Interview with Dennis McKinney by Dale Goter, August 23, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Dale Goter: Today is August 23, 2019, and we're in the House chamber of the Kansas State House. I'm Dale Goter, and I'm conducting interviews for the oral history project featuring legislators who served in the 1970s to the year 2000, and our guest today is former House member and Minority Leader Dennis McKinney. Dennis served in the House from 1993 to 2008. He served as a minority leader. After leaving the House, he went on to serve as State Treasurer and has had a political influence in Kansas throughout that period of time as a sitting representative of the district surrounding Greensburg in I guess we call it central Kansas. It's really not western Kansas.

Dennis McKinney: We call it southwest Kansas.

DG: Southwest Kansas. Thank you, Dennis, for taking the time to go down memory lane here and revisit that era. I want to start with your beginnings in politics. What got you into politics? What attracted you? What fed that decision?

DM: I grew up in a family where we always discussed politics, especially at the dinner table. We also had the privilege of growing up during all the unrest of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. We had a lot of discussions about that. We were always interested in politics and public policy. When I got out of college, I moved back to the farm, and a few years later, I ran for county commissioner. I was a county commissioner in Kiowa County. Then the state representative seat opened up, and I ran for the House. I was actually appointed to fill out about six months of Lee Hamm's term, and then I was elected to the House.

DG: Was that a Democrat district at the time or did you turn that over?

DM: It was a Republican-performing district, but it had been represented by a Democrat for twenty years when I ran.

DG: How does that happen? There's a few places in the state where you see that. What are the dynamics that make that work? Personality is one of them.

DM: If you're not in the majority party, obviously you have to work harder as a candidate. It was not as partisan then as it is now. A lot of people might meet you on the doorstep and say, “Are you Democrat or Republican?” and I'd say, “I'm a Democrat,” and they'd say, “Well, we usually vote Republican, but we look at the candidate.” So we had a good chance of getting elected.

DG: You came out of that era. You mentioned the Vietnam era. Is that what formed your political philosophy? What did you think you were going to get done coming to the legislature?

DM: My parents came through the Dust Bowl in the Depression. My father is a Franklin Roosevelt Democrat. Our focus mainly was on, “How do we solve problems? How do we get the right kind of policy that actually solves problems?” That was probably our focus at the time.

DG: And you developed a reputation as a middle-of-the-road [legislator], somebody who worked both sides, who could talk to both sides. That was an era when that was maybe more possible than it is now. What was that like? How did you develop into that leadership role?

DM: It was more possible then. Recently Pope Francis said that you have to be careful about your political ideology because it can distort both your politics and your morals. I think that's a pretty good warning. We actually had people who would focus as much on good policy then. We always had a lot of political rhetoric.

I started on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Carl Holmes from Liberal was the chairman. Ken Grotewiel from Wichita was the ranking minority member. Their whole focus was on good policy. I remember having meeting after meeting in that room. It was kind of like a graduate-level seminar, where we studied water law, where we studied the history of water in Kansas, and different aquifers. We would study solid waste in thorough detail, waste issues, and how do you build a subtitle D landfill.

The upshot of it was, with the right kind of leadership from people like Ken Grotewiel and Carl Holmes, we were really focused on good policy at the time because they said that those issues should not be partisan. We should get the most cost effective, get the most value we can for what we spent to get good policy and protect the environment.

DG: Obviously you did your homework. You're respected for your knowledge base. You had to bring that to the table to have the respect of everybody. It's not an easy job.

DM: I would say a lot of values that I had and we had in the Democratic caucus at the time were really traditional Kansas values. Kansans through history have invested in education. That was probably our top priority. Through history, Kansans have invested in education. The very first thing in the State Constitution, the enabling statute in the State Constitution sets aside land in every township to provide funding for public schools in every township. I was raised by Dust Bowl parents who came through the Dust Bowl. They taught us, “Take care of the land. The land will take care of you. Leave it better than you found it,” those types of values, pretty traditional values.

DG: You're definitely from a rural perspective, and the rural/urban split in this building, that's been a battle for decades. When you came in, I think you used to call them “the cowboys” that seemed to control the legislature, a lot of rural influence. Was that the case for you? You were in a better position as a rural legislator then than perhaps that area is now?

DM: I don't know if I was in a better position. We had a lot of interest in our caucus we needed to balance obviously. We had legislators from Wyandotte County, legislators from Sedgwick County, legislators from rural areas. So we tried to have good discussions so we could balance out those interests. You had to understand, on any given day, there might be a vote where you didn't expect everybody to vote together. We tried to make sure our members of our caucus

voted for their districts. If they were representing their districts, they were more likely to be re-elected and come back.

DG: You were in many ways more conservative than some Republicans on some issues. You were not a fiscal wacko by any stretch of the imagination. There's some social issues like abortion that you were on the conservative side. You made that work through as a Democrat. How did you wrestle through that?

DM: Well, we tried to respect each other. We understood we were from different parts of the state, from different districts. I had a district that was very conservative on some of those issues. At the time, we had a number of Democrats from districts, both urban and rural, that leaned probably more, not extremely pro-life or pro-choice but probably leaned more pro-life than they were pro-choice. We understood everybody voted their district on that issue. Again, we wanted them to come back. That was not an issue that we—

And, at that time, I think I counted once, I think almost 40 percent of the Democratic caucus would be voting pro-life on any given day, and quite a number of Republicans were voting pro-choice. So the stereotypes that all Democrats do this and all Republicans do that was not accurate at that time.

DG: And you came, as they reminded me, the year after the Democrats had their two years of control of the House, which was a big high-water mark for Democrats then.

DM: Yes.

DG: It didn't last, but you had a much stronger constituency I assume then than the folks working the place now.

DM: I think my first year, we had fifty-four or five Democrats that were there. The next year, we dropped I think to forty-four. We stayed in the forties for then on while I was in the house.

DG: How did that affect the policy discussions? Let's take education. I know that's a prominent one throughout your tenure here. What were the issues then? How did you manage your delegation to participate?

DM: A lot of issues are not partisan. So that takes a number of issues off the table. Then we tried to maintain good discussions to get to good policy. That's how we build coalitions. On most issues, there was not a clear majority of Republicans or Democrats. So we tried to build coalitions to get to the right policy on most issues, especially education. That was one of the tougher ones. We would try to build a compromise where all boats rose with the tide, and that meant we had to address the needs of Johnson County, and we had to address the needs of Wyandotte County. We had to address the needs of some place like Elkhart or Atchison, and that was our goal.

We also knew that based on the court rulings we had seen that we had to have school finance proposals that were fair to everybody, including the poorest students and the poorest districts. That's what we tried to aim for. There were guidelines there to tell us. We had research [Legislative Research] out there to tell us what to do, what direction we should aim. That's what we tried to aim for, to make sure, if you're in a poor district, you were well served for. If you were a poor student even in the wealthiest district, you were well served in Kansas.

DG: That's come up in our interviews with other legislators in that era, the change in equalization, which was rather dramatic for Kansas. That rich/poor thing did get equalized, but it's always a struggle for rural interests to maintain their position in this building.

DM: Before I started, the 1992 legislature really passed landmark legislation, changing the way schools were funded. That was definitely bipartisan with a mixture of Republicans and Democrats in both the House and the Senate that got that passed. From then on, it was somewhat of a struggle to maintain the idea that we had to make sure the poorest students and the poorest districts were taken care of, that you couldn't evolve your own interest on your own and leave everybody else out to dry. That was probably the source of the biggest conflict on school finance.

DG: Other issues that stand out in your mind. I would think water would be one that you tracked in that period of time. Water is always a big deal for western Kansas.

DM: Water is important everywhere. It's hard to do development without it. I remember some of the things I was very proud of, like I said, leadership in our committee with Ken Grotewiel and Carl Holmes really was not partisan most of the time. We started the effort to start dredging and restoring some of these major reservoirs we had in the eastern side of the state that was important to public water supply. We also passed the Water Transfer Act, which Hays is now seeking to use transferred water from Edwards County up to Ellis County from one basin to another. We passed that. It hadn't been used until now. Now Hays has been using it to invoke that statute. So it's kind of interesting to see some of the things you worked on twenty years later start having an impact.

DG: It is very political. Wichita was starting to look for a water supply and thinking about taking water from Milford that set off a huge pushback. People were very territorial about their water, but yet it is a state resource.

DM: There was a lot of cooperation, for example, to help Wichita bank water in the equus bed so that it could be used later and to address a number of those water issues that were in that area that affected Wichita, both for quality and quantity. There was always [need] for air travel, there was a lot of interest in cooperating on that so that places like Wichita and even Hays and Garden City and Salina and Manhattan could have good quality air travel.

Sometimes it took a while, but ultimately we usually had enough bipartisan cooperation to achieve some of those things, [in] which coalition building was really important.

DG: I'm sure in your mind it was always the case that you were looking out for your constituents, and you are [in a] rural area. Rural Kansas has declined in population and probably in economic clout to some extent. When you look back there, were you just fighting the tide all that time where you really can't control this? Were there some stopgap things you did that did preserve life in rural Kansas?

DM: Well, there's a number of things, a lot of small things we did over the years, but I think one of the main things we did was maintaining an investment in education, including at the community college level for vocational technical education. Right now we talk about how we've lost people in rural Kansas, but there's still demand. If you're a good welder, you can get a job quickly in rural Kansas. For people with high levels of education, agronomists, someone who understands animal physiology, someone involved in wildlife parks, wildlife biologists, someone who's good at—the technicians in the John Deere dealership or the AGCO dealership. If you have those kind of skills, you can still get a job pretty quickly in rural Kansas. That's why we have to maintain an investment in education. With the right education, there are still plenty of jobs in rural Kansas.

DG: Tax issues are there every year. That pendulum swings one way or the other. When you look back, what were the tax issues, the burden on Kansas homeowners, how it was distributed. What did you see happening?

DM: It's very interesting to me. We had scholars look at this for several times over the years. I remember Joan Finney had looked at the tax structure. Governor Graves had had a commission of both scholars, researchers from region institutions, and business leaders get together. They looked at our tax structure, and they all said the same thing, “Look, Kansas has this three-legged tax stool of sales, income [and] property taxes. We maintain that, so in economic shifts, we're still stable, and we need to maintain a certain level of revenue.” They all said to maintain the three-legged structure because it spreads the burden out.

Then we came to the Brownback administration, there was a huge rollback in income taxes, and eventually sales taxes had to go up to compensate for that. Property taxes went up. Local governments were forced to raise property taxes to compensate for that. The interesting thing about that, when we got there and we really saw the impact, young families out there, even though their income tax rate had declined a little bit, they lost their childcare tax credit. They lost their home mortgage interest deduction. They lost their medical deduction. A lot of these young families started paying more. While they lost these benefits, they were looking around, “My school's got less money. What's going on? My highway has less money. My hospital's struggling.” A lot of frustration grew out of that. Now we're back to more of a three-legged tax system. We probably need to make some more changes to get back to that, but trying to maintain a system that's fair to wage-earning families.

That was interesting because that new tax change came in. I remember one time I was just stirring the pot a little bit. I've got the local grain elevator [in my district], and I said, “Thanks,

guys. You get your paycheck every two weeks?" They say yeah. I said, "You still have the state income tax taken out, aren't you?" They said yeah. I said, "I have no state income tax in my proprietor's income. Thanks a lot, guys." By this time, they're mad. It's just interesting to see these changes.

My point is that people like Governor Graves, Governor Finney, Governor Sebelius understood why it was necessary to maintain that three-legged tax structure, maintain equity in the tax system, which had kind of been a Kansas tradition over the years.

DG: And it took a different direction when Brownback became governor obviously.

DM: Yes.

DG: That stool disappeared for the most part.

DM: It took three or four years for it to sink in, what that impact was, what it did. Most of my neighbors sure didn't like it, even though some of my farmer neighbors weren't paying income tax on their proprietor's income.

DG: It is very complex, and the average citizen—you've worked with constituents all your career. Do they really ever understand the complexity of taxes. It's simplified in campaigns, no new taxes or something like that. But the reality—

DM: Most of the voters are smarter than you give them credit for. It may take a while before they focus on it. When you go write the check to the County Treasurer, "Hey, what's going on here?" Most voters understand it. Now some voters are very busy, getting kids to daycare and then getting to work and back. It may take them longer for it to sink in, but when they do, they understand it.

DG: Let's talk about the personalities a little bit. You mentioned Governor Finney, Governor Graves. You did not serve under Governor Hayden.

DM: No, that was before I was in the legislature. I was a county commissioner prior.

DG: Those were very unique personalities, Governor Finney particularly. When I came here as a reporter, she was state Treasurer, a position you went on to hold. Any specific challenges working with each of those? How did their style play out working with legislators?

DM: I have a great appreciation for Governor Finney. At that time, a lot of people made fun of her. People thought she didn't understand policy all that well, but she understood people. She was unfailingly courteous to people in the public. I have a greater appreciation for her ability to do that now. She had certain core principles, and she stuck with them. I remember one time, I was fresh in my first term, and she wanted an initiative passed so voters could put initiatives on the ballot. There's some legislators that had drawn a proposal. It wasn't too bad. It required

some signatures in every Senate district around the state. You couldn't just get signatures in Johnson Wyandotte County. You had to get signatures from all over the state. It was a statewide interest. It had a number of other safeguards built in. I thought, “This looks okay to me.”

I just remember she came to our caucus that morning. It was coming up for a vote. This was her #1 issue, something she really believed in. The whole time she had been the state treasurer, she was governor, she believed in it just wholeheartedly. She came in and she said, “This is our opportunity. This is something I really believe in,” and she teared up. She said, “Please, just do this for the people.” I thought, “She came down here to ask me to do this? That bill looks like a good one to me. I'm going to do it,” and it passed the House. Tom Sawyer helped it get passed [in] the House. It didn't get passed [in] the Senate.

As a result, this is one thing that sticks out in my memory, all of us who voted for it, she invited us out to Cedar Crest. She was a wonderful entertainer, very gracious. We ate dinner. She played the harp for us.

DG: I didn't know she played the harp.

DM: She did, very well. She gave us a tour of Cedar Crest, explained a lot of the gifts that were there, that had been given to the state by dignitaries of other nations, and had all the history down. It was very enjoyable.

DG: There are a lot of stories about her. One that I recall is she went to China on a mission and went into the receiving room with all the Chinese delegation, and nobody speaks a word, and everybody is afraid to move, and she went and shook hands. It was like even though there was a language barrier, she connected with every person face to face.

DM: You still hear stories. People went to see her at the State Fair, and they went back to the State Fair the next year, and she remembered them, knew their name, and say, “How's your daughter doing? Didn't you have a daughter studying agronomy at K State?” “Well, yeah, I did.”

DG: My first year at Topeka, we had a schnauzer. I walked the schnauzer down in the Collins Park area and met her. Every year after, she'd ask me how that dog was doing. She had a remarkable memory, which is how you got elected a lot of times, too.

DM: I think people appreciated the fact that she respected them and was courteous and was warm. I think people yearn for some of that.

DG: So she gives way to Governor Graves. The negatives on him, some people called him “The Empty Suit” coming in, but he seemed to have a fairly successful tenure. What was working with him like?

DM: I thought he was good to work with. I wanted him to be a little more courageous sometimes. He came in, especially in his second term, he came in with a vault full of political capital. I was wanting him to use it, be a little more aggressive, especially when it came to school finance. He did help us get a new highway program renewed. He helped get that done, maintained a basic level of funding for schools, fought off some attacks on that, and he was always good to talk to and negotiate with, I felt. I think Governor Graves also had some good Cabinet secretaries that provided some good leadership on policy areas.

DG: That's an interesting point. When I first came here, John Carlin was governor. He had a very proactive staff. Governor Hayden came in, and it seemed to be a little bit different style. Governor Finney comes in—the staff that works for governors were often the intermediaries to the legislature. How was that a factor in what got done in those eras?

DM: It's a big factor. If the governor's staff comes out of the office and talks to you and builds relationships, it's always helpful. I think that's one of the main impressions that I got from the time. I remember one man who worked as the chief of staff for Governor Graves who just stopped by some of our offices. It didn't matter if we were Democrats. He kind of wanted to know what we were thinking. The upshot was, if he came and asked you for help, you'd listen at least. You may not agree, but you'd at least listen. Or if you needed something, you felt like you could go talk to him and say, “We've got to talk out this problem over here.” Or sometimes you might have a warning for him. You might say, “Hey, you have a problem over here. You'd better address it.” You felt like, “I'll tell him.”

DG: Politics is a difficult business. You have that leadership role as the minority leader, and day to day, session to session, what kind of strategy did you have in mind going in that you knew you had to follow a certain pattern or be a certain kind of person. What made that work?

DM: When I became leader, we had good leadership from Governor Sebelius. She helped set some direction. That was helpful, but the main thing was, I always told people, I'd seen some speakers who maybe tried to flex too much muscle from time to time or tell people what to do. I always tried to remind myself every morning I couldn't fire anybody. I worked for the caucus. You'd better be careful, be a good listener, and be careful what you say.

We also had some key priorities within our caucus. We tried to engage as many people in the caucus as we could in leadership positions or in positions where they could influence policy, help them get their amendments out in committee, if not in committee, then get them out on the floor of the House where they could at least make a point. We tried to empower our members as much as we could to carry the issues for their district, or to carry issues they really believed in, and find places they could get it out. Sometimes if the process tried to shut them off, it was very frustrating.

I have to say that when I was in the legislature, I have to give Tim Shallenburger some credit. He didn't try to completely choke things off.

DG: He was Speaker of the House.

DM: He was Speaker of the House. The forum was usually open to debate and amendments so people could at least get their ideas out. They might get voted down, but if you at least get your chance to present your idea, people are a lot less frustrated.

DG: And the end goal is always the benefit of the State as a whole. So you served with Democrat governors, two of them, and you served with Republican governors. When there are Democrat governors in place and a Republican legislature, do things generally work better, not having it be a monolithic—is that a dynamic that benefits the state?

DM: I think so, in the sense that you get a better discussion of the issues. You get a better clash of ideas. Not everything's controlled, and we're all going to do it one way. Occasionally it takes a governor of a different party with the veto to slow things down and get things done. That helped. Of course, one of the key issues, too, that came up while I was minority leader was school finance. We had difficult sessions in '04 and '05, and we had a special session in '05, and we finally started reaching some better solutions in 2006 and '7 and '8.

DG: You can still see the evidence of that today. What are the things back in that era that you worked on that left a mark, that you felt survived. When you look at the news every day and watch the state, maybe you had a hand in or the legislature of that era had a hand in?

DM: Well, I didn't have a big hand in some things, but you want to try to be a part in helping certain things to pass, like how do we improve foster care? How do we improve care for children in need of care that are placed in foster care, that are placed in an institutional-based setting. We tried to improve that. I wasn't the leader on those issues, but how do you improve care at state hospitals and those types of institutions? That was important to us. We had some people like Melvin Minor [Stafford] who was very good on those issues, and people didn't know it because he did a lot of it behind the scenes. The Larned State Hospital is in his district.

Unfortunately, I would say that was one of my biggest disappointments was to see a lot of those changes evaporate in subsequent years. The Youthville facility in Dodge City, we raised a lot of private money for that facility to partner with the state to treat some of the most physically, mentally, sexually abused children in the state of Kansas [who] were treated there. That's all closed now. We had a horse program, a dog program. That's all closed now That was my biggest disappointment to see foster care services, child in need care services, I think, deteriorate.

DG: What contributed to that? It's the people who are here, but what was going on in the public mentality that lets that happen?

DM: Like Pope Francis said, we have to be careful about political ideology because it can distort our politics and our morals. If you're so totally against government that you don't recognize our

basic functions, like to care for a child who has no place to go, who doesn't have a healthy home, they suffer, and a lot of people won't know about it. That bothered me a lot.

On the other hand, in school finance, we passed some measures that really I think for the first time emphasized that we'd take care of the poorest children and the poorest school districts in the state. No matter where you are in Kansas, you have an opportunity to get a good education. That was important.

DG: You had a solid knowledge of this business. One of my favorite stories about you while I was doing a public television program, "Ask A Legislator," and you're on with Senator Phil Journey from Wichita who is very proud of his knowledge of law. He was talking about this big case that was influencing what was going on in Kansas, and he couldn't remember the name of it, and you chimed in and said, "Marbury v. Madison."

DM: McCulloch v. Maryland. The power to tax is the power to destroy.

DG: He laughs, and then your comment was, "And I'm the farmer on this panel." I always thought that you had a sense of the tradition of government. It's not just the casual stuff, the obvious stuff. There's something at stake here, what you're doing and why you're doing it.

DM: We have such a rich history in Kansas. Right across the street from the Capitol, there's a statue and a memorial to Samuel Crumbine who is a leader of the public health movement. Kansas was a leader in the public health movement. We were a leader in measures to protect labor, people in labor, people working in coal mines and the mines in southeast Kansas. We were the first to adopt unemployment insurance to buffer the economic impact and the personal harm done when there were major layoffs in the industry. We were one of the first to adopt workplace safety laws, anti-trust laws, the progressives, all those progressives like William Allen White helped put a lot of changes into place to limit the power of big business. Throughout Kansas history, like I said, there's always been a strong commitment to education, both public schools and higher education.

These were strong traditions in Kansas that we should be proud of that we achieved with bipartisan cooperation. That's something—obviously we understand government has to be limited. The question is we still have some basic functions, and we should do them well. That was the approach that I felt. Government has to be limited. So our taxes are reasonable so we don't overregulate and stifle creativity and innovation, and government has to be limited most of all to protect our civil liberties. Even with that, government still has a role to play to improve the quality of life in our society. That's a long tradition of that in Kansas.

DG: Our conversation earlier with Senator Dave Kerr of Hutchinson who served kind of in that area, he mentioned how the tone of communications changed so much with social media. He said, "When you got an email that's nasty, when you got letters, they were kind of civil. Did you experience that change?"

DM: Yes. With a letter you've got to write it. It takes a while to write it. Then you fold it up and you put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it. It may sit on your desk for a day or two. Then you might change it before you go drop it in the mailbox. With email, you type it, you hit the send button. The communication has declined somewhat.

Also even in the legislature, I worked with Senator Kerr some. I remember working with Steve Morris, [Hugoton] when he was president of the Senate. I always knew I was welcome in his office. It didn't matter what part of the state I was from.

DG: Another western Kansas personality.

DM: Right. It didn't matter what part of the state you were from or what party you were in. If you had a good idea, Steve wanted to hear it. That was very refreshing. People might be reluctant to approach the Senate president, but if you had a good idea, he wanted to hear it. He might not agree with it, but he'd at least talk to you about it, and it was open. Because of your ideology, he didn't dislike you or think somehow that you were inferior. He respected you and wanted to hear your ideas. I really enjoyed working with Steve Morris.

I had a really good working relationship with Doug Mays [Topeka] who was speaker of the House at the time. Because we were civil, because we could talk to each other personally, we could work out problems ahead of time. Quite honestly, the legislative procedure has rules for a reason to be fair to everybody, so everybody gets their say. There are also rules you can use to disrupt the process if you need to. I think it was clear that we tried to communicate that we wanted to cooperate and solve problems, but if we were treated badly, then we could also use the same rules to slow down the process and make it harder to get things done. It was easier to work with us than it was to run over us. It was part of an equation. It's kind of basic human nature.

DG: I understand. That covers most of what I recall from that era. Any other issue areas, changes that took place that we want to document? Part of this process is to make sure that what happened then is remembered going forward. What's left there that we didn't cover?

DM: I think over the years we passed some measures for water conservation and for addressing water issues and water supplies in the state, water quality, wildlife habitat, and a number of things like that we did in cooperation to help the water office, the Conservation Commission, other state agencies do their job better so we could take care of our environment in real common sense ways. I think we accomplished some good things in that regard. I always [thought] we could have passed the law requiring some of the PACs [political action committees] that we see now disclose their donors. That hasn't been done yet. I always notice that whenever that got proposed, that got a really sudden and vile objection from certain legislators. I think that would help open up the process.

The other thing I remember is on the special session 2005, it was kind of a drawn-out process. We were here for several weeks. The process was kind of used to slow things down in that

time. There was a strong commitment. The court had said, “Look, the only evidence introduced into the court was your own evidence. The state's own research was introduced as evidence against us. Your formula is not constitutional.”

Among legislators, there was this strong view that, “Well, this court is trying to take over the rule of the legislature.” Well, the court wasn't. They had several decisions, several opinions issued where they said, “No, we want you to fix it, but your formula is not constitutional.” Finally, in 2005, we passed a finance bill that was actually less constitutional. The court threw it out. It had some really strong language. We got called back into special session. I remember, because the court decision was there to protect the people that have no economic or political power, and that was why they had issued the decision and were trying to fix it.

I still remember one legislator, I was sitting in the front row right next to the podium, and about the twelfth or fifteenth person came down there talking about these black-robed judges trying to take over the legislature and tell us what to do. I remember sitting there and thinking, going back to my old Federalist Papers about the role of the courts, the role of the legislature, the role of the executive. All of a sudden, it dawned on me. This is the tyranny of the majority. We have one group that doesn't want to accept any constitutional limits and rejects the court's right to impose constitutional limit, and that's why the constitutional limits are there, to protect those who was in a minority with no political or economic power. This is what Madison was saying. This was the tyranny of the majority.

DG: This is classic Dennis McKinney, when you get into the depth of why it's there.

DM: This is the textbook stuff becoming real to me. I'm sitting there. I think one minute I was thinking about, “How am I going to get my wheat harvested and get ready to plant this fall?” and then all of a sudden I thought, “Hmm, that's interesting.”

DG: It is lost on a lot of the public, what goes into education. I'm reminded of one thing I wanted to talk with you about, and that is your experience with the Greensburg tornado. I was working with the City [of Wichita] at that time. That was a tragic thing for the community, and it challenged leadership on every level. Looking back on that, that changed your perspective of how government worked at all?

DM: Of course. I always tell people, if you have to go through a major natural disaster, you certainly want to be an American, and I recommend you be a Kansan. We received support from the whole state. Governor Sebelius put the resources of the entire state government at our disposal. Ninety percent of the town was destroyed. Here's all these trucks from KDOT helping to clean up all the debris. We had to dig a huge landfill.

DG: And from Wichita. We sent you trucks, too.

DM: One day, I come around the corner, and here's a whole bunch of trucks lined up from the city of Wichita, front end loaders, and they're getting ready to unload and start collecting debris

and hauling it off. We had to dig out this whole new landfill, haul the whole town off, dump in it, burn it up, and cover it up, things not many communities do, everything. Even the collection of public health officials and county health nurses who are pushing—they robbed shopping carts from the old Dillon's store. They're pushing these shopping carts around town. Here are all these people volunteering, cleaning up, "Do you need gloves? Do you need a dust mask? Do you need a tetanus shot? Do you need band aids?" Everything from the public health level to how do you dispose of waste in this situation? How do you handle all the waste? How do you manage volunteers? How do you manage fire risk, security risk, everything? How do you get rid of this debris? How do we finance rebuilding? We had a lot of private help, but it required coordination and leadership from the state and local government to get it done.

DG: A couple of other points: You left the legislature to run for State Treasurer, successful at that.

DM: I served two years, filled out an unexpired term for two years, and then I lost the next election.

DG: Why did you make that move?

DM: I'd been in the legislature sixteen years. I thought maybe it was a time for a change so somebody else could come up and be in a leadership position. I thought maybe it was time for a change.

DG: Do you still have aspirations? Your name is always in the mix every time there's an election. You're not disqualifying yourself from any future role?

DM: I wouldn't disqualify, but, you know, running a campaign is harder. I tell my farmer neighbors, running a campaign is harder than setting a corner post in August in hard ground. It's possible but doubtful, but I enjoy it. I also served on the Racing and Gaming Commission after I left here.

DG: That's right. You did that. You're farming now.

DM: My main crops are wheat and cattle. I'm in southwest Kansas.

DG: And challenging times to be a farmer.

DM: Very challenging.

DG: That covers most of what I had in mind. Do you have any closing thoughts? Again, this is a historical perspective about back then.

DM: I Think one of the other things that we helped pass that was really important was renewing and funding the highway program. It wasn't just a highway program. It was a transportation

program. It addressed some transportation needs, not just in large urban areas, but also in rural areas, where we have people that don't have transportation otherwise, especially to medical appointments. It helped with short-line railroads. We've got a lot of tonnage of freight off the highways, and, of course, the primary investment was in highways. What we see is, with this investment and infrastructure, the dividends pay off over and over and over again.

Governor Hayden helped get that ignited and going, the renewal of that investment. The lesson's pretty clear, when we invest in infrastructure, we put people to work, and long-term benefits to the economy. When you take twenty minutes off the cost of a load of rock from southeast Kansas into a construction site in Wichita, that's a significant reduction in cost and a big addition to the economy.

DG: Anybody who drives from Wichita to Kansas City twenty years ago and then today, the difference in the quality of the roads and the safety factors is—but you came out of an era where the highways were a scandal in previous decades. When the first highway plan was put together, that did kind of change and set in motion a mechanism to be removed over ten-year increments.

DM: One of the things I noticed was a lot of people were skeptical at the start. But then when they get the new highway or improved highway that was needed for a long time, and they say, “Hey, this really works. They did what they told me they were going to do, and this works.” Then it improves the interest in going forward. Actually it's a confidence builder for government.

DG: Are you good with that?

DM: Thank you.

DG: Thank you for sharing those stories. For the oral history project, I'm Dale Goter.

[End of File]

