Interview of Robert G. Frey, by Jim McLean, August 2, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a reporter/editor of the Kansas News Service, which is a collaboration of public radio stations across the state. We're doing this interview today with former senator Robert G. Frey. At the time he served in the Senate, he was living in Liberal Kansas and represented southwest Kansas in the Senate.

This interview is funded in part by Humanities Kansas, and it will be transcribed and placed in the Kansas Historical Society for viewing by the public. Bob, can I call you, Bob?

Robert G. Frey: Yes.

JM: You served ten years in the Kansas House and then four in the Kansas Senate, and then after you left the Senate, you were appointed by former Governor Bill Graves to serve on the State Board of Tax Appeals. While you were in the House, we should also mention, you were for a time the Majority Leader in the Kansas House.

RGF: That's right.

JM: How does it feel to be back here in the Senate chamber?

RGF: Well, it feels good to be back. It's always been so awesome to be here because of the architecture and the way it looks. It really feels good to be in here.

JM: I think that the renovation of the Capitol took place after you left the legislature.

RGF: Yes. This most recent renovation, we were just admiring it, my wife and I, looking into the Capitol dome and so on. It was renovated while I was in the legislature also.

JM: Was it?

RGF: A lot of painting had been going on and that sort of thing. This is remarkable, how nice it looks now.

JM: It's nice to have you back. So just a couple of preliminary questions so we can kind of get to know you: are you a native Kansan?

RGF: No, I was born in Wisconsin.

JM: What brought you here?

RGF: The Air Force. I was stationed in Morocco towards the end of my enlistment, and I was sent to Wichita. I didn't know what Wichita was like. I didn't know much about Wichita. I had to kind of feel my way around once I got here.

JM: In Kansas.

RGF: Yes.

JM: Roughly speaking, when would that have been?

RGF: 1962.

JM: 1962, you're discharged from the Air Force. You find yourself in Kansas, and what? You just decided to stay?

RGF: Yes. I said it's too cold to go back to Wisconsin. So I started going to the university at Wichita State. It was just called Wichita University then. It became Wichita State a little later. I graduated there, and then I decided I'm going to be a lawyer. So I went up to Washburn University and got admitted and spent three years there at Washburn and got my law degree.

JM: We should mention that a lot of prominent people in Kansas public life, members of the legislature, got their law degree at Washburn—Bob Dole included. What then took you to Liberal? You just decided that you needed someplace to practice?

RGF: There's an older gentleman—I think he might have been eighty years old had come up to Topeka to try and get somebody to go out to Liberal. They needed a county attorney. That's an elective office, but you had to be a lawyer, I guess. They just couldn't get anybody to run. One of my classmates, Tom Smith, and I decided, “Let's go out to western Kansas and start a law practice out there.” I was appointed as the county attorney. He was appointed as the assistant county attorney. That was a part-time appointment. Then we started our law practice. That's why I went there.

JM: The county attorney, that would have been Seward County, and the county attorney then is the person that prosecutes criminal cases in that county.

RGF: That's correct.

JM: That got you involved to some degree in public life. You're a public figure as the county attorney.

RGF: That's right. It is an elective office.

JM: What then made you decide to step up and run for the legislature?

RGF: I don't know exactly what made it. The legislator who was here decided to not run. It was an open seat. I had friends, and I was kind of inclined to want to go, to run. It wasn't hard for me to find supporters to run.

JM: You hadn't been really politically active until then, right? Like in party politics or anything?

 

RGF: I wouldn't be known as a real active politician before then, no. I was always a member of the Republican party, which would be pretty common at that time.

JM: It was very much advantageous in Kansas politics at the time, still is.

RGF: That's right. I had people who said, “Why don't you run for the legislature?” There was one other person who was interested in running for the legislature so it wasn't an uncontested race. Fortunately, I won the election.

JM: You had to win a primary. Then were you opposed in the general election that first time?

RGF: Yes, I believe I was.

JM: We should mention, we're taking you pretty far back here. We should mention that—

RGF: I'm eighty years old.

JM: You're eighty years old, and your memory isn't what it used to be, right?

RGF: I think you could say that.

JM: Like a lot of people who are eighty years old.

RGF: When it came time to run for the House of Representatives, I did have a primary election that I won fortunately, and then the general election was a contested election also. I was fortunate I won that as well.

JM: There were some Democrats in the legislature from southwest Kansas in those days. This would have been the 1974 election, when you first ran.

RGF: Right.

JM: But there wasn't a particular issue that prompted you into politics?

RGF: No, I can't say that there was.

JM: So you served in the House for ten years.

RGF: Yes.

JM: You were involved in leadership for many of those years, as we mentioned before, as the majority leader. Also you were the chair of the Judiciary Committee, for many of those years.

 

RGF: Yes, I was.

JM: There seemed to be an awful lot going on from the time you got here right on through when you left the legislature and went on to the State Board of Tax Appeals. Those were very momentous years in terms of the legislature.

RGF: Well, they were. A lot going on. A lot of different opinions about what was going on. Fortunately, the Judiciary Committee was a committee that got a lot of business. We had a lot to do, and it was interesting, always interesting.

JM: But what comes to the Judiciary Committee often, laws that need technical correction or this law was passed five or six years ago, and there was some unintended consequence, and you need to go back and fix it. There was a lot of very specific detailed work that went on in that committee.

RGF: Yes, I would say that. That's correct.

JM: When you first got here, one of the controversial issues, there'd been a constitutional amendment passed prior to you getting here to unify the court system in the state. But it was up to you guys starting in 1975 to implement that legislation.

RGF: Yes.

JM: Was that controversial at all?

RGF: Well, you know, looking back, I can't remember, I don't remember constituents knocking on my door and saying, “Don't do this or don't do that.” It was not controversial in that respect.

JM: Right because the voters had passed the amendment.

RGF: Yes.

JM: But as I understand it, one of your colleagues who at one time was the longest serving member of the legislature, Dave Heinemann from Garden City, remembers that there was some controversy that rural legislators in particular were afraid that they were going to lose their county judge under unification. According to Dave, you sponsored legislation to make sure that didn't happen.

RGF: Yes, the county judge—being a lawyer in a rural county, the county judge is pretty important. You wanted somebody there who would be a good judge. We didn't want to lose our county judges.

JM: As a county attorney, you need somebody who can wake up at all hours of the night if you need a search warrant or something like that, just to keep the wheels of justice moving.

 

RGF: Absolutely.

JM: You kind of jumped right into that when you got to the legislature. What was the atmosphere, if you could remember? This place has—there are cycles to any place and to politics. This place has become more partisan since I think your days in the legislature. How would you describe the collegiality of the legislature when you served here, the ability of people to work across the aisle?

RGF: I was both in the House and in the Senate. I can kind of contrast those two. In the House, there was more consciousness of the partisan issues, I believe, than in the Senate.

JM: Why do you think that is, because they're up for election every two years?

RGF: And we're divided as we sit in the chamber. The Democrats are on one side, the Republicans on the other, and that sort of thing. You divide it up right away. You had your own caucus, Democrat and Republican. There were no other parties. There was no third party. If you weren't one or the other, you would just pick one and stay with them, I believe, but there weren't many people who came who were not either Republican or Democrat.

JM: Roughly speaking, during your time here, there was always this kind of urban/rural divide in the legislature.

RGF: Yes.

JM: Was that pronounced when you were here?

RGF: Yes. You had to be conscious of that.

JM: You were a rural legislator.

RGF: I was.

JM: But I remember covering you in those days. You didn't always act to type. You didn't always act like a rural lawmaker. You would break ranks occasionally.

RGF: I don't know exactly how I would define what I was thinking. I would say that the rural legislators, for the most part, not everyone, were a little more conservative.

JM: Right.

RGF: I never considered myself to be that conservative. I felt I was always more of a moderate.

 

JM: Those terms got coined later on in the Republican party as it became two, maybe three separate parties, really.

RGF: Yes.

JM: So you would classify yourself as a moderate Republican.

RGF: I would.

JM: Did that ever cause you any problems with voters, that moderation?

RGF: I'm sure that I probably would have lost one or two. I don't know. Not a lot. But the whole general population, it's hard to say what the general population is. I'm sure there were very liberal people in Liberal, Kansas, as well as very conservative. It didn't ever—if they didn't like what I was doing, they wouldn't vote for me. That's the way I looked at it.

JM: After that first time, you won in your elections fairly comfortably from then on?

RGF: Yes, until I was seeking re-election in the Senate, and I lost that election. I never spent a lot of time wondering why, but I think a lot of it had to do with the conservative view as opposed to a less conservative view, and I was the less conservative.

JM: That would have been in the mid-eighties, when things were really starting to change in Kansas politics. There had been the anti-abortion demonstrations in Wichita, which gave rise to really embolden the conservatives. Maybe people entered politics who hadn't been politically active in the past, particularly in Sedgwick County, and that spread across the state and eventually affected the membership of the legislature pretty dramatically.

RGF: Yes.

JM: Maybe you were an early victim of the change.

RGF: It's very possible. I got to know—it was a woman [Janice McClure] . She won the election. She came to the state legislature. I had been around in Topeka after that. I did some lobbying after that for the Trial Lawyers Association. I talked with her about that. I could see where she was really surprised when she came up here, exactly what she saw. It wasn't at all I think like she thought it was going to be. I think she became kind of disenchanted with it after a while.

JM: Really. Surprised how? She thought there would be people of like mind, or she was surprised that the people up here were broader than she anticipated or what?

RGF: It's hard for me to speak for her in that respect, but I know that she saw a lot of different views that maybe she wouldn't have seen every day out on the farm in western Kansas.

 

JM: Was that defeat in the polls after such a long run, did that surprise you, or could you see it coming?

RGF: At that point, I think it did surprise me a little bit, yes. In a way, it confirmed my feelings that maybe she was not seeing it right.

JM: I remember in one particular instance, let me see if I can get you to remember this. I think it pertains to what we were just talking about. You were still in the House, as I recall, and we're dealing with political extremist groups now, contemporaneously. In those days though, they were almost defined as “fringe groups.” As I recall, there was an organization called the Posse Comitatus that was starting to make some noise. There were actually people in southwest Kansas who were conducting paramilitary training operations, thinking that at some point, they would have to take on their own government to protect their liberties.

RGF: Yes.

JM: And you introduced a bill, as I recall, that would ban paramilitary training. Do you recall that at all?

RGF: Yes, I do remember that occasion. I don't remember it line by line.

JM: Of course not, right.

RGF: The Posse Comitatus out there was the subject of a lot of conversation, when you go for coffee in the morning, and you sit down with a group of people drinking coffee. There were people who would bring it up, and you would discuss it.

JM: What was driving that then? This seems to be again, some of these changes were taking place roughly around the same time.

RGF: What was driving it? I'm not sure.

JM: People were suspicious of the government.

RGF: Very much so. I was a lawyer practicing law, and the judges were under a lot of pressure, and I'm inclined to believe that the judges probably were unfairly attacked by Posse Comitatus a lot. I had chosen sides, I guess. I was a not a friend of the Posse Comitatus.

JM: I can't remember their manifesto chapter and verse, but I do recall they believed at the time that the only duly elected constitutional officer of the government was the local sheriff.

RGF: Yes.

 

JM: They thought everybody else who had been elected legislatively or otherwise was essentially invalid. Again, I don't think it was a terribly widespread movement, but I do remember because during the hearing on your bill, I remember being in the elevator here in the State House when somebody who I think had been standing in the back of the committee room rather menacingly. He maybe even had issued threats beforehand was arrested in the elevator. I had my tape recorder rolling. There was some tension around all of that.

RGF: Yes, there was a lot of tension. That's right. I didn't feel like I was in harm's way.

JM: When you go back for legislative coffees, you didn't have people in your meetings who were confronting you about that?

RGF: Not that I recall. There may have been people who were inclined to agree with that, but I never had an extremely unpleasant situation at meetings when we would get together at a public meeting.

JM: During your time in the legislature, notwithstanding your responsibilities with the judiciary committee, so many other things happened—constitutional amendments to permit liquor by the drink, the state lottery, the severance tax was passed. The battles over school funding started in earnest and proceeded for another twenty, twenty-five, thirty years.

RGF: Yes.

JM: What do you recall about some of those really, really big issues in terms of the way people at home were reacting? For instance, the liquor by the drink thing was a big change in this state.

RGF: It was a big change. It would be politically a very hot item.

JM: That was in the mid-eighties when many of those things were happening. Then the state lottery came into being? We reappraised property all over the state, which led to a great tumult. Many people think that [property reappraisal] was responsible for former Governor Mike Hayden's defeat after one term. You were here at a pretty active time.

RGF: Yes, it was. Those kinds of things were taken on, and there was a procedure to follow, whether it was legislative or judicial. I was always one to say, “We'll just have to wait and see what happens.” I didn't spend a lot of time agonizing about one or the other. I just wanted to see whatever was going to be done, that it was done right.

JM: To my recollection, you always seemed like one of those legislators who, there'd be pitched battles on one side or the other, and you were always one of those legislators who was kind of in the middle of conversations, taking it all in, and then one of those legislators that whichever side was going to prevail needed to have on their side to win. You were kind of a predictor in that way. Does that seem accurate to you?

 

RGF: Yes, I think that's probably right.

JM: What was southwest Kansas, the district you represented, like then? There's been so much change in that part of the state in terms of migration in and the labor force and the majority Latino communities now. What was it like then? Was it in the midst of that change then?

RGF: Yes, it was changing then. A far greater population increase. I attribute that to, if you want to point to one thing, it was the building of a meat processing company, National Beef, I think it was called. A lot of people moved in from outside of Kansas. A lot of Hispanic population expanded then. It represented a reason, I guess, for a change in thinking in many of the people that now live in Liberal, Kansas that didn't live here before.

JM: Right. That had to affect local politics in some way, such a dramatic change.

RGF: Yes. It probably did although it would be hard for me to diagram how it happened, but I do know there were other opinions and different ways of thinking about things that came. We had more to think about and other opinions to consider, but generally speaking, it was not an unhappy time. It was good.

JM: As an attorney and as somebody who was very much involved in legal issues during your time in the legislature, in recent years, the judiciary has come under attack to some degree, both at the federal and state levels, with people complaining about “unelected judges” superimposing their judgement over that over the legislature in terms of school funding and a host of other issues. You've watched that as a citizen and not as a legislator. Do you have any views on that trend and that rhetoric?

RGF: My opinion is judges have to make decisions when there are issues that arise out of the law, if there are two different sides, two different ways of looking at things. Ultimately the way our system is, you take it to the courts. We lay it at the feet of the judge. If the people don't like the decision, of course, they're going to complain about the judge. They had to have a decision. Somebody had to make a decision. We don't have a system of government where we put it up for a public vote. That would be—I would say it would be virtually impossible. You have to centralize the decision making somewhere. Where else but in the judiciary where people who have studied the law, understand how the law works—they may have different opinions about what the law should be, but it just made sense to me that those decisions had to be made in the courts.

JM: There's a reason, again, the phrase “unelected judges,” there's a reason why judges, particularly at the appellate court level—we should mention that the Kansas Court of Appeals was created while you were serving in the legislature.

RGF: Yes.

 

JM: But judges at the appellate level, there's a reason, isn't there, for insulating them from politics?

RGF: Insulating judges from politics?

JM: Yes, from electoral politics.

RGF: Well, I think so. Some people would say, "If the judges have to decide how laws should be interpreted, I'd rather have a conservative Republican than a liberal Democrat." They might politicize it in that respect.

JM: Sure.

RGF: I would rather that not be the decision as to who would be the judge. I'd rather have it be more of a decision based upon the understanding or the philosophy of the judge or something to that nature.

JM: The best judges are people—everybody has their political opinions and their political views. But a judge is pretty much required—you can never fully set those aside. Just to look at the law and interpret it and to apply the law as the legislative branch intended, there's oftentimes a lot of grey area. There's room for interpretation, right?

RGF: That's correct. The judges that I knew where I practiced in Seward County in that area were pretty good judges in my opinion. There was an older man, Judge Morgan and so I never had any real quarrel with the judges.

JM: They were impartial and fair as far as you could—

RGF: As far as I could tell, yes.

JM: Earlier in our conversation, you indicated that you thought the partisanship, even when you were here, was somewhat sharper in the House than in the Senate. I never gave you an opportunity to talk about what it was like in the Senate that was different than what it was like in the House.

RGF: The partisanship is similar, of course. The Democrats were on one side, and the Republicans on the other. I don't think it was quite as partisan in the Senate.

JM: Fewer members, a more collegial body, people knew one another better, maybe?

RGF: We all knew each other pretty well. By the time you'd been there for a few years, you would know each other pretty well. I never saw it as being a real hardline issue, a political issue in most cases.

 

JM: I remember when I was covering the legislature in the mid-eighties, this urban/rural split manifested itself into a little bit more of a partisan twist. There was a group particularly in the House who became known as the Cowboys. Do you remember that?

RGF: I do remember the Cowboys. I was the majority leader in the House when the Cowboys were rising.

JM: That must have made your job as the majority leader more difficult.

RGF: Oh, yes. They would come into my office, and they would want to see me and talk about things, not as an opponent, but just because I happened to be in leadership. I welcomed that opportunity. The Cowboys had—I don't know if I can say --a more conservative view.

JM: I think that's fair, a more conservative view, kind of a combination of a more conservative, rural views on things, thinking that maybe rural areas weren't adequately represented. I guess my judgment was they started to surface and become a little bit more aggressive. They became an actual faction within the legislature, and you had to deal with them as the majority leader and make sure you understood where they were going to be on a particular bill and that kind of a thing.

RGF: That's true. You did. They didn't always come to me for advice. That's for sure. I don't think I would ever consider myself a Cowboy, although I was from cowboy country. That's the way it was then.

JM: They probably came to your office and said, “If you need our support for this bill, this is what you need to do for us.”

RGF: Yes.

JM: Did you have conversations like that?

RGF: Oh, yes. That was not unusual.

JM: And David Miller was again not anybody I would necessarily consider a cowboy. He was an insurance salesman from Eudora, but he was kind of a leader from that contingent, and J. C. Long, and I think Jerry Friedman from Great Bend, and some others. Do you remember those guys?

RGF: I do. J. C. Long and Jerry Friedman, Dave Miller, yes. They were all very—I liked them. They were all very good guys.

JM: Bright guys, but nevertheless your job as the majority leader was to get stuff done.

 

RGF: Yes. We had to get legislation passed, and that required them to be able to vote for what we thought should be—when I say "we," I'm talking about mostly Wendel Lady, who was the—

JM: Speaker of the House.

RGF: The speaker at that time, yes.

JM: I can't remember the exact numbers, but the breakdown between Republicans and the Democrats was a little closer in those days. In fact, of all the years you served in the legislature, you served a few in the minority when the Democrats took over under John Carlin as the speaker of the House, later governor, and later again under Marvin Barkis, I think in the early nineties, right? You had the experience of being in the majority most of the time, but also in the minority.

RGF: That's right. I was. If I remember correctly, when Marvin came in as a leader, I was out, I believe.

JM: Maybe on your way to the Senate at that point?

RGF: Yes.

JM: I think you were out entirely. That's right. You would have been out by then. But earlier on, when John Carlin was the speaker of the House, you were here then.

RGF: Yes, I was.

JM: When you look back at your time in the legislature, you stayed for long enough, one would think, that you enjoyed that service. Did you enjoy being here?

RGF: Definitely, yes.

JM: What did you like about it?

RGF: I had chosen to go to law school, so I had an interest in the law. Where else would you want to go? Where the laws are made. It was just an environment that I liked. I liked the collegiality of the legislature and the issues and the way that they were resolved. It seemed like it made sense to me that the legislative process is a good way to resolve issues of that sort, what the law should be, and that includes the judiciary. It all just fit in right. I felt comfortable.

JM: And your peers must have obviously thought a lot of you to elect you to the majority leader. Do you recall how that came about? What prompted you to run for leadership?

RGF: My memory is not as good as it used to be. I'm not sure why. People had their reasons. I never really questioned them, but they did listen to what I had to say.

 

JM: In those days, Wendel Lady was the speaker. He was from Johnson County. In those days, there was an intentional effort—maybe there still is—to balance the leadership, so you made sure to have some rural and somebody from somewhere other than one of the big metro areas.

RGF: I agree. It would have been concerting from people in western Kansas if they didn't have some leadership in the legislature who they could go and talk to, that sort of thing.

JM: Right. That's why the Cowboys were in your office from time to time. As you said, you represented a Cowboy area even though you didn't consider yourself—

RGF: The Cowboys weren't necessarily divided by eastern and western Kansas.

JM: That's right.

RGF: It was important though that western Kansans felt like they were being represented because of those wide-open spaces. My district was huge compared to Wendel Lady's district in Johnson County.

JM: Even when you were in the house, it was huge. When you went to the Senate, it got even bigger.

RGF: Yes.

JM: That leads me to another set of questions because there are challenges to representing a district that big and that far away from Topeka.

RGF: Yes.

JM: When I asked you if you liked serving here, you had to like it. How many hundreds of miles would you drive week in and week out just to serve here?

RGF: Oh, a lot of miles. I used to tell people up here on a Friday afternoon, “I'm going home.” For me to drive east as far as I have to drive west just to get home, I'd be over in Indiana, just to kind of get an idea of what you're doing. You don't always know that. You don't have a concept in your mind of how far away it is. I tried to impress the people, it's a long way from here, and it was. I ended up learning how to fly an airplane because the travel was so long.

JM: Really? I'd forgotten about that.

RGF: Yes. I ended up flying back and forth. I flew my own airplane, and that's not uncommon in western Kansas anyway to do that because the distances were so great.

 

JM: Even when you were home, let's say you went home for a weekend, and you were going to be with constituents one end of the district from the other, hundreds of miles even doing that.

RGF: It was close to a hundred miles from my home to go to a constituent meeting in another part of the district.

JM: Did that make serving more difficult? When you have an area that big, it seems like there might be more diversity of opinion, if you were in one part of the district versus another, people might think very differently on some of these big issues.

RGF: It's true. There were differences of opinion, but when I was in the Senate, Dodge City was part of my district.

JM: It was?

RGF: Dodge City was not like Liberal, Kansas.

JM: Right.

RGF: It was different. You had to understand that. You had to factor that in when you were talking with people and making decisions.

JM: When you lost that election, when you ran for re-election for the Senate, how many years later was it? It would have been several years later that Bill Graves then asked you to serve on the State Board of Tax Appeals, correct?

RGF: Yes. I was living in Wichita then. I don't know what his thinking was, but I liked the idea.

JM: His thinking was you had chairman of the Judiciary Committee and had been one of those evenhanded legislators. That's what you need in a quasi-judicial administrative body like the Board of Tax Appeals. Again, that body has been off and on fairly controversial, too, because they have to make a lot of judgment calls.

RGF: That's true. Yes, you do.

JM: Did you enjoy your time on the board?

RGF: I did, yes.

JM: Were you there when Gus Bogina was there at all?

RGF: Yes. We decided the issue was the value of property, if you want to quantify it. That's what it was all about. It involved taxation, of course. Not what the taxes would be but how that value affected your taxation. It was something that people had strong opinions about.

 

JM: Of course, they did. It affected their pocketbook directly. During your time in the legislature, there were several issues—you reappraised property all across the state, and some people saw their taxes change pretty dramatically. You had debate after debate over how to value agriculture property over that time. Do you remember those conversations? Constituents probably were as attentive to those conversations as anything.

RGF: Yes, they were. I don't have memories of being very uncomfortable about it. It was an issue. There obviously were divided opinions about the way things should be. That's what it's all about. I didn't stress a lot about that.

JM: The severance tax in the mid-eighties, when that was passed, Governor John Carlin wanted the severance tax. That's an oil-and-gas-producing area that you represented at the time.

RGF: Yes.

JM: Was that a big issue in your district?

RGF: It was. I have no recollection of it being an agonizing issue.

JM: Were you an opponent or a supporter of that?

RGF: I'm pretty sure I was a supporter.

JM: Really? In that neck of the woods?

RGF: Yes.

JM: That might have been semi-courageous.

RGF: Possibly. It made sense.

JM: Also there's been an awful lot of debate over the years that I've watched the Kansas legislature in operation over how to fund schools. It finally looked like we're starting to resolve that, but there have been so many different attempts. In a big-picture sense, do you recall anything about those conversations?

RGF: School funding, I never really got into that issue a great deal.

JM: But it had to do with property valuation in the sense that some districts that the property didn't appraise at a very high value, some southeast Kansas districts versus some districts where there was a lot of oil and gas wells where the appraisals were ultimately high. The property tax, a mill levy in one place would raise a lot of money, in another place, not so much.

 

RGF: Yes.

JM: The effort was to try to equalize educational opportunity. It's been a hard needle to thread.

RGF: Yes, it has. It made sense to me. Why should kids in a poor area have to get a poorer education if you qualify the education based on the money that's spent? If it made sense to me, and apparently it did at that time, you do have to set up a school funding situation where you might have to prop up some areas in order to get the funding for the schools that didn't have the tax base to support it. It made sense to me. I did not lose a lot of sleep about school funding in the sense that I think the ultimate goal was a worthy goal.

JM: Well, Bob, is there anything I didn't ask you about that you want to talk about?

RGF: Just the people. When we were in the legislature, I can remember a lot of good friendships. It didn't matter the party. When we were in Topeka here, we got along pretty well. I don't remember any really unsavory situations at all. I've kept up with a lot of my colleagues, some of whom are now passed.

JM: When I got here in the early eighties, it seemed like a very collegial place. I have often referred to it as kind of its own small town. You had all different kinds of people on the five floors of the statehouse, just like a small community would, and the place accommodated them all.

RGF: Yes, it's true. As far as I could see here, people got along in their private lives pretty well with each other. They may have great differences in the political side, but in the private life, we didn't cross.

JM: In other words, that's the proverbial story of the two legislators at office, at parties. You get up on the floor and can argue, argue, argue, and then as soon as the day is done, they go out for a drink together. That's the way it was?

RGF: That's right. That's the way it would be. It had to be that way. It would be very unhappy if it were another way, I think.

JM: There have been years in recent history when it wasn't that way.

RGF: That isn't the kind of experience that I remember having.

JM: Do you remember what your favorite gathering spot when you were here during that time? Was there a particular place that stands out where you'd all get together in the evening after the day's business?

RGF: Well, they were right closely around the Capitol building here. There was almost always a restaurant and bar.

 

JM: And there were hospitality rooms hosted by various lobbying organizations, particularly early on when you got here, right?

RGF: Yes, there were. That was not a place that I would hang out at. Well, I wouldn't hang out at a bar either, for that matter. I had my own life to live.

JM: You'd go out to dinner though with friends.

RGF: Yes, we would go out to dinner. Lobbyists were very important in our lives. For communications purposes, we had to get information and give information. That was a good way to do it.

JM: Anybody stand out in your mind as being—Mary Turkington who represented the truckers was here at the time.

RGF: Mary, I remember very well. Mary was a very professional woman.

JM: She was a trailblazer in a lot of ways.

RGF: Yes, incredible. I remember her well. She was intimidating.

JM: In a very nice way. If she winked at you, you knew you were in trouble.

RGF: That's right.

JM: Or she used your full name, you knew you were in trouble. It was pretty subtle, but you could tell.

RGF: That's right.

JM: Anybody else. Pete McGill, who had been speaker, went over to found one of the biggest lobbying firms.

RGF: Yes. Since I've been gone, I've kind of lost track of his organization. Pat Hubbell, the beer wholesalers, of all people. Pat was a big guy. He had a big voice. He was fun to be around.

JM: I've often joked. I know Pat Hubbell. I've often joked when you look up the term “lobbyist” in the dictionary, it should be his picture there. He just fits all—he's kind of one of those “hail, fellow, well met” big voice, well dressed, slaps you on the back.

RGF: Exactly.

JM: The kind of guy nobody would mind spending time with.

 

RGF: Yes. That's the way it was. But there were a lot of other people who were not that way who I liked as well.

JM: Right.

RGF: It was a good community that we were in here.

JM: Community. That's a good word for it.

RGF: We'd get to know each other. We don't necessarily mingle in terms of family-like things, but socially it was a good experience.

JM: I'm glad you came back to the Capitol to talk to us today. I really thank you for your time.

RGF: It's fun to be here. My wife and I, we met in Liberal, Kansas. Her father had come there originally from Nicaragua, and we've been married a long time now. We still have our contacts out there in western Kansas. It was a good experience. We're still living the life.

JM: Thank you for talking with us today. Thank you for your service to this state.

RGF: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

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