

Tape 9, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is 12/14/92, and this is Tape 9, Side 1.

Well, there's only a couple of other things on the 1965 session that I was interested in asking you. Was there anything else that you were saying when we finished the last tape that you wanted to add to that?

VA I can't recall now. I don't think so.

CH Well, actually, let's go on, then, to the 1967 session. In the - of course, nationally, at the point that you were elected into the senate, that was '64, which is a major rout for the Republicans because Barry Goldwater lost decidedly in that. Did you actively campaign for any other candidates while you were campaigning for yourself, or are you perceived as being on a ticket? Were you on a Goldwater ticket at all?

VA No. No, it was just on our own, which, incidentally, is a pretty good example of what happens to the Republicans. By that I mean there was as landslide against Goldwater, then, ten years later was the Nixon and Watergate and parting of Nixon, and the Republican officials running for office really got beat up with those things, which, really, we had no control, we had nothing to do with, and all the rest of it. But no, I wasn't on any ticket. I was just running for the senate seat.

CH So at this point are any regional or national issues having any effect on your actions?

VA I can't really - nothing bounces sharply to my mind.

CH In 1966...

VA Excuse me. The only thing that did occur that was of note, and it's not any secret, I think the Oregon legislature was the only one that went the other way in 1964, because that was the year that the Republicans took a majority in the house during that awful landslide against Republicans nationally. So the Oregon legislature got some kind of note for having done that. But, then, I was in the senate [laughter].

CH Well, you weren't up for reelection in '66, so there wasn't anything there that you had to deal with. But what was the composition in the house and senate at that point, then, in 1966? Do you recall?

VA The what?

CH The composition of Democrats and Republicans in the house and senate. The senate was still...

VA I think the Republican senators were a good sized number, if I remember. I know when John Burns was there we had fourteen, if I recall. I know during my tenure we slipped to six, and the following session seven. The lowest was a six when we had this photograph in a phone booth of the Republicans. It's an interesting photograph, incidentally, in the sense there was Bob Smith, Tony Meeker, Wally Carson, George Wingard, Ken Jernstedt, and myself.

CH Quite a distinguished group.

VA That's not bad. Smith is a congressman, Tony was treasurer, Wally Carson a supreme court judge, and I was governor, out of that six. That's not bad.

CH That was a pretty strong nucleus. You must have been held pretty tightly together.

VA Well, there was nothing else to do. If they put all six of our votes together, we really couldn't do a hell of a lot [laughter].

CH Well, in that session Debbs Potts was president, wasn't he?

VA Yes.

CH And is the entire senate involved in electing - they're all involved in electing the president, not just members of the caucus or the people that they invite or anything like that, it's a floor-wide campaign, isn't it, for the entire floor?

VA Well, no, no.

CH How are they elected?

VA Debbs was a coalition senate president. The small number of Democrats would get together and decide who their nominee would be, the Republicans agreed to the coalition, which meant once that they had done that, that's - in other words, it was a small number of Democrats in conjunction with the Republicans that decided who was going to be the presiding officer.

CH And was there anybody else running at the time for that position?

VA I think what they called, quote, the regular Democrats, that's what they called themselves, they put up a nominee.

CH Do you know who that was, by any chance?

*BUD LEWIS AS! PLEASE*

VA It was one of those useless exercises.

CH Well, I guess if you're in the majority, it's at least worth a try, isn't it?

What was your impression of Debbs Potts as a president of the senate?

VA I think he did a very fair job. He did a good job, he worked very hard at it. He's one of the nicer guys I've met, although I would say to you, and I hesitate saying it because I've never held it against him or anybody else, remember the event I told you about during the John Burns period where my name never came up? I didn't spend my time lamenting about it, but I'm sure that Debbs Potts had something to do with it. But we are very close friends, I think very highly of him, we've never had any problem between us. He's a good man.

CH In that same term, Monty Montgomery was elected speaker of the house. How did he fair as speaker?

VA Very well. All the reports - of course, I wasn't there, but everything I've ever heard was very complimentary of his two terms as speaker of the house.

CH I'd heard references to him as sort of the golden boy of the Republican party, and a lot of people expected him to move up into statewide office. Why didn't that happen?

VA Well, he ran statewide for what, secretary of state, treasurer? I don't recall now. Why he didn't? Well, I don't know, he just - I don't know. I can't answer the question, anymore than I could say how come Vic Atiyeh came out of the middle of nowhere and beat Clay Meyers.

CH Were you close to Monty?

VA Yes. He was one of the Turks.

CH You didn't - being a Syrian, of Syrian heritage, you weren't offended by being referred to as a Turk?

VA [Laughing] No, those are all generic terms, you know.

CH That same term, in that same election, Governor Hatfield went on to become a senator, and Tom McCall went from being secretary of state to governor, and he had selected as his assistants Ed Westerdahl and Ron Schmidt. What was your impression of him and his lineup in the executive branch?

VA Oh, I think they functioned quite well. Westerdahl was the administrative assistant or executive assistant, and Ron was the press aide. I think they did a pretty good job.

CH Clay Myers was secretary of state. He was also slated for a, so people thought, major role in state government. Of course, he was secretary of state for quite a while, wasn't he?

VA Yeah.

CH What was your impression, at this stage, of Clay Myers?

VA You know, at that stage - as a matter of fact, at no other - I mean, it wasn't different even later on. I liked Clay, I thought he did a very conscientious job in the jobs that he had, including treasurer. He functioned extremely well and did a good job.

CH We've already talked about Bob Thornton. The treasurer was Bob Straub?

VA Yes.

CH We've mentioned him a little bit, but he was a fairly active treasurer, wasn't he?

VA Yeah, Bob was. Bob actually - he might even agree to this. I think he functioned better as a state treasurer than he did as a governor. Not that he was a bad governor, but I think he was more proactive, he was kind of himself in charge, and I think he did a better job as a state treasurer than he did as a governor.

CH Do you recall any of the highlights of his being a treasurer in terms of handling...?

VA Well, mostly his highlights of him running against Tom McCall for governor.

CH The Tom and Bob show?

VA That's right. Nothing particular. I think that he kept the bond rating high in Oregon, worked well with the investment council, was highly regarded as such, put a good staff of people together. You know, it was a very well functioning office, to the benefit of Oregon.

CH You were on the Air and Water Quality Control Committee that term, and we've talked about a number of people that were on that. Ben Musa was the chair of that. As a chairperson, how was he - as a chairman, how did he function?

VA He did very well as a chairman, ran things extremely well. But I need to back up, and I get to the interim, and that's the Interim Committee on Public Health.

CH Before this?

VA Out of the 1965 session of the legislature. Remember, I

used to tell you they used to have these resolutions for interim committees, and there was an interim committee on public health. Now, I specifically bring this one up because this was the beginning of our air and water quality movement in Oregon. This was the beginning of it. During this session, during this interim committee, we proposed and put together and rewrote the air quality law in Oregon, and in the following session, I would add, there was the water quality law. Then, I need to get to the election of the 1964, because it was Straub and McCall, and I do recall there was a major debate about the environment and raw sewage going into the Columbia River, and all the rest of that - excuse me, the Willamette River, obviously into the Columbia eventually. And to take a step further back, the first - the very first group that took an interest in air or water quality before McCall and Straub, before this Interim Committee on Public Health, and that was Associated Oregon Industries. So it was business, really, that was the first one that really had any serious look at laws that would clean up our air and water.

CH What was their incentive to do that?

VA I can't tell you. You'd really have to talk to somebody there. Actually, Tom Donaca would be the one, if you ever get around to talking to them. He was a lobbyist, and - now, he was - we talked about lobbyists earlier, but he had great credibility, very forthright, very honest, and technically very bright.

So, now, having just said what I've said, you mentioned the Air and Water Quality Committee. That was the first environmental committee in the Oregon legislature. There had never been one before.

CH Did the public health interim committee evolve into the Air and Water Quality Control Committee?

VA Not necessarily, because there was a mixture - I can't recall who made the transition. There was a mixture of house and senate members on that committee, and I can't really remember all of them. I do remember Sid Bazett, I do remember Gracie Peck, Dr. Crothers, but now it falls off, and I can't recall. I'm talking about the interim committee. So when you jump to the next session and talk about air and water quality, there was something that led up to the - that was something - that was the very first environment committee in the Oregon legislature.

CH Was there legislation that came out of the Interim Committee for Public Health that, then, in '67 became legislation?

VA Yeah. That was the rewrite of the air quality law.

CH And what did that consist of?

VA I really can't recall. I can recall this, because it was a formula that continued on through, and it was a formula that I have said was the reason for the success of the environmental law in Oregon, and I had proposed those - to me, again back to principles, we wanted to create incentives for people to spend a lot of money on antipollution equipment, and to me one of them was to say, We know you can't do it tomorrow, but you've got to do it. And so the first part of what I'm trying to tell you now is what we call the compliance schedule. Well, that's not the first step either. The first step was to identify the polluters, and we would give them a permit. So we said, Okay, now, we know you pollute, you have a permit, and, as Dr. Crothers used to say about me [?], this was a permit to emit. So we said, Okay, now, now you've got a permit; we can pull the permit at any time. And then we said to them, We know you can't do it right away, but there has to be a compliance schedule. We will sit down with you and work out this compliance schedule. Having done that, then - and, of course, that compliance schedule is going to vary with

the companies - then you have to make these steps that's in this compliance schedule, and if you miss these steps, we pull the permit. In addition, we proposed a bill that would give either income or property tax deductions for antipollution equipment, and the companies had to make their choice; it couldn't be both, it was one or the other. And we put a time frame on it. I don't recall what that was now. Four years? I think it was four years, a rather short time frame. That's been extended after that. So the whole idea was, okay, now, if you want to get this job done, you can't do it right away. If you want tax credit, though, you've got four years to get this job done, you've got a permit here, you've got a compliance schedule. Everything was going exceedingly well until the EPA was created, and they wanted you to do everything yesterday, and the standards are clear out of sight. Then everybody dug their heels in, and then it was tougher to get the job done.

CH When did that occur?

VA I don't recall when EPA came along, but I really was very upset.

CH In the seventies.

VA Yeah. I was very upset, because Oregon's environmental law was doing very well. It really was. But Congress being what Congress is, and the bureaucracy being what it is, it's overkill. That's what happened.

CH I noticed that in that session that they had not only air and water but also other waste pollution bills that passed. Was that all out of that same committee?

VA There was a lot of interest at that time. No, not all came out of that interim committee.

CH Why would there be so much interest at this period in 1967? Were there any events or episodes that prompted that?

VA Well, no. There was a lot of talk about air and water, there was a greater paying attention to what was happening, a greater awareness of it; the campaign of Straub and McCall kind of put a lightning rod to the whole thing; the work of Associated Oregon Industries, who just decided it was time to do something.

CH Looking at the members on your committee, there are a couple of people here that we haven't talked about. Bateson was one.

VA Corny Bateson, yeah.

CH Cory?

VA Cornelius. We called him Corny.

CH And what was he like?

VA Kind of a - well, a very, very bright man. His attitude was a little pompous, maybe because he was so bright. A little bit arrogant at times. A nice guy. I liked him.

CH What about Eivers?

VA George Eivers, from Clackamas County, a Republican. George was a participant in the process. You know, among the average senators.

CH You were also on the Education Committee that time, and Bateson and Eivers were also on that, and some of the other people that we've already talked about: Flegel and Husband and Musa. Berkeley Lent, Bud Lent, was on that committee, and, of course, later he became a supreme court justice and chief

justice. I would imagine that ideologically that was in a different track than you were?

VA Yeah, he was. We had philosophical differences, but not a very wide - it was a wide gap, but not a very wide gap. He was a very pragmatic guy, very pragmatic. You know, if he knows he's going to lose, he's going to smile, and when he's got you, he's got you, and he's going to smile at that too. Again, a very bright man.

CH Were there issues or legislation in the Education Committee that came to the fore that...?

VA Other than the one I mentioned, I'm sure there were, but I can't recall, except for the trainable bill which was finally passed.

CH Going back to the air and water quality, I notice that there was a bill for - there was legislation making a start on the Willamette greenway that was approved. That was all part of that pollution of rivers, or is that different?

VA That's different in the sense that that was really sort of a combination. If I were going to put one ahead of the other, I might put Bob Straub ahead of Tom McCall, but now we're into this era in which Tom McCall scooped up and cleaned the whole rivers, and he's the one that greened Oregon, and he's the one that passed the bottle bill, although he opposed it initially, and, you know, on and on it goes. Tom was marvelous for grabbing on to things, but I think Bob Straub is generally credited with the Willamette greenway as it finally evolved and developed.

CH Is he the one that initiated the legislation in the...?

VA I think it was his idea.

CH You know, you mentioned Tom McCall grabbing on to ideas, and I've heard this from other people as well. How would he do that? I mean, how would he latch on to something that...?

VA Well, Tom was very eloquent. As a matter of fact, I noticed during the campaign - that is, the campaign when Tom ran for the first time against Bob Straub, and this was Tom's first run - that Straub would mention something, and Tom would pick it up, and he'd make a bigger deal out of it than Straub did. So all of a sudden, although Straub mentioned it first, no one remembered that Straub ever mentioned it first. It was McCall that did it. A very smart man, and very articulate. The media just loved him. He was always saying things in a very eloquent way and very descriptive way. He had a good facility for doing things like that. So he could - like I say, he really opposed the bottle bill to begin with. I mean, he was an opponent of it, but today everybody knows he's the one that created it, although the one that did create it no one hardly ever remembers, Paul Hanneman.

CH When - and maybe we'll talk about this a little bit later, but when Tom McCall eventually came out in support of the bottle bill, did he - I'm trying to think of the psychology that he used. How would he make a 180 degree turn on an issue and save face, and how would he do it?

VA He didn't bother about that. He didn't bother to say, I used to be over here, but now I'm over there. He just - just like anything that came before never happened [laughter].

CH And people believed it?

VA And nobody ever paid any attention. The media didn't - you know, they didn't say, Well, Tom, you were against it. How come you're for it now? They never questioned him. They loved him. You know, they wouldn't question him that hard. And he just

would say it was - well, how would he pick up something that Straub said and make it his own.

CH But other people doing that would be criticized as being wishy-washy. Why wasn't he labeled like that?

VA I don't know [laughter]. You have to ask the media about that. I have no idea.

CH And in terms of education, there was a teacher tenure law that failed in the house. I don't know at what point it got in the senate, if it did, but do you recall anything on that issue or whether you debated it?

VA Well, that is one of those things that - no, I don't recall that, but I do recall there was an interim committee on education, and out of that we rewrote the teacher tenure law. We called it - what did we call it? Fair dismissal, something like that. We called it something else, but we rewrote it altogether, but that followed this. This was not the time.

CH There was also a bill to control speakers on campuses, which narrowly failed in the house. Wasn't that a controversial issue over communists speaking at the Eugene campus?

VA Yeah, some communist speaker. I can't even remember his name.

CH Was that debated in the senate?

VA No, I don't think so. You know, there's all kinds of issues. The interesting thing that I've said so many times is that, you know, we meet every two years, except special sessions, and meet for about six months. So the legislature meets, and everything is wrong with the state of Oregon, and there's got to

be a bill to address that. And, then, the legislature goes home and Oregonians live very peacefully for eighteen months. Then, another legislature comes, and everything's wrong with the state again.

CH As a governor - jumping ahead, as a governor you must have felt relieved on the day that the legislature recessed.

VA Oh yeah. It was tough, it was tough, and tough in the sense mostly it was hard to run government.

CH With the legislature in?

VA Yeah, because they had all these committees, and the directors of your government had to appear before all the - it took an awful amount - a horrendous amount of time of your directors and people from your state agencies appearing before the legislature. And then, of course, they were always telling me how to run my shop when I was governor. We'll get to that pretty soon. Times came when I'd say, Well, this is my business, this is not your business. I'm talking, now, when I was governor.

CH Sure.

VA This is not your business, this is mine. Leave me alone.

CH Well, the scenic rivers proposal died in Ways and Means. Was that something that also went through your committee on..

VA I'm not where that came from. I don't recall.

Incidentally, there are bills that really are - you're hard to stop anywhere, and so the presiding officer, knowing that it might be difficult to stop - they should go to a certain committee, logically - would have subsequent referral to Ways and

Means, and Ways and Means did kill a lot of bills. I'm sure this was one of them.

CH Single member districts failed the Democratic hurdle in the senate. That was something that Republicans were primarily in support of?

VA Yeah. It was probably one of the big mistakes we made in Oregon.

CH As Republicans?

VA As Republicans. Actually, it took the form of an initiative petition, I think, and was finally passed by the people. The Republicans were being supportive of it, Democrats were opposed to it, but that's not the point. It did make a difference on elections, yes, I'll agree with that. But the basic point, when I say mistake, you'll recall we talked about my days in Washington County running countywide, from urban to agriculture. When you made single-member districts, you had a person in the ag district and you had a person in the urban district, and they became provincial. In other words, they weren't worried about the ag, and the ag wasn't worried the urban. And I'm simplifying it, but that was a big mistake. And after single-member districts went in, really, the provincialism just - it really was not good for Oregon, it was not good. It was a mistake.

CH There was also an effort which failed in campaign spending limits and limits on campaign periods. Was that a hotly contested issue?

VA Yeah, as it is today. I always opposed it. I think that it - again, I go back to principles. That really is just - first of all - there was a spending limit put on. Bob Straub and I ran the first time with a spending limit. Eighty-seven thousand

dollars, I would add. We ran with that limit. And, then, it went to the courts, and the courts said this was restricting freedom of speech, and I agree with that, I agree with that. They're saying you have to cut down this horrendous cost, but at what expense? Yeah, it's expensive, I agree with that, but what are you giving up? But anyway, these were issues that were coming up all the time.

[End of Tape 9, Side 1]