

Interview of Jo Ann Pottorff by Patty Clark, October 9, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Patty Clark: The date is October 9, 2020, 1:30 p.m. We are in the House chamber of the Kansas State House in Topeka. I'm Patty Clark, and today I will have the privilege of interviewing Jo Ann Pottorff from Wichita who was State Representative representing District 83 from 1985 to 2013. I'll be conducting the interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Incorporated, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those who served from the 1960s to 2000. These interviews will be made accessible to researchers and to educators. The interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. The audio and video equipment today is being operated by David Heinemann.

Jo Ann grew up and was raised in the city of Wichita. She has her bachelor's degree from Kansas State University and her master's from St. Louis University. She served as President of the Kansas Association of School Boards before she became a state legislator and also served on the Wichita School Board. While she was a legislator, Jo Ann served as the Vice Chair of the Appropriations Committee, Chair of the Arts and Cultural Resources Committee, and Chair of the State Building Construction Committee as well as time on the Transportation Committee and actually a multitude of other committees as well. Jo Ann, you had a very, very interesting set of committee experiences.

Jo Ann Pottorff: I did. That's right, which was very good.

PC: There were a number of issues, a number of watershed legislation that was passed during your tenure. We'll get to that in a little bit. But, Jo Ann, let's start with, just talk about your background. You were born and raised in Wichita, your time with the school board there, your time on the State Board of School Boards.

JP: I was raised, as you mentioned, in Wichita. I went to public education in Wichita. We lived in St. Louis for a couple of years but decided to come back to Wichita, come back to Kansas. That's where we wanted to raise our family. My husband decided to run for the Wichita School Board. He had a good friend, [Attorney General] Kent Frizzell, who was very involved in Kansas politics. They had been in a breakfast group together. Kent talked my husband into running for the Wichita School Board.

My husband ran for the school board, and he was there for twelve years. On a Monday night, he said, "I'm not going to run anymore." The next day, Tuesday, was the filing deadline. I said, "Maybe I'll run for school board. Maybe I'll come down to the meeting." I never even thought about political office. Neither one of us are political in our families at all.

So I went down to the school board that evening. I thought, "Yes, I'm going to." So we put a little press release together by Tuesday the next morning, and I ran for the Wichita School Board. There were about twenty-five people running at that time. When I ran, they thought since my husband had been on the school board, I was going to be just like him, and I was not even interviewed by the Wichita Eagle, which was kind of interesting at that time because the

Eagle always interviewed people, but I did run. I was elected. I was elected to the School Board for eight years.

During this time I was on the Wichita School Board, I came to Topeka a lot because I was very involved in education, and Wichita did not have a lobbyist at all. I would come up here, and I had a chance to meet many of the legislators at that time. I didn't really think about running for the legislature that much until a January before. Mike Meachan was my representative said, "I'm not going to run again. Would you be interested?"

This was in January. I would come up to Topeka, be up here several times during the month, visiting with legislators. The more I was up here, I thought, "Maybe." It wasn't really until May before I decided to run for the legislature. The filing deadline was in June. I quickly got ready and prepared to run for the legislature.

PC: Talk a little bit about campaigning at that point in your political career—how it's similar or perhaps how it's different.

JP: The campaigning for the legislature in an urban area like Wichita was different. When I was on the Wichita School Board, I ran for the city-at-large [position]. When I was in the legislature, I represented just a section of the city. I did represent Wichita State University. When I first campaigned, the university colors were yellow and black, and also school colors are usually yellow and black. I thought, "Those are good colors." My political signs were yellow and black with "Pottorff for Legislature" on them. They really showed up because so many people were using red and blue as political signs. Nancy Kassebaum did use green, but my yellow and black, people recognized that.

I campaigned—door to door was really the way to campaign. That first door is always the hardest to knock on, and especially in the summertime, when it can be 105 degrees outside. Do you really want to go out and go door to door? But I did. I really liked to go by myself basically because I thought it was important for me to meet the constituents. I was going door to door. I learned that you don't spend time at the door. You just visit with them and give them your card and talk to them. But I was elected after that first time. I guess the rest was history after that.

PC: When you think about your first election, were there issues that you identified with that you were passionate about? Was it more about becoming a part of public service from an elected standpoint?

JP: I think it was both. Of course, education, since I was coming off of the Wichita School Board, the education was very important. But public service, after I realized that I was going to run for the legislature, then it was to be able to serve. I really felt after being in the legislature, what a privilege it was to be elected. There really are not that many people when you look at the number of legislators that have been elected through the years, it really was a privilege to be elected and to represent my district.

PC: Let's talk a little bit. There was some landmark legislation that was passed relative to public education during your tenure. That was the school finance formula. Give us a little history. Give us a little bit of your perspective of the debate during that time period, the issues, the compromise that had to take place. Give us that personal birds-eye view.

JP: Right. Again, when you look at a school finance issue, you look at my district of over 50,000 students, it is so much different than those people that live in western Kansas. I remember when I was elected to the Kansas Association School Board as President, the person from the smallest school district of Kansas that had only about ninety students was the one that made the nominating speech for me.

It's difficult when you're talking about a school finance issue to be able to have an issue that's going to be able to work for districts across the whole state. As I said, very small ones and very large ones. You really do have to compromise and talk to people and let them know.

PC: What were some of those points of compromise? What were the challenges that had to be addressed to get that passage?

JP: I think financing, how it was going to be financed. I think at one time, there was a lot of different ways that the people talked about financing, whether you get "funny money," so to speak. I think that was Governor Finney maybe when she was head of a school finance plan, it was hard to figure out how that was going to be financed, and how she was going to finance that. I think when you have issues like that, they're not Republican/Democrat issues, but they're issues that you work across the aisle, so to speak, that we have people that are going to support those issues.

PC: And your experience clearly on the Wichita School Board and in the state legislature informed how you talked about that, how you conversed about it.

JP: Yes.

PC: Were there any particularly prickly issues that had to be addressed in order to—especially, as you mentioned, the urban districts versus the very small rural districts, where that compromise was really difficult to achieve but finally got to the finish line?

JP: I really don't remember that. That's a long time ago.

PC: But monumental in many, many, many ways.

JP: That's right.

PC: There was another set of experiences that you had. That was with reapportionment. You went through that twice as a state legislator.

JP: I went through it several times, yes.

PC: How does your experience with that compare—the last time Kansas went through reapportionment, it actually had to be handed over to the [Kansas] Supreme Court.

JP: Yes.

PC: We've got another one coming up.

JP: Absolutely.

PC: What advice would you give people based on your experience? What advice would you give state legislatures regarding this next round of reapportionment to guide their thoughts?

JP: I think you can give them any advice you want, but they're not going to listen to it. They're going to do what they want. And then when it comes time for their own district, they're going to look at their own district and make sure that they're going to be re-elected in their own district.

I can remember when we first had our reapportionment in districts, we had big manilla paper that was laid out on the floor, and we were drawing our own legislative districts. This was before we were using computers. We didn't [even] know how many voters you had. Then we looked to see how many Republicans or how many Democrats. You tried to draw your district that really represented you to get re-elected again.

PC: It's an important part of the process every ten years. Is there anything you would say to the current legislative body to encourage them to come together and avoid the Supreme Court decision again?

JP: I think you have to listen. I know there's lots of meetings that are going on, both with the Republicans and Democrats, and then trying to work together to get that final thing. As you said, it did not work out the last time very well.

PC: You mentioned Governor Finney a little bit ago. What was the interaction during your twenty-plus years in the legislature with the Governor's Office during the legislative session? How did the Governor's Office work with the state legislature?

JP: I served with several legislatures.

PC: Several legislatures, several governors.

JP: Several governors, Republicans and Democrats, both. I can remember, Governor Finney was [unusual] with her harp. She invited us down to her home and played her harp. We had breakfast at her home. She did a different way of interacting with people. The different governors, they would invite different groups of people down to Cedar Crest [residence of the Kansas Governor] to get to know them and have dinner. You got acquainted with the governor and his or her wife that way. There was interaction. I think when your party is in office, you get better acquainted. As a Republican, Bill Graves and his wife Linda became very close friends. Of course, Mike Hayden.

I can remember Mike Hayden when I was on the School Board. Mike Hayden, I think, was Chair of Appropriations or something, but I can remember coming up to listen, watching a meeting at the end of the legislative session, and I think Mike Hayden had this spittoon down here beside his chair, and he was using his spittoon. I thought, "Do I really want to ever know this man very well?" That was Mike Hayden, and it didn't bother him to use his spittoon there in front of everybody.

PC: Did those more personal relationships help in terms of navigating through some of the more difficult, challenging conversations?

JP: I think so, yes. I think if you really ever wanted to know the governor, or had constituents who'd come up, you'd feel very comfortable calling the Governor's Office and saying, "I'm bringing So and So. They'd like to meet you." Constituents are always very pleased if they can meet a governor. That was always fun to do, too.

PC: Looking back on your tenure in the House of Representatives, what are a couple of your proudest accomplishments?

JP: I think the Parents as Teachers legislation was. I did not introduce very many bills. I felt like we had enough legislation in Kansas. Too many times legislation [was] introduced by an individual because a constituent has a personal issue that they want it taken care of. I can remember an attorney in Wichita. If something didn't go right with one of this clients, he'd start introducing legislation to get it changed. Parents as Teachers is one. Again, from my education background, it was very important. Parents as Teachers is one that helped parents learn how to really raise their children—not raise their children, but gave them some information on raising a child. I think there was a comment about, "We know more about changing a tire on a car than we do know how to raise a child." It was patterned after Missouri legislation.

PC: Was the response initially to that introduction of that legislation favorable? Were there people you had to convince?

JP: There certainly were people I had to convince. I remember when I first talked about it, I think that [Senator] Fred Kerr thought it was a good plan, and he was going to introduce it in the

Senate, and I said, "That's my bill. Let's get this through the House, and then we'll get it to the Senate." When we did have hearings, we had some very good testimony from people throughout the state and thought it was an important issue.

PC: Is there another piece of legislation, another accomplishment you're particularly proud of?

JP: I'm sure there were, but at this time, I don't know. One of the things towards the end of my legislative—it was a Midwest Interstate Railroad Compact that we passed. In Wichita, we talked about getting railroads back into service in Wichita. That was talked about and talked about. There were people working on that. In fact, Shelby Smith, who was a former lieutenant governor, who was a close friend of mine was one that was very involved in wanting railroads. I worked on that bill, and we got that compact passed. That was states throughout the Midwest.

Then as part of that compact, I was on that and went back to Washington, DC. We had a chance to visit with the Secretary of Transportation there, some of the Congressional hearings, the head of Amtrak. We're still working on getting railroads into Kansas more, passenger rail train.

PC: It's a long process. I'm going to shift gears just a little bit here, but then we're going to come back to some additional reflections of your time in the legislature. Today we're going to identify personal identity as loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status, etc. Did you experience times during your tenure in the legislature where you believed your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, to work with your fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Were you ever given assignments to committees or tasks that you believe were a function of your own personal identity?

JP: Probably just because of my identity with the education issues would be why I served on the Education Committee, and I was on the National Conference of State Legislators. I had the opportunity to chair the Education Committee for the National Conference of State Legislators.

PC: What was that experience like?

JP: Getting to meet legislators throughout the United States, it's very interesting because every legislature is different. We have a citizen's legislature but some of the larger states have legislatures that meet all year around. I had a very close friend in New Hampshire that served in the House. I think there was like almost 400 people in the New Hampshire House. I think the Senate only has like 40 or 30, but very small districts. They didn't even get any salaries, so to speak.

Being involved in the NCSL, the National Conference of State Legislators, you had a chance to meet other legislators, and you had a chance to learn about legislation that they had in their states, too. If you ever had a bill that came into your own legislature and you could find somebody from another state that had that same interest, you could visit with them and see what they thought about that legislation.

PC: You bring up a great distinction: citizen legislators, part-time legislators. For Kansas, is that a good structure?

JP: I think it's a very good structure.

PC: Why?

JP: I think because you have a chance to also have a home life, so to speak, or a business. I sold real estate as well as being in the legislature. I was able to go back and forth with that. But if I was in the legislature all year round, I would not be able to have another career like that, and I think it's important for other people that can be able to take several months off and then have a break and be able to do those kinds of things. A citizen legislature, and then we've always talked about we don't get paid a whole lot. We seem to find people to run for the legislature. I don't think it's an issue.

PC: Let's do a little bit of retrospective. As you look back on your time, what changes do you see? You did have pretty long stand.

JP: I did. You're right.

PC: Let's break it down into two different time periods. What changes did you see from when you were first elected to the point at which your service ended? What changes occurred during that twenty-plus years in how you did your work and how the legislative body did its work?

JP: I think that it became more political towards the end of my career. Maybe I was just naive in the beginning and not realizing that, or maybe things really did change. I do feel like it did. When I first came in my political career, I sat on the other side of the aisle even though I was a Republican because there were so many of us that we couldn't fit on this side.

PC: What else changed during the twenty years? Anything process-wise?

JP: I don't know process-wise. I think campaigning-wise, or being able to run for an office, I think that you had some oppositions, but I don't think parties had people that ran against you as your own political party. Towards the end of my tenure, I would have primary opposition. I was still in office. I think that was something that at the beginning, Democrats, Republicans would not—if it was an open seat, they could have primaries, but they would not have [a primary] against an incumbent.

PC: Any other changes in the seven years since you've served in the legislature that are of particular note or particular caution?

JP: Well, I don't pay as much attention to the legislature as I used to. I remember I was visiting with people that had been in the legislature, and they laughed when I said, "Why aren't you paying attention?" You do [pay attention] in the beginning [of your retirement], but soon you start to have your own life back after you leave..

PC: Have your life back.

JP: Yes, yes, but you still do pay attention. I enjoyed even the drive up here and coming through to Topeka to see the changes in Topeka. I've really had memories today. I've come up here a couple of times since I left, but just to see what has happened to the city, so to speak, not a whole lot of changes, but the memories of places that you lived when you're in the legislature, which are several. I had a wonderful opportunity to live with a senator, Senator Lana Oleen, when I was here. We lived in several different places for about ten years. That was really nice because I could learn what the Senate was doing, and she could learn what the House was doing. We had good interaction together.

PC: What do you miss the most, and what do you miss the least?

JP: I miss the people the most. You make wonderful friendships, and so you do miss those. The least is probably—we didn't have as many early hours as we did. The very beginning, it seemed like we were meeting at 7:00 in the morning for committee assignments. I think that changed.

Probably not having a day—it starts from 8:00 or 7:00 and then getting home at 9:00. You didn't have to go to receptions or things, but I always thought it was very important. If there were people coming from Wichita for a reception, I thought it was important to go and visit with them and see what their issues were.

PC: If you were coaching someone who was interested in running for public office today, what advice would you give them?

JP: It's kind of interesting. There is a young man who is running for the legislature today who was a page of mine when I was in the legislature. It has been such fun. He's just graduated from college, but he did visit with me. His dad has visited with me. His dad is a friend. We were in the real estate business together. But just to see his excitement of running for the legislature. That's been kind of like giving birth to somebody. He was up here and had a chance to see what was going on.

The advice I would say is friendships are important when you're here. You work with your own political party, but you need to have friends across the aisle, too. I know again when I was here, there were certain people who really tried to get, especially in the evening maybe, to get Republicans and Democrats together to socialize. That was so important. I think that happened. There was more socialization with Republicans and Democrats at the beginning of my career than there was later on.

PC: What contributed to that, Jo Ann?

JP: I don't know. Maybe people just got busy, and they just didn't have so much time. There are some people that, of course, live close enough to Topeka that would go home in the evenings, too, drive home. So they weren't here in the evenings either.

PC: Another piece of legislation that passed and then had to be renewed during your time in the legislature was the lottery.

JP: Yes.

PC: Talk a little bit about the importance of that, not only to revenues to the state, but to what it's been able to find in finance.

JP: You mentioned the lottery passed. That was when I first came to the legislature. There was a lottery and parimutuel and liquor by the drink—my first legislative session. I supported those. Charlie Belt who was a lobbyist, I think, or was very involved with the Wichita Chamber of Commerce, and I had been involved with the Chamber of Commerce, too, really visited with me about those issues. That seemed to be something in our area in Wichita that people wanted.

I had a legislator in my office. There were like three of us in the same office at that time. He was from the western part of Kansas. He was very opposed to the lottery or any of those issues. He would come back and call his constituency and say, "It didn't pass." Then he'd call back the next day, "It didn't pass." But they did pass. Some of those things took several times to pass.

The lottery ended up passing. Personally, I was not a real supporter of the lottery, but I thought it was important that people had the opportunity to have it and vote for it. But the money for lottery, in the beginning, some people thought it was going to go to education, which it didn't, and which was fine. I think that that was not a steady source of income for education. It went to economic development and other things. But, at the beginning, the lottery, it was a little slow process getting started.

PC: The authorization of it was important once it passed by the vote of the people.

Jo Ann, you had a really unique opportunity and experience when you served in the Kansas legislature of traveling to Korea. Could you talk a little bit about how that occurred, what you learned, experiences you drew from that trip?

JP: That was a wonderful experience. I was involved with the Women's Legislative Network through the NCSL. We had an opportunity to go to Korea. There were eight women, and we were from across the United States. We went to Korea, and the reason we were there was to help the women of Korea to run for political office. They did not know how to run for political

office. It certainly was a man's thing. We had different kind of workshops and all with these women. We had an opportunity when we were there to visit with the president of Korea.

One of the times when we were there with the president of Korea, one of my friends just had a birthday. She also had several grandchildren. We were sitting there. It was in the Blue House, not the White House, but the Blue House in Korea. We were sitting there with the president. He was so personal. He was asking my friend about her grandchildren and all.

As we were there in Korea, we visited several different communities to talk to women and all. Then after we were in Korea, we went to Taiwan, and we had an opportunity again there to work with some women, not necessarily run for political office, but some women that were doing some social work in Korea, some domestic violence work and things like that. It was a wonderful opportunity and one that I will cherish forever because I've had opportunities to visit several countries through the legislative process and to help women run for political office, but I think Korea was the highlight.

PC: Do you recall some of the other female legislators that joined you on that trip?

JP: One of the legislators was from New Hampshire¹. She was in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. That house has—it's almost like 400-some people in the House. Her legislative district was almost a mental hospital and just a few other things. It was a small one. When you take a state like that, it's just a very small number of people. She came from a very political family. Her husband's family had been governor of New Hampshire.

She had a twin sister who was in California. My friend's birthday was right then. Birthdays are very important in Korea. They made a big thing of her birthday, but I can remember her calling her sister. Of course, there was a number of hours difference between Korea and California. She called her sister to wish her happy birthday. Well, it was the wrong day. She was ahead or behind. I don't know which it was. That was fun because people were there when we were with her to celebrate her birthday. They were excited to be part of that, too.

PC: You mentioned that you visited other countries. What were some of the other countries you visited as a legislator?

JP: I had an opportunity to be in Germany. I had an opportunity to be in Japan. The Japanese, that was interesting because we were with a different—I can't recall. They're not called prefectures, but anyway the different mayors and Council people of those things. We were in Germany with a group of people, too, as a legislator, but when you're in those places, you do have an opportunity to visit their own capitals and see how their legislative processes work.

PC: What were they most curious about in terms of our form of government?

¹ Susan McLane later died of Alzheimers. Her daughter, Ann Kuster wrote a book about McLane's illness and is now serving in Congress from New Hampshire.

JP: Of course, they hear a lot about our form of government through television. They do want to know about it. They're curious how you're elected basically. How you raise money. That's a new process to them, the raising of money and how we do fundraising and those kinds of things. That's always of interest to them. They again have very few women. It's better now than it used to be. When you're visiting with those different places, it's mostly all men that are coming out to those meetings.

PC: What a great experience. Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything that during this interview, which has been absolutely delightful—

JP: Thank you. This has been fun, too.

PC: Is there anything that we didn't ask you that you wish we had?

JP: Well, I can't think of anything. Just sitting in this beautiful House Chamber, I was here through the process of the remodeling of the Capitol, and it was kind of funny. During the time my office was going to be remodeled, I kept saying, "When my office is remodeled, I'm going to leave the legislature," but I didn't. I was here several years after my office and the Capitol. Being on the Building Committee, we were kind of involved in seeing what was going on.

PC: You were very involved.

JP: This beautiful Chamber is such a joy to be in.

PC: Why is that important to Kansans to have a State House that is well cared for, that is a statement about the state of Kansas? Why is that important? That was a pretty expensive project.

JP: Yes, it was.

PC: And a large undertaking.

JP: Very, very large.

PC: Talk a little bit about that.

JP: I think it is, when people come, there are Capitol buildings across the United States that are varied kind of Capitol buildings. Some are tall, and some are more like our Capitol. I think it's a pride in Kansas. I have some very good friends that would have liked to come today that really wanted to come see the Capitol. I think when you see this Capitol building, it stands for Kansas. To think of the years that this building has actually been here, even though it's been remodeled, and what went through in the very beginning when they first built this, the different stages it

had to go through, it stands now, and it hopefully will stand for hundreds of years from now that people can look out here and say, "This is Kansas." I think when they come to Topeka, they see this as Kansas.

PC: Are there any thoughts that you want to leave with Kansans, not just Wichitans, but Kansans about the future of this state? Things they need to be mindful of, purposeful about. If so, please talk right to the camera or to me.

JP: I think it's important, the future of Kansas, I think that the parks that we have in Kansas, the historical sites. Again, from the Building Committee, we looked at some of those historical sites, and maintaining those historical sites. That is our history, and we need to be sure that the people, our [inaudible] [00:02:41.24] know the history of Kansas, and it's there. Hopefully, someday again the people will be able to tour the state of Kansas and see some of those historical sites.

PC: Great thank you for being with us. This has been absolutely delightful. I would be remiss if I also didn't thank you for your years of service, your decades of service.

JP: Well, Shelby Smith reminds me that I was the longest serving woman.

PC: That's a mark of pride, and it's a good lesson for other women to follow. Thank you for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

JP: Thank you very much.

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