

H. EDWARD "ED" FLENTJE: Wendell, I'm going to start this off with kind of a formal statement for the record.

WENDELL LADY: Okay.

EF: This oral history interview with Wendell Lady, former Speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives, is being conducted under the sponsorship of the Kansas Oral History Project, Inc., a nonprofit corporation created for the purpose of establishing an archive of oral histories of Kansas state legislators who served prior to the year 2000. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. Professor Ed Flentje of Wichita State University is conducting this interview at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka on December 15, 2017. Audio and video services are being provided by the Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University, under the direction of Tom Parrish.

Mr. Lady, from Overland Park and now retired, worked for Black & Veatch as a consulting engineer and project manager during his career. He graduated from Kansas State University in 1952 with a degree in architectural engineering. He was first elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 1968 and reelected to six additional terms, serving from 1969 through 1982. He served as Minority Leader of the House in the 1977 and '78 legislative sessions and as speaker in the '79, '80, '81 and '82 legislative sessions.

Welcome, Wendell.

WL: Yes.

EF: Nice of you to be here. We want to have a conversation, and it's unfair to ask you to think back fifty years, but we're going to ask you to do that.

WL: Well, I'll try.

EF: And I know you will, and we appreciate the opportunity to do this.

I thought we ought to start off just asking you how you got the political bug. I mean, you grew up in Abilene, obviously where a very famous Kansan, [President] Dwight [D.] Eisenhower, grew up. I don't think of engineering schools as a place of political activity. Where did you get the bug to run for office?

WL: You know, I really don't know for sure whether I can answer that question. I had been a member of the Overland Park City Council Chamber for just one term year.

EF: The Overland Park City Council?

WL: Yes. And I really don't know what started me. Of course, I grew up in Kansas out at Abilene, so I had a strong feeling for the—for the state, and I just decided I was going to run.

EF: You mean, did somebody come to you and say, "Wendell, you can do this"? And I'm thinking first of the Overland Park City Council.

WL: I don't recall that.

EF: Yeah? You just said, I'm gonna put my name out and do it? Of course, Overland Park was a growing, rolling suburban community.

WL: Well, it was, and I'd gotten pretty well known in the—in the city because of that experience on the City—on the City Council.

EF: Had you done engineering work for local government before?

WL: No, really hadn't.

EF: So would you describe Black—I mean, you were employed by Black & Veatch a good part of your career, right?

WL: Right. I was there forty-three years.

EF: Well, let's say all your career.

WL: Right.

EF: How would you describe Black & Veatch? Did they encourage you, discourage you or tolerate you running for office?

WL: They just tolerated me. They didn't ask me to do it or it wasn't for anything that would help their situation. I just did it, and frankly, I don't recall why I decided to do that.

EF: Did you have to take time off from Black & Veatch when you served in Topeka?

WL: No, they let me. I wasn't paid during the time that I was gone, but they were very—very helpful. Mr. Veatch was—I talked with him before I did it, and he had no objection.

EF: They let you have a leave of absence.

WL: Yes.

EF: You always knew you'd have a job when you came back?

WL: Yes. Well, then, I was there all the time except when the House was in session.

EF: Well, you served a term on the Overland Park City Council. You got some things done during that time!

WL: Well, I can't say that I can remember the things.

EF: I read that you were instrumental in a bond issue for parks.

WL: Oh, I was. I was involved with that, and also the Overland Park golf course, which—one of our other members—we played a little bit together, and we decided that we ought to have a golf course in Overland Park. And the city was just very young then. It was only formed in 1960. But we—we just decided that there should be a golf course. And there was an election coming forth on some parks and some—

EF: A bond election.

WL: Yeah, a bond election. And so, we just added the golf course to it. And the other—the parks and the ponds and that sort of thing really won big, but the golf course passed by only eighty votes, and so we were—we were very pleased.

EF: Did you recall campaigning for that project?

WL: Yes, yes, both my friend and I worked at it.

EF: Yeah. Well, you served one term on the Overland Park City Council. You immediately run for the Legislature.

WL: I really don't know why that decision was made.

EF: But nobody said, "Wendell, we need you in Topeka"?

WL: No. No, I don't—I don't know. But just for some reason or other. Of course, being born in and living in Abilene, I really felt very strong about the state of Kansas, and so that's probably why.

EF: I was curious when you started your term here in Topeka, in the state legislature. An Abilene resident was speaker of the House, Calvin [A.] Strowig. And I was—I was curious if you'd known him before you moved to Overland Park.

WL: No, I really—really don't remember knowing him at that time.

EF: Do you remember him as Speaker at all?

WL: No, I really don't. You have to remember that when you're 87 years old, there's a little bit of a problem with remembering a lot of things that happened in the past.

EF: I had that trouble just last week or yesterday.

I look at the election records when you first ran for the legislature, and you actually ran against an incumbent legislator, and you beat him two to one in the primary. You must have had some profile in Overland Park that helped you beat an incumbent.

WL: Well, I received—just the fact that I was a member of the City Council got me a lot of attention -- people got to know me through that.

EF: Do you remember who you ran against?

WL: For the Legislature? No.

EF: The incumbent.

WL: No.

EF: His name was [William] "Bill" Brier,—

WL: Oh, I do remember that, yeah.

EF: —who had to be a fairly young guy at that time.

WL: Yeah, he was. And I think he was spending quite a bit of time out in Colorado with friends at that time, and—I beat him pretty—

EF: You beat—you won soundly.

WL: I did.

EF: Was there any particular issue you remember that you kind of had in your mind when you ran? I want to change this or I want to do this differently.

WL: No, I really didn't at that time. I frankly didn't know that much about what was ahead in the—in the Legislature.

EF: I worked for former Governor Bennett, the late Governor Robert F. Bennett, and you would have served during his term.

WL: Yes.

EF: Did you know him at the time?

WL: I knew him very well, and we were very good friends. I thought a great lot of him.

EF: Was he a mentor at all for you?

WL: Not too much, but I talked with him quite frequently, and—and we thought a lot of things on the same—same page.

EF: He was a pro-education guy.

WL: He was. He was strong for education, as I was too.

EF: Yeah. Some of your colleagues who were elected the same year, like [David J.] "Dave" Heinemann and Jim Maag remember you being a proponent of changing the way highway funds were distributed. They used to be distributed by the old highway commissioners, by districts. Do you recall that issue at all?

WL: No. As a matter of fact, I don't.

EF: Now, when [John Michael] "Mike" Hayden ran, he argued that all the money was going to Johnson County and not to the outlying areas. So, you must have had some influence on that.

WL: Well, I probably did, but I—I don't recall.

EF: You're in the Legislature for just a few years, and I think by the end of your second term, [Duane] "Pete" McGill put you on [the] Ways and Means [Committee]. Is that something you aspired to do, or was that an accident, or—

WL: I really don't recall. I was just appointed to it.

EF: So, it wasn't something you got here and say, "I really want to be on Ways and Means," necessarily.

WL: Well, I think probably just about everybody thinks they'd like to, because you're in control of the money, and that's—I was—I was pleased to be appointed to the Ways and Means Committee.

EF: And I think not that much later, you're named chairman of Ways and Means. And I—I think that's by McGill.

WL: I think that's probably right because he was—he was on that committee right up until the end.

EF: Did you have a good relationship with Speaker McGill?

WL: Well, it was—it was pretty good until he decided he wanted to be Speaker for a third term chairman of the—well, let's see, he was chairman of the—I can't recall, but it was—four years was the maximum—

EF: He was considering a third term in 1977.

WL: Yeah, that was it.

EF: The third term as Speaker.

WL: Right. And I—there'd never been—no Speaker had ever gone past four years, and I thought that was a pretty good reason, and that's really why I ran.

EF: Now, Mike Hayden told me this: He says, "Wendell Lady is the only Republican House leader that actually served for six years." Because you were Minority Leader, then Speaker, and then Speaker [again].

WL: Yeah.

EF: That's quite a run!

WL: Yeah.

EF: Were you a unanimous choice for Speaker?

WL: No, it was very close, both times. The first time, I ran against—

EF: [Robert] "Bob" Arbuthnot. Do you remember Bob Arbuthnot?

WL: Yes.

EF: He was an influential legislator.

WL: Yeah. Well, I'll tell you what—and I haven't discussed this much with the press or—but there was a group of young members of the legislature that asked me to run for Speaker, and they were sharp young men. And so, I did. I ran on their request. And they were extremely helpful when I was elected because I appointed all of them to—to important positions, and they just really did a tremendous job in—in support. Mike Hayden was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, and there were others that I named as chairmen of the important committees.

EF: Well, I look at Mike, and, of course, you know I worked for Mike a while and think a lot of him, but he was a rural guy, a long way from Johnson County. How did you connect with people like Mike Hayden?

WL: Well, as a matter of fact, I spent my first six years in life on a farm, and then we moved to town. My father was in the cattle business, and he turned the farm over to my brother, my older brother, and he spent his time buying and selling—selling cattle.

EF: So, you could talk ranching and farming with Mike Hayden?

WL: Well, I had a pretty good idea, and somehow or other, I got along with the ol- —or the younger group of the—of members.

EF: Some folks have tried to say that you were elected by urban-suburban folks as against the rural folks. Is that accurate?

WL: Well, that isn't—

EF: Or you really saw it as more young and—

WL: There were several of the younger men that were farmers or lived on a farm. But most of them—they were not—probably not. We had lawyers and others.

EF: Now, some of your colleagues, Jim [Maag], Dave Heinemann, remember that you organized and you were the informal leader of a study group that met in the evenings and studied bills and that kind of thing. Do you remember?

WL: I remember that, and they were all—almost all of them were chairmen of the various committees, and particularly pertaining to money. And we did that. I—I listened.

EF: Did you do that a chair of Ways and Means?

WL: I can't recall that, whether it was—Dave probably remembers. I can't remember.

EF: I don't recall that kind of a group at other times in the Legislature. That's somewhat unusual.

WL: Well, that—that group thought like I did, and they did a—they were a very intelligent group, and they worked at—

EF: And those were folks that eventually asked you to run for Speaker?

WL: Yes, they did, yeah. I'm trying to—I can't remember. There was a man that did—came to me and asked if I would run for Speaker, and—it's his group that felt that way.

EF: The other thing that I have researched about this: There was a lot of institutional change: constitutional amendments to strengthen the Governor; Governor, Lieutenant Governor running as a team; getting rid of the Auditor; getting rid of the Printer; four-year term. And in the Legislature, the legislature historically has relied on the Budget Director, [James] "Jim" Bibb. Do you remember that name at all?

WL: I remember the name, but I don't remember him.

EF: You would have been the first chair of Ways and Means where the legislative staff, Marlin Rein, gave you advice. That was a fundamental change. Do you remember much about that?

WL: All I remember is that I got along very well with him, and he was helpful.

EF: I—at that same time, I was working for Governor Bennett, and, of course, Bennett went over the budget with a fine-toothed comb late into the night. You and Governor Bennett seemed to be pretty much compatible on the budget issues.

WL: We did. We talked a lot with each other, and I had a lot of respect for—for Bob, and so we got along fine. And that helps.

EF: He won the governorship by a sliver.

WL: I remember that.

EF: But carried out the governorship with great energy.

I also—I think Dave Heinemann told me that you had actually ran for Speaker pro tem before running for Speaker. Do you remember?

WL: I don't recall that.

EF: You run for leadership -- Speaker -- and win, after the '78 election. And, of course, in that election, the majority of the House flipped. Republicans lost a whole slew of seats in the House, and you are elected essentially Minority Leader, and who's speaker? John [William] Carlin. How did that work? All of a sudden, Republicans are in the minority, and John Carlin is pretty new as Speaker.

WL: John and I got along very well. I don't think we—we didn't have very many times when we were not on the same page. I had a lot of respect for him.

EF: How did you—I mean, one of the issues at that time was—that Carlin was promoting was the severance tax, and you had supported that, and how did your Republican caucus deal with that? Because you had obviously a divided caucus. Did they give you a lot of grief over that?

WL: Honestly, I can't remember.

EF: You actually, as I recall, ran for Governor promoting a severance tax, too. I just—I was wondering if you had a group of Republican legislators go pound on the Speaker's desk and say, "You can't do this! Republicans are made of oil and gas." But you don't remember that part.

WL: No, I really don't.

EF: The other thing that I always remember is—of course, Mike Hayden—you—you appointed Mike Hayden chair of Ways and Means.

WL: Yes. He had been on the committee before.

EF: Right. He had been on the committee, but you advanced him over some more senior members: [William] "Bill" Buntin, for example.

WL: Yeah.

EF: Do you remember anything about that decision?

WL: No, I really don't, except that I just felt that Mike was the best—would be the best Chairman that I—that at least had been on the committee before. And Mike and I always got along very well. He was a good—good committee chairman.

EF: And I always thought that gave him a shot, then, at being Speaker, twice, two terms.

WL: Yeah.

EF: And then running for Governor. I mean, I'm just fascinated how you connected with these younger folks like Mike Hayden, Jim Maag, Dave Heinemann. You think that study group was the—

WL: I think that had quite a bit to do with it, but they to me were just very well equipped to—to lead committees, and see that things got done right.

EF: One other issue—and I probably remember it because I was watching the election of Mike Hayden. I had worked a bit for him and his election. But I was also, before that, involved with Governor Bennett. And John Carlin ran for Governor saying he would reduce electric rates. And Bennett basically ignored him. Nobody's going to vote based on that. And, of course, John Carlin wins the governorship after being Speaker for one term. Do you remember dealing at all with utility rates issue [sic] when Carlin became Governor? I think the Legislature passed it. Exempted the state sales tax from utility rates.

WL: Yeah. When was John elected?



EF: He was elected in '78, so you would have been Speaker at that time.

WL: Right. That's when I started.

EF: And—favorable. But you had a good relationship with John Carlin.

WL: I did.

EF: Was this the rural backgrounds again?

WL: No, I just felt that he was very—very well qualified to be the Speaker—or, actually, the Governor.

EF: You know, before I learned of your farm and ranch background, I always thought of you as suburban Johnson County. Did your farm and ranch background help you a lot with—in—in the Legislature?

WL: I don't—I don't think so. It—it helped me just knowing probably more about what's going on in the rural areas than—than others, but I don't think it had much influence on my—

EF: Did you consider farming and ranching as a career?

WL: No, I just wasn't interested.

EF: You—you had enough of that as a young man?

WL: Yeah. That might have been some part of the thinking, but I went to school, engineering at K-State, and that—engineering and farming didn't go together.

EF: At all. Well, let me—you served in the Legislature during three Governors. First, [Robert B.] "Bob" Docking, when you first got there was in his—would have been in his second term.

WL: Yeah, that was '68 when I started.

EF: And when I researched that era, which that was a time of a lot of these constitutional amendments. Bob Bennett, as president of the Senate; Pete McGill as Speaker; [Richard C.] "Pete" Loux [pronounced LUX] as Minority Leader. They came up with a whole slew of constitutional amendments in the early '70s. Were you supportive of those moves to strengthen the governorship?

WL: I really don't recall those issues.

EF: In '76, Kansas got recognized as "the most improved Legislature in the country." Do you remember that at all?

WL: No. I think that I remember that, but—

EF: Bennett was in the forefront of that, and I just—I was curious if you kind of watched this develop and supported it or were involved in any way.

WL: I don't recall.

EF: Bennett, in his—in his first year, wanted to reorganize the Department of Transportation. It was the old Highway Commission, kind of a political deal. He wanted merit appointments and that kind of thing. Was that something you were interested in at the time? Do you recall any of that?

WL: No, I really don't recall.

EF: What about the death penalty? Is that—that was an issue kind of bubbling up during that time. Carlin said he had let it become law and then vetoed it. I don't recall you being involved in that issue, but I was wondering.

WL: I really—really wasn't.

EF: Now, a new prison was—would have been on the Ways and Means agenda, too, and I'm just wondering if—those are issues I remember during Bennett's time in office. Bennett says, "I can get the votes for a new prison, but not for a new prison at a particular location." You know, he started losing votes when he got it located.

WL: Yeah.

EF: Again, asking you to look back 50 years, what—were there any things you were particularly proud of? I mean, you've mentioned bringing some of these young folks into decision making. Dave Heinemann mentioned advancing women into committee chairs and vice chairs. Anything that stands out as you look back?

WL: Well, I was very pleased with the way these young—young men took over and helped me be Speaker, because they chaired the committees, and we met regularly, and everything, it seemed to me, worked out very well. And I think that I made the right decision in getting those younger men involved. There were some thinking of the older—and a lot of the members from the farms—I just think that they weren't really fully aware of what needed to be done.

EF: The politics have changed since you were here in the '70s and early '80s, and I'm always curious if you saw any of these things coming, like the struggle over abortion. I don't recall that being much of an issue during your legislative service. Do you recall it ever coming up at all?

WL: I really—I don't recall.

EF: I don't think it did. And of course, later were these folks that wanted to cut taxes, cut the budget and those kinds of things, and the '70s and '80s were kind of expansive times. I mean, taxes were always an issue, but there was pretty bipartisan support for an expanded state obligation for welfare and roads and education, universities and those things. And I don't recall, during your terms, somebody drawing the line on this. It was pretty much a broad agreement.

WL: Yeah, I think it was, pretty much. But I always had support of the Ways and Means Committee, and—and that's—I mean, that's where the—really the biggest decisions are being made in the Legislature. And they—they helped.

EF: Now, the Speaker has broad authority under House rules. How would you describe your style as Speaker? Did you say, "Here's where we're going and everybody follow" or were you—how would you describe your style?

WL: Well, my style was to work with the people, the Ways and Means Committee. We met regularly, and we'd talk about it, and—and I—I don't think that I was making decisions strictly on my own.

EF: You weren't an authoritarian speaker?

WL: I don't think so. Of course, probably there's never been a Speaker that—with a claim for that.

EF: During your—actually, in this time period, Democrats won control of the House in '78—am I—no, '76, when you would have been on Ways and Means. Were you involved as Speaker or Minority Leader in recruiting candidates for—Republican candidates?

WL: I really don't recall that too much. Of course, I had so many things on my mind then as Speaker of the House.

EF: Yeah. I just—I was curious about that. When—I mean, you were there. You saw at least three governors. You saw a number of legislative leaders: Strowig, McGill, Carlin. Was there one that stood out as having really great leadership skills?

WL: Well, of course, I felt very strongly about Bob Bennett, but I think John Carlin did a—did a good job. He and I got along very well. We I'm sure had differences of opinion at times, but I think both—I think he respected me, and I did him as well.

EF: Did you have a chance to observe this friction between Robert Bennett and Senator Norman Garr at all?

WL: I heard a lot about that.

EF: You heard a lot about it? I never particularly understood it, but obviously it was in your neighborhood, so to speak.

WL: Yeah. Well, I got along with both of them. I think probably I agreed with Bennett mostly on the issues, but we didn't—I didn't have any bad feelings toward—toward either one of them.

EF: Now, you served your two terms as Speaker, and you decide to run for Governor. How did you make that decision?

WL: Well, I guess I felt that—that I could be—be a good Governor, and I knew that I had the experience here in the Legislature and—and made a lot of contacts with people. But there were two of us running from—from Johnson County, and—and that wasn't a good idea, but in the—in the primary, somebody from Wichita [Sam Hardage] won, and so that took care of that.

EF: Did you—well, let me back up. Were you always a Republican?

WL: Yes, I was. But I didn't always agree with what went on in the Republican Party.

EF: When do you remember kind of veering away from the Republican line?

WL: Well, I think during the time that I was here, I think I probably came to that conclusion, but I don't know. I'm smart enough to know that I don't have all the answers.

EF: I don't recall, after the primary—you lost that primary. Were you asked to embrace the Republican nominee? Were you kind of quiet in that election, or,—

WL: I think I was—was pretty quiet.

EF: I saw your name on a group of traditional Republicans—I think they called themselves traditional Republicans—that objected to what the state did on taxes here a couple of years ago. I take it you weren't enamored on what the state was doing.

WL: Well, one of the things that affected me more than anything was the split or the—my mind's getting a little bit—

EF: Take your time.

WL: Yeah. I just—

EF: The traditional Republican group is a group organized by Rochelle Chronister and a number of former Republican leaders, and in 2012, when this tax plan was promoted, they spoke out against it, and then in 2014 they actually endorsed [Paul] Davis, as I recall, for Governor, the Democrat running against [Samuel D.] Brownback—who was running for reelection. I just—I was kind of curious, after your service and after running for Governor, how active you stayed.

WL: I really haven't been very—very active.

EF: Did you miss it? You were appointed to the [Kansas Board of] Regents, too,—

WL: Yes.

EF: —the Board of Regents, for a while, so you stayed active there, I assume.

WL: Yes. You know, one thing that I felt the strongest about was the money, the spending of money, and I felt that we should have increased—at that time, we were—the money was less than 50 percent, and I felt that it ought to be increased to 50 percent.

EF: For schools.

WL: For schools, for education. I was always strongly in support —of increasing that and—and— education, you know, of our people is most important, and I have really felt that we have not done—and I don't know what it is now. At that time, we were—it was less than 50 percent. And I don't know what it is. Do you know?

EF: It's actually more now.

WL: Is it more now?

EF: But I remember Bennett arguing for that, too. We had to reach at least 50 percent state participation in schools, school funding.

WL: Yeah, that was—and I tried to see that that was happening, but I wasn't able to get that done.

EF: Well, it took a while to get it done. And we're still struggling with it.

WL: What is the percentage now? Do you know?

EF: Well, it depends on how you count it. You know, there's a 20 mill statewide levy for schools, and then there are local levies for schools, so do you count the 20 mills as local or state? Even the [Kansas Legislative] Research Department is not sure where it should be counted.

WL: Well, I think at that time it was completely—the state monies was what was financing schools, and I don't know, it may have been some outside, but that was the thing that bothered me the most during the time that I was in the Legislature and afterwards, that we didn't do something about increasing the percentage of—of money given toward education.

EF: Do you remember working on that as chair of Ways and Means, or as Speaker, or both?

WL: Yes, I was working on that. But I've been thinking about it ever since, that—that I just felt that we were not getting—spending enough money on education.

EF: Well, Wendell, we've about exhausted my questions, and—but I'm sure I'm missing something.

WL: Well, I think you've covered it pretty well.

EF: You sure? Haven't I missed something that we need to talk about?

WL: I don't think so.

EF: How do you remember the time? I mean, was this a great time in your life, or did you have disappointments?

WL: I look back. I was very—very pleased with what I had tried to do, even if we didn't get it done.

EF: You pretty much, after running for Governor, two terms as Speaker—you went home, worked for Black & Veatch?

WL: Yeah, I've been very much involved in the—the large church, Methodist church that we built starting in 1994. We had the first building. So, I have been involved. Being an engineer, the pastor asked me to help, and I handled three projects. And now that church has a membership of 20,000—

EF: I've heard about that church.

WL: —people, and it's increased another 1,000 since the end of the year. And I've been—spent a lot of time with that.

EF: And that's a fulfilling kind of work.

WL: It really is. I feel very—very good about being—participating in that.

EF: Okay. Do your kids have political ideas?

WL: I think they have ideas, but they haven't participated.

EF: They haven't run for office?

WL: No, I don't think so. I think they figure that I had enough trouble. They didn't need to—

EF: Well, I haven't heard of any troubles you had. Everything seemed to go pretty smoothly.

WL: Well—[Laughs.] I'm pleased with the way it went.

EF: You should be. You should be. Well, I think we'll bring this to a close. Thank you for coming over today and sitting in the Speaker's chair.

[End of interview.]