INTERVIEW OF GARY SHERRER BY MIKE MATSON OCTOBER 15, 2021
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mike Matson: The Kansas Oral History Project is dedicated to preserving and providing access to the voices of Kansans from all walks of life, including those in public policy making. It's a nonprofit whose purpose is collecting, transcribing, and making available to researchers and the public oral histories of various aspects of life in Kansas including those involved with public policy making. The Kansas Oral History Project's work is supported by grants and donations and does not charge for the use of its oral histories that it does collect.

My name is Mike Matson, and I'm a volunteer interviewer for the Kansas Oral History Project. If you were to design a professional career that impacted others through leadership, through creativity and innovation, it would look a lot like the career of Gary Sherrer. I first met Gary Sherrer when I was a reporter covering politics and government for WIBW TV, and Gary was a lobbyist for Bank IV. Later on we became colleagues in the administration of Bill Graves as governor. Gary, of course, served as commerce secretary and later as lieutenant governor. I had the good fortune to serve as the governor's press secretary and communications director. We are here in the Office of Lieutenant Governor David Toland, who has graciously offered this space for the use of this interview. Governor, delighted to see you again.

Gary Sherrer: Thank you, Mike.

MM: How does it feel being back in the old digs?

GS: It feels good because I'm not in office. I can be relaxed in this environment. It's great. I loved it here. It was good times.

MM: Excellent. We'd like to in this time together kind of just explore your life and your career. So I think the best way to do it would just be to start at the beginning. Let's kind of do it chronologically. You grew up not far from here.

GS: I did. The first house that I can remember when I was growing up was down at 13th and Van Buren. I used to come to this capitol on my bicycle and come in in the hot summers and get a cool drink of water and walk the halls and go to the top. I never liked it, but peer pressure makes you make a lot of dumb mistakes. Mine was going up on the top of the Capitol because I didn't handle heights very well.

But, yes, I grew up down there on 13th and Van Buren, but actually we moved a lot. I went to five grade schools. The only one I went to twice was Quinton Heights, the old Quinton Heights down on Buchanan Street. My parents were really the working poor. When you rent, sometimes you can afford something better, and sometimes you can't pay the rent and need something less. So I got good exposure. I got to see Van Buren Grade School, Polk Grade School, Central Park Grade School, Quinton Heights, a nice tour of Topeka when I grew up.

MM: Tell us about your parents.

GS: My folks were typical. They grew up in the rural area of northeast Kansas, the Effingham and Everest areas. The Depression, the history books like to have ends to things. So the Depression ended when the World War II started, and I know it didn't for a lot of people.

My dad was a core driller for the State of Kansas. He would leave on Mondays and come back on Fridays. Core drillers were drilling for the core samples to build bridges, overpasses, etc. He did a lot of stuff on I-70 actually. My mom worked in a flower shop and then eventually in the revenue department over in the docking building actually. They never made much money. I had older brothers and sisters, but the one closest to me was ten years older. As a result, they kind of were gone by the time I was a seven, eight year old.

It was an interesting time. It teaches you a lot of things. I got my first job when I was in seventh grade at the old College Hill Drugstore, and I worked there for six years. I started out delivering prescriptions in the snow, and I ended up running the fountain department, the soda department.

MM: High school, Topeka High, just down the street.

GS: Topeka High, yes, the Class of '58.

MM: And it was there that you got into debate, correct?

GS: Yes. I had a wonderful teacher in junior high who said to me, “You need to take debate.” I remember saying to her, “But it's the same time as journalism, and all the girls are taking journalism.” I might have turned out not as good as you, but I might have turned out to be a journalist. She said, “No, you really have to take debate.” So she told me to, and I did. A guy by the name of J. Matt Hill was the debate coach, very successful, and it changed my life. Debate was an absolute life-changing experience. It just touched it all through my life.

MM: When you look back at it, what is it about debate, the class that resonated so deeply with you?

GS: I think there were a couple of things. I think that you could train yourself to think and to understand there are almost always two sides to an issue. So you're trying to sort your way through and see the advantages kind of on both sides and make a decision. In debate, of course, you're assigned the affirmative and the negative, generally assigned both. So you get to understand logic, reasoning, and then communication. It's not enough to have an idea if you can't get it to other people. Those things, I don't think I was sophisticated enough to understand how valuable they were, but as I grew older, it was like, “Wow, they drive almost everything I do.”

MM: Sure. When you were in high school, I'm confident that you had thoughts of college. When you were thinking about, “Where am I going to go to college, and how am I going to afford this?” what was going through your mind?

GS: Well, I didn't plan real well, but I did want to go to college. Nobody in my family had gone. My dad died my senior year in high school. My dad was making $216 a month for the State of Kansas, if you could imagine in 1958. My mother was probably making less as a clerk in the Revenue Department. There was no way that she could help me. Out of nowhere a letter came from the debate coach at Emporia State. In those days, it was Kansas State Teachers College. I'd never been on the campus. It said, “We'll give you a scholarship and a job in the Registrar's Office.”

So I told my mother, and she wasn't very happy because she was hoping I was going to go to Washburn and stay at home. She took me down and dropped me off because I didn't have a car. The next time I saw her was in December for Christmas. But there I was, pretty ill-prepared, seventeen years old, didn't really understand college or anything. I just knew I wanted to go, and I wanted to debate.

Kansas State Teachers College [now Emporia State] in its own way became my first family. I mean, the support and the nurturing and they cared. It was just amazing to me. It changed me forever, actually. If you just want to know, they saved me because if I hadn't been in that environment, I have no idea where I would be now. I really don't. I don't think it would have been with the kind of opportunities I've had in my life.

MM: So clearly Emporia, that's a soft spot in your heart.

GS: Oh, yes, for over fifty years now, I've done whatever I can, when I can to support them. I owe them that. We were pretty good. We won Air Force Academy Nationals. We won Dartmouth. There [was] no Division 1, Division 2 debate. In fact, one of my deals is that Larry Tribe is this national justice legal scholar from Harvard. I debated Larry in college.

MM: Who won?

GS: Well, I tell my grandchildren I did, of course.

MM: Modesty prevents you from—

GS: My grandchildren are not impressed at all.

MM: I understand. It's a nice claim to fame clearly. So Emporia State, it has deep and significant meaning in your life. Now you're thinking about a career. What happened after college?

GS: I was an education major because again I really and truly didn't know what I wanted to do for sure, but I thought being a debate coach would be pretty neat. I taught school after that for eight years. I loved it. I met some interesting debaters along the way that I had in my class. Bill Graves might come to mind. Lawton Nuss was also one. I've had the chance to be exposed to some pretty remarkable students.

MM: Well, we'll come back and talk about Bill Graves here in a little bit. Talk a little bit about the early part of your career. It was sort of a tour of Kansas. You had a chance to teach in a lot of different communities.

GS: Yes. I taught one semester in Leavenworth, Kansas, and then I went to Hutchinson because I wanted that debate job. By the way, they told me I had to also do the drama. I had never done it before, but I assured them I could. Fortunately, I found a wonderful colleague teaching. She really wanted to do drama. I got paid for it, and she did really great work.

MM: That's awesome.

GS: And I have to just tell you something. Sometimes we're just so ignorant of what goes on around us because when I think of that, when I taught at Hutchinson, I made $250 a year more than a woman would because I was head of household, which meant I think at one time I had a cat maybe, but that was the most. But a single mother raising her children and being a teacher, she couldn't have that $250. I only mention that because we are so ignorant sometimes and so reluctant to be educated. There's just no progress with a combination of ignorance and reluctance.

MM: Your life and your career is just sort of the arc of culture change in Kansas, when you think about what you've done and how far the society has evolved in that thinking and just the way people think about those sorts of things. Is that fair?

GS: I would have said that a few years ago. I have to be honest with you. I worry. Kansas has been a progressive state, if you look at it. There were a lot of things that were done here early. I do have that concern about our open-mindedness and again that thing about being ignorant. Ignorance isn't a problem. it's the reluctance to learn and to understand that becomes a problem.

Then I finished up. It was in Hutchinson where I got married, Judy Waller from El Dorado. I met her in college. We ran into each other. It was like debate. It's a long, thoughtful process. We started dating in February, got engaged in June, and married in August. She was a teacher as well. For forty-five years, we had a great time. I lost her in 2010.

We then were in Salina where I finished my teaching career. I made the decision to leave teaching. People always say, “Well, it was the money, wasn't it?” Oddly enough, it wasn't. That was the most money I'd ever made in my life. We owned a home because Judy was teaching, too, and we could afford a little house. I felt because I wanted to do some things. When you teach, you're in that classroom because that's where you ought to be. Those kids are waiting for you. So I just wanted to do something else. So I resigned without a job.

MM: Did you have in inkling of what you wanted to do? Was it just the desire to do something more important or more far-reaching?

GS: I just wanted to do things where I would be out in the community. I wanted to be involved in things. I don't know. It's a genetic flaw. That was really difficult as a teacher. Fortunately, because I'd had Bill Graves and his sister Martha in class, their dad offered me a role as the marketing and PR guy for Graves Truck Line. That started things.

MM: Let's talk about things. Your relationship with Bill Graves has often been described publicly in very complimentary ways. You're his mentor. Is that a fair and accurate assessment?

GS: You'd probably have to ask him about his mentor. We have a really good relationship. I think one of the things that has made it good is that, I don't know. I shouldn't probably do this anecdote, but I'm going to anyway because I don't think it would bother him. There were some decisions made that I thought were not the best ones necessarily. They weren't horrible or anything wrong with them. I just might have gone a different route. He came into this office one day and he sat and he said, "I guess you're disappointed in me." I said, "No, I'm never disappointed in you. Sometimes I'm disappointed in your decisions but never in you."

I think that's why we had such a good relationship. He knew I would be absolutely honest with him when he asked for advice. I can't really remember ever asking him for anything during those years we were here together. It was just solid then and solid now. It was solid in the classroom. He was the president of our Debate Club and the whole thing.

MM: So we'll come back to the years as governor and lieutenant governor. Let's pick up with the career. So you're working for Bill Graves Sr. at Graves Truck Line in Salina.

GS: Yes.

MM: Tell the story of him selling the company and what that meant for Graves the younger.

GS: I think Bill had always planned to go back and be the next president of Graves Truck Line. His dad didn't have a high school education, but he was one of the smartest men I ever worked around. I really enjoyed working for him. His sense of numbers was just phenomenal. He saw deregulation of the trucking industry on the horizon, and he knew what it was going to do to regional carriers like his. So he sold—Graves was publicly held, but it was controlled by family shares, and it was sold. I think that changed Bill's trajectory because now I'm not going back and being president of Graves Truck Line.

Graves Truck Line was very family. The brothers all had a role and the cousins and the aunts and uncles. I would tell you, one day John Graves said to me, "I know you didn't like that decision they made, but you have just got to remember, you're not a Graves." So I did remember that.

MM: So your career, your relationship with Bill Graves continued on one track. In the meantime, your career continues to progress. What happened after Graves Truck Line?

GS: I got a call from a friend who said Capital Federal was looking for a chief marketing officer, and Henry Bubb, the legend, hadn't been very pleased apparently with the candidates, and would I be interested in talking to him? So I said sure. I met with Henry. He could be an intimidating presence, although again I think he liked the candor and the kind of straight talk. We seemed to hit it off well.

So I went to Capital Federal. I was there four years as their chief marketing officer. And then I got recruited to Fourth Financial Corp. by Jordan Haines, another sort of Kansas legend of sorts. And Jordan, I learned a lot working for him. I really did. Jordan had a yellow pad, and he wrote all the things to do. If I had called him and he was in a meeting, I might get a call at 9:00 that night because he was still working the yellow pad on his call backs.

So Jordan recruited me down and said, “We're a one bank holding company, and we'll never be able to grow if we don't change that.” So I was the chief marketing officer for Fourth Financial Corp., at the time Fourth National Bank. Then I came up here to this wonderful building to work on the multibank holding issue.

MM: So you're a marketing exec on the rise, and you get this job that's financially based, and they want you to come here and lobby. So you're back in Topeka. You're back in familiar surroundings. But what was that like? What would help us to understand when you're asked to carry this water for this bank? What was the culture like?

GS: Well, if I have a regret and I do, is it took an enormous amount of time away from my family. I missed some grade school concerts and some things like that because I was up here doing this, and you can't replace those things. If there's a hole in my life, it's that. We had to really work at it. When it passed, it passed by one vote in the House after I think it was a two- or three-hour call in the House. There's some inside politics on it. There was a deal made that one of our votes was going to be gone. In fact, we didn't know the vote was going to be called. The long story is that after a very extended call to the House, we finally [won], it was a one-vote deal. I feel good about it because all those things about it was the end of small banking and all this sort of stuff. The consumers benefited, and that's what it was supposed to be about anyway.

MM: Did you enjoy that lobbying work?

GS: Mostly. I thought there were really good people in this building. I got to meet a lot of good folks. So I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the strategy. It was a debate again. It was defining the issues, communicating the issues, finding the flaws in the counterarguments. It was a debate just on a bigger scale

MM: You took advantage of all the skills that you had started to develop as a teenager.

GS: I think so, yes. I think without a doubt. That's how you figure out how to get through somebody's arguments. What's their argument? And the other thing you do, by the way,

people forget is that when you have debate training, my arguments, what do I think the others are going to say? What's the weakness in my argument? How can I strengthen my own arguments against what I know is going to come as kind of a counterpoint? It was good.

I've always been interested in politics. I always have. I will tell you, I'm twelve years old. The Republican Convention, I know Taft is a bad human being because he's against Dwight Eisenhower, and that was unacceptable. I literally that night—as you remember in those days, conventions weren't predetermined, I had a piece of cardboard, and I'd written every state, and I divided Taft. As the roll call, I was keeping track just in case they needed somebody to verify the results after they were over. So I was doing that when I was twelve.

MM: That would have been the 1952 election.

GS: 1952. That's why on my car, there's an Eisenhower Foundation tag of "I like Ike" actually. So I've always had an interest in politics. In college, I was involved in student government and things like that. This was a chance to be in the real lab.

MM: When you're here in the real lab and you're building these relationships and you recognize that your arguments are going to carry some weight, you're also noticing that there's some gaps there, and this leads to the conversation about Leadership Kansas. You're one of the founding fathers of a very significant leadership development system in Kansas. Tell us about the origins of that.

GS: Well, I was at a state chamber meeting. I was actually a regional vice president or something. I was talking to Al Campbell who's a wonderful gentleman from Larned who'd been a legislator. Al Campbell was there. Carl Nordstrom was the exec. He was a prince. I will tell you, there's probably not a more decent guy on the planet than Carl Nordstrom was.

Somebody brings up—Bob Bennett was governor at the time, and somebody brings up that they were looking for an appointee for some board, and they were kind of wanting like a woman from southeast Kansas for balance. And by the way, in Bob Bennett's credit, he appointed the first woman Supreme Court justice. He was in tune with the balancing and equity on those things.

Everybody's saying, "I don't know anybody. I don't know anybody." And somebody said because the other two aren't here in that conversation, I'll take credit for it, somebody said, "In a state of only two million people, how is it we don't know leadership potential individuals, people who have the capacity to be on boards or to grow? Why don't we have a system to identify them?"

So Al agreed to create a task force, which sometimes is the death of an idea, but in this case, I was on it. Dwight Button, the chair of Fourth Financial, and I was at Cap Fed at the time. But Dwight Button was the chair of Fourth Financial. Neta Pollum was on it. Al Campbell was on it. It seems like to me Archie Dykes who at this time was at Security Benefit Life was on it.

We were talking about how do you do it and all this. So the school teacher in me kicked in and I said, “Why don't I design one, and then you all can enhance or reject or do whatever you want to do?” So I just thought, “What would I like to do?” and just arbitrarily I thought a class of thirty-five people once a month for six months, move it around the state because we're a little provincial in this state, and we need to make sure that people in Johnson County knows what Garden City looks like, but we also need Garden City people to acknowledge the economic engine of Johnson County, etc.

We took it back to them. They agreed. Let's go. We got a nomination form, sent it out to the various members. I literally had put all the classes together, hoping we could get them. The first class was going to have the governor and the attorney general, etc. That's how it started.

We looked for a model, and we couldn't find one around the country, honestly. We didn't have the search engines of today, but we just couldn't find one. So we created this, and wow.

MM: Well, what you see now is models that were built on the Leadership Kansas model in states all across the country.

GS: Right.

MM: And probably more importantly, communities within Kansas have created their own.

GS: It's interesting you said that. I spoke at the Lions Club in Salina that year, and they said, “What do you think is the most important element of this?” and I said, “Well, the state program is good, and it will have some value, but I'm going to tell you, there's going to be a Leadership Salina and McPherson and Newton and Pittsburg and Liberal, and there were. They were all created by the people who had been in the class going back home saying, “We can do this.”

Thomas County has a good one, for instance. So rural areas, everybody. And the whole purpose, identify, inform, don't propagandize, just inform because information changes. So don't go too much on that, but inspire them. You've got this talent. Get out and do something with it. That was the whole force. I think it turned out well.

MM: Let's go to an earlier conversation about just some changes that have occurred. When you look at the lay of the land today with respect to leadership in Kansas specifically, what does it tell you about the efficacy of programs like Leadership Kansas? These are efforts that can help solve problems. Fair?

GS: I think they are. You know, community problems. I used to give a speech. I would talk about if you don't think leadership makes a difference, I can show you two Kansas towns that are maybe twenty miles apart, and one has got a main street that's still working. They may have adapted it a little bit. Maybe there's an antique store where the department store used to be, etc. But things are still going okay. And down the road, the same economy, the same geography, there's a town that has no main street anymore, and it's not a happy town. It's not

doing well, and I said, “What's the difference?” I said, “One is that it was being run by the grumpy old men at the cafe, and the other one is some people decided that the only way”—

I did economic development, and I had a woman once said, “Hope can kill you.” What she meant was, you can't just stand around hoping that it's going to get better. To get better, you have to make changes because you can't keep doing what you've been doing. And that's what the leader does. He leads or she leads through the change process to get to that change that's going to make the community, the school, whatever it is, better.

So I've always believed that this leadership development is really critical at the level of community, and it's nice when we can then move it on up to the state, and there are days when I read things in the paper, thinking we could probably use a little more of it, but still if you built that base up there, those communities are dependent upon the quality of leadership.

MM: You referenced it as “grumpy old men.” I've heard it described as “the cancer of the coffee shop.”

GS: Well, I've been in those conversations. “You know what killed our town is when they took the school away, when they consolidated schools? That's what killed communities.” No, the community was dead. That's why the school went away because if the community had been alive and vibrant, you would have had enough kids in your school to keep the school.” Or it's the grasshoppers of '39 or whatever it is. There's always a reason, but all that's pretty irrelevant. It's “Where are you going now? What are you doing? Are you fighting change?” This business about “Don't tax me for anything,” okay, just keep going to the coffee shop and griping, I guess. I don't know, but it's not much of a solution.

MM: Fair enough. So back on the chronology. You're still working and communicating regularly with Bill Graves.

GS: Yes.

MM: At some point, he realizes, probably with your help, that public service might be an opportunity for him careerwise. Tell us about that conversation.

GS: Well, he was doing a little graduate work over at KU. I'm not sure that his heart was in it, particularly after he saw that he wasn't going to go back and be the president of the truck line. I said to him, “You have a lot of talents and skills.” I actually hooked him up with George H. Bush's campaign when they were running the primary against Ronald Reagan.

MM: 1980.

GS: Yes, it's not like I picked a winner for him, but it did pay dividends later by the way, having an in with the Bush family. It was the experience and getting to know somebody and all. Then I

had told Jack Brier who was then secretary of state that this was a talent, and he was kind of looking right now, and so Bill went to work for Jack at the Secretary of State's Office.

MM: And then of course ran and was elected in '86. [Kansas Secretary of State]

GS: Right.

MM: Re-elected in '90.

GS: Re-elected in '90. I'm not trying to sign up for his fan club, but I remember one thing, and that was that it was clear that Joan Finney probably was in trouble. There were some decisions coming from her administration that probably weren't the best thought-out ones. I was in the meeting with the little kitchen cabinet about "If you're going to position yourself to be governor, go after her. Establish it. That's the way to do it," and he absolutely refused. I mean, he just said, "No, she's got her own problems. I'm not going to run because of Joan Finney. I'm going to run because I think I can do a pretty good job."

He was adamant in that, and I think that talks a lot about character. I don't know how many you would find today that won't take advantage of the situation. He was very thoughtful in that. So he then decided to run for governor.

MM: Of course, Finney chose to not seek re-election.

GS: Correct.

MM: He ended up running against Congressman Slattery. A big win, 1994.

GS: Yes.

MM: You're clearly on the inside circle. What was your role in that campaign and immediately after?

GS: Well, during the campaign, again it was just a sounding board. For whatever reason, he knows that whatever I told him is the truth as I saw it. It was just good. Sometimes, as you know, it's good to have somebody just to talk to. There's not a lot of agenda on there.

So during the campaign, it was mainly, "Yeah, I think that's a good idea." Right after the campaign, he asked me and Kent Glasscock, Representative Kent Glasscock, and his chief of staff to be, Joyce [McGarry], and [Senator] Sheila Frahm as his lieutenant governor was going to be on the transition committee. I was kind of insistent that we limit it. I know the trend is now to have transition committees of a thousand, and I get it. Maybe that's just today's politics. I tell you what, keeping something quiet with three or four people is a miracle, and actually Lieutenant Governor Frahm went to Hawaii for two weeks. So there were just three of us doing it. We didn't have any leaks. I think we put together pretty good groups.

We'd gotten the whole thing pretty well put together.

MM: You're basically building the executive branch of state government.

GS: Yes. Well, you know, anyone who's been around it knows, getting elected is one thing. Governing well is a whole different set of things. The governor's deal was just “Bring me people who will be competent, who will do the way we want to do things and get things done.” He truly wasn't interested in the party they were in or if they had given any money. I have to tell you, I'm not comfortable naming names, but I know of one administration that came in that color coded all the applications, like if you were for them in the primary, that was the best pile, and if you came on board after the primary and maybe gave money, and then I remember they had little black dots on them, absolutely because of whatever reason they had against it.

An anecdote that I love that I don't think got a lot of attention as it should have, we decided we were going to announce the whole cabinet in one announcement. The strategy that I was pushing on that is, “Look, you do them one at a time, and everybody has somebody that doesn't like them.” So if you give people in the press enough time, it's not going to be a glowing thing. There will be somebody who will say, “Oh, he's really competent,” but there's going to be someone who said, “Well, but she did this once.” So I said, “We'll just throw them on out there at the same time, and they've got to cover them all and do the research on all of them, or it's going to be old news.”

And we never floated names to get reactions either. We just said, “We're going to go or not go.” So we all go up to the Supreme Court Chamber. We actually meet down at my office, and we troop up there, and we go in, and he's at the podium, and we line up behind him. By this time, I had done the Dick Cheney thing of “Gee, we can't find a good commerce secretary. I guess it will just have to be me.”

So we're lined up behind him. I think it was John Petterson of the Kansas City Star who said, “Governor, you said during the election that if there was a good Democrat, you'd put him on your cabinet. Did you?” And Bill, typical Bill, which is so perfect, he said, “I don't know,” and he turned and he said, “Are any of you a Democrat?” and Wayne Franklin [Secretary of Labor] raises his hand. Bill turns back and said, “Well, I guess I did.” It was such a great story because it said, “I didn't look to see what party they were from. I was looking at what credentials they had.”

So it was fun. It was a good cabinet and good people who really I think were in tune with the governor. You know, Ed McKechnie, who's a pretty bright guy and was an incisive, sometimes pain legislator. I like Ed. We're friends. But Ed once said to me, “You know what I don't like about your administration? You all speak with one voice.” We say, “Well, if they gave you a little money and cut So and So's budget, couldn't you get that done?” They would say, “Oh, no, they need that. We've been in meetings.” He said, “You all spoke with one voice.”

And it was honest because it was very clear to everybody: do a good job. Put your politics a little behind. You can't do away with politics in this building, but you don't have to use them as your spear as you go around thrusting to people either.

MM: So you're in the Cabinet as commerce secretary.

GS: Yes.

MM: It's the nineties, and the money's flowing.

GS: Yes, the economy is wonderful.

MM: What was that like?

GS: Well, it was great. Not only budgetwise, we were able to cut taxes and increase spending for education, things of that nature. We expanded programs in commerce because 1) we got good support from the legislature to do so, but there was money to do it. And then recruiting businesses because the economy was good, businesses were expanding. As a result, in my years there, we were directly related to the creation of 42,000 jobs. I'm not either arrogant or naive. It wasn't just about my brilliance. It was we had a good economy, but we also had some really good strategies. And creativity has to be part of government. I think today people don't get that creativity is okay in government.

We created a fund called the KEOIF. It was the Kansas Economic Opportunity Initiative Fund. It was money that was pretty discretionary. I remember we had in southeast Kansas a company looking at one of our towns in southeast Kansas and a town in Missouri. Missouri had the advantage because they had a spur, a railroad, and this company needed raw materials. We said, “You come to Kansas, we'll build that spur.” It was a couple of hundred thousand dollars, but the payroll and particularly bringing business to areas that was difficult to bring to.

We had the only grant program for Main Street in the United States. For some reason it was called Incentives Without Walls. I've never understood why my staff named it that except that I told them the form could only be one page. The application form could only be one page. I said, “You've got communities out there, Main Street programs, who don't have professional grant writers. They just need some money for something.” So we had that. That was the only program in the country.

A lot of that stuff went by the wayside in later administrations, but we found it effective. We found it very helpful. Also this local partnership business. I think for state government to keep in mind that it's a partner with the communities. I'm sorry for maybe this two-minute rant here, but I am really disturbed when I see a trend that we're going to tell school boards what to teach and how to teach and bypass the community who elects their own school board and has those discussions. When we do these mandated things down, I think we're missing the point that traditionally we used to say that government is the best the closer you get it to the people. This

building is a long way from a lot of people in this state. I think one of our successes, I really believe this is the way we partnered, the way we said to the community, “What is it you want? How does this work best for you?”

For instance, in that Incentive Without Walls, we gave them the money as a grant. We said to the Main Street program, “You can loan it out if you want or give half of it as a grant and half of it as a loan, and when it's repaid, it goes back into use. So you could keep a revolving loan because we don't need to be in your business down there as long as you do what you said you'd do to get the grant.” I mean, we did have standards, and we expected them to be met.

I don't know. Somehow it seems we drifted away a little bit about appreciating the partnership of local government.

MM: When you think about partnerships from that era, the conventional wisdom was “Stay away from KCK. Stay away from Wyandotte County. It's an economic loser.” You guys didn't listen to that advice.

GS: No. We had a real opportunity obviously come along. When the ISC Corporation with the NASCAR racing was looking around, they were looking at Missouri. They were looking at Kansas. They were looking at some other states. We had the STAR bond. I will tell you, I personally think it's the very essence of good government. Carol Marinovich, the mayor; Dennis Hays, the county administrator—Wyandotte County at that time particularly was a pretty Democrat county.

MM: Right.

GS: Actually we had people say, “What are you doing that for them for?” Well, they happen to be Kansans. That's when you get in these positions, it's about Kansans. I remember going down with Carol, the first time we met with the racecar folks. Once we got them, and again I give credit to Carol and Dennis, they were saying, “This is wonderful, but there are only a few races a year. I don't know about the whole economic impact.”

In those days, I'll call them “the good old days,” the STAR bond was totally controlled by the secretary of commerce. The legislation said that. Not even the governor, obviously Bill and I talked about it and he was on board, but I could draw the line of what the area was that would qualify for STAR bonds. And Carol and Dennis shared with me what they saw, the potential, and that's where the Legends is today and Nebraska Furniture Mart, and all the rest. There was actually an article in a government journal about the economic miracle called Wyandotte County. To me, it was wonderful. It was a great experience. Of course, I admire Carol and her leadership. But isn't that what government is supposed to do? I mean, isn't that kind of basically kind of the standard that we ought to be setting? I don't know.

MM: So '96, Bob Dole runs for president, steps down from the Senate.

GS: Right.

MM: The governor appoints Lieutenant Governor Frahm to the US Senate. He needs a lieutenant governor. What happens in that conversation?

GS: Well, you'd be surprised how many people want to be lieutenant governor. For the life of me, I'm not sure why although I loved it. I've told friends of mine there's nothing more former than a former lieutenant governor. That's as former as you can get.

So there were a lot of people interested. Truthfully, he and I had one conversation. Essentially, I initiated it. I said, “You want me to serve, I'm here. You've got a better idea, I'm here. So we're good.” His style, it went for a few weeks, and then a phone call. “Hey, we're pretty good together.” “Okay.”

MM: So you have a career that is behind the scenes. You get things done. Now all of a sudden, your name's on the ballot, and you're a candidate for public office. What went through your mind there? Was there a different way you thought about “Here's Gary Sherrer, and here's how I act?”

GS: Well, my mother was still alive at the time. She was kind of proud. I think what it does do is I think there's a higher level of responsibility. I really do. It's one thing to be secretary of commerce. It's another—for better or worse, lieutenant governor is the second highest elected office in the state. I mean, I always enjoyed it when we had like Kansas Day, which used to be a really big Republican event. Pat [Senator Roberts] and Sam [Senator Brownback] always got introduced before me. They'd build it up, and then it was me, then the governor. I always thought, “Take that, United States senators.”

But, no, when your name's on the ballot and you're elected, I think it should change you a little bit. It should say to you, “Before you were the commerce secretary working for the governor, trying to do good things for the state, but you worked for the governor.” Even though you're on his ticket, there were people who said you're okay, or maybe they voted for him in spite of me. I could probably give you a couple of names there. But in essence you've got the certificate. You're an elected state official. I think there would be something wrong with you if you didn't take it a little more seriously.

MM: The last policy issue we want to talk about here is higher education. You were involved deeply with a task force that in essence changed higher ed governance in Kansas. Tell us about where that idea came from and where it went.

GS: Well, interesting enough, there had been something like twenty task forces that addressed the issue of coordination of higher ed. The governor had talked about it and said, “We've just got to get a handle on this thing” because you had community colleges that are not governed because they all had their own trustees, but there are class approvals, what they can offer, and all coming from the State Department of Education. We had horror stories of “I went to a

community college, and I took all these classes, and then I went up to K State or I went up to KU, and they wouldn't take any of them, or they only took one, and now I have to start all over again." There wasn't a coordination going on.

So he agreed, and we did a task force, and I was chair. Actually we had a co-chair. We wanted somebody from the business community, and we had Gene Bicknell co-chair it with me. But we had great discussions, what would it look like, and all. Then the task force recommended certain things be done, and I can remember sitting at the desk in this office, and opposite me was [Senator] Tim Emert and [Senator] David Adkins, and there were probably a couple other legislators. I know there had to be at least one or two Democrat legislators because again we didn't see it as a partisan issue.

Then we developed the legislation, and it was passed. I have to tell you, subsequent to that, I served on the Board of Regents. I will tell you, it's much better there. Today we have actual agreements between universities and community colleges that say, "You take these classes at Butler County and teacher ed prep, and they will all transfer to Emporia State because we've got an agreement now." It's just so much better for the students. It was just a move that should have been made a long time ago. I'm really pleased that it happened.

MM: You touched on this earlier. This might be a good way to wrap up our conversation. When you look back on your career and you compare the way things happen today in the public arena, what's the biggest change? What has changed between the time when you were effective and today?

GS: I think the raw partisanship. I think it's really sad that we can't get people in a room and figure out what's a good thing to do for this state, for the people in this state. It's got to where somebody's tag on it, it's got to have somebody's flag flying on it. I know it probably happens occasionally, but essentially we've just grown so partisan. Remember when we started all of this, I was talking about one of the things in debate and in life, it's not our ignorance that's a problem, it's the fact that we're unwilling to do something about it, to learn, to listen, to see the other point of view.

I remember a time, Mike, when I watched a debate on the Senate floor, Frank Gaines and Bob Storey. If you were sitting in the gallery, you were thinking, "They ought to call security because these two guys are going to go at it." After the Senate adjourned, they're coming out, and I hear one of them say to the other, "It's your turn to buy. I'll meet you there in thirty minutes."

And I think that's significant. They weren't giving up their principles. They weren't giving up their passions, but they could separate them and didn't have to make such an enemy out of the other person and just anger and negativity and all those things. So the long answer is simply that the responsibility is "What is the best for the people in this state?" and your party comes second. Your prejudices come third or fifth. I just think we've lost that, and I don't know what the secret would be to get it back. I'll be honest. I loved my years here. I really did. It was the best eight years of my life. But I don't think I'd want to be here today.

MM: Lieutenant Governor Sherrer, on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project and on behalf of all the Kansans that you represented, thank you for your career.

GS: Thank you, Mike. I appreciate it.

MM: Absolutely. I appreciate your time.

GS: Thank you

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