

Tape 61, Side 1
September 10, 1993

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 9/10/93, and this is Tape 61, Side 1.

I was asking you about your family, Tom and Suzanne and what their activities are, where they're at in their lives.

VA Tom married Pat McDonald, and they had my oldest granddaughter, Megan. She's nineteen now. A lovely lady, lovely. She's really a fine woman. They were divorced, and Tom is remarried, but no other children.

The thing that I admire so much about him, he was in the rug business. It wasn't real easy for him. There was - still my brothers were there, and I - one of the reasons I asked my brothers to retire, I don't think uncles and fathers should be looking over any young people's shoulders. But anyway, at some point he just had it and decided he was going to go in business for himself. He's built the business that he has today, really, from scratch, and he's done it by working really hard, and he's scratched and scratched and scratched to get started, and today he's doing very well.

CH And this is in trade?

VA He does that, he has rugs made to his design in China. He travels to China no less than three, and most often four, times a year. Just returned from Iran and China. He was invited by Iran to speak to an Oriental rug conference

there, a seminar or whatever they call it, and to address them, which he did. This is the second time, now, he's done that.

So he's succeeded, and he's done it on his own really hard work and his own brain, his own mind as to what ought to happen. He's very meticulous about what he wants and how he wants it. I think that'll be the measure of his success. What he's produced stands out. He has retailers all over the United States, and even into Germany right now, and I think they buy from him because he produces a beautiful rug, well made. But that's a picture, you see the whole picture. But he deals with colors and each - you know, what goes where. They have what they call cartoons, which is an interesting word, but this is the actual drawing of what that pattern is going to be and what color goes in there. He's done extremely well, extremely well. He's worked very hard at it.

Suzanne was married, had two children, Sonia and Cody. She's divorced. That was a tough time for her. You see that side of what happens with a young woman. Here, she had two children, she was divorced, her husband - her former husband now - I helped, but, of course, he had his own skill. He is a professor at Southern Oregon College in art. He's an artist. I mean genuinely. He has art shows, and she's in that field. But he just wasn't making enough to send her enough to take care of two children herself. So here she was, working, with young children, daycare, and, of course, they would get sick.

And she has jobs, and - she did very well at it, but she'd come over with this envelope full of paper and would have her canceled checks. I've rebalanced her checkbook, and I don't know how I did it. I mean, it was so messed up.

I mean, we're not talking about one month, about three or four months, you know, maybe five months, sorting through all the papers. We helped her, we were able to do that. But she had some sense of humor. She finally gave me a little card that says, I can't be overdrawn. I still have some checks [laughs].

But she remarried a wonderful man, a wonderful man. He works - his name is Lyndon Borden, and he works for the gas company. He's what I call an outside man, he's not a corporate person. A good father. And they have one child, the two of them, and will deliver another one September 17, 1993. I don't think the baby will come ahead of that, but it might come ahead of that. I don't think it will, but it'll be Cesarean, so that's how we happen to know that's the day.

But they really have done exceedingly well. I'm very proud of them, both of them. It's been tough - it was tough for Tom, but in a different way. You know, he just had to go do it. You look at a man a little bit differently. It was very tough for Suzanne. She got her own jobs, she always did very well at them, was always well regarded in the jobs that she had, but still it was tough. You know, you worry about the children, and they maybe fall and hurt themselves or they get sick. It wasn't easy. She had an apartment and -

But anyway, that's my family, and I'm very proud of them. I have very, very fine grandchildren. Sonia is a very interesting young lady. She'll be eleven in November. That's Suzanne's oldest child. She's beautiful inside as well as outside. She's a very pretty girl, but she has a beautiful soul. She's a very beautiful girl inside. Cody is a nice looking young man. Incidentally, they're both

doing very well in school, as is Megan, that is, Tom's daughter. Extremely well in school.

I don't know how far SATs go, but I got a kind of a quick[?] from Pat McDonald to Dolores that Megan's SATs were way over a thousand. I don't know what way over a thousand means, but to me a thousand sounds pretty good, but she's over a thousand. I don't know how far over you go, but that's Megan. And Sonia, straight A's and Cody's doing very - they're good young people.

CH We've talked a little bit about your nephew, George, and Opal Creek. Are you in contact with him at all?

VA No. We sold the mine, and George - actually, George and Tom worked for a while for Persus, which was the Hawaiian group that bought the mine. George still - well, I don't think he works for them any longer. I think there was some transition to, eventually, hopefully, that the Nature Conservancy will take over part of that area of the mine. No, I don't - I actually have very little contact with my nephews. I obviously see them from time to time. Every Christmas, we've had a tradition going way back, way, way back. My brothers and I would get together, and we would rotate. Every third year it would be at our house. And it's grown. Now it's, gosh, I don't know, getting close to forty. When you get us and our children and their spouses and their children, it keeps adding up.

CH How are your brothers?

VA Oh, they're fine, they're fine.

CH Are they still involved in the business?

VA No. I really urged them to retire. Richard retired first from the retail business, Ed retired about a year later from the cleaning plant.

CH And your wife, Dolores?

VA Well, she's longsuffering, would be a good word for it. I think we've touched on it. You know, I had some lament about all the times I wasn't there while she was really raising the children. And working, of course, in the retail business, I'd come home - we would work at nights, and we'd go over to the cleaning plant after work, and we worked hard at building up what we have. And, you know, if she had chosen a life, I don't think she would have chosen the one that's she's gone through, but she's been very good about it. And something must have clicked, because next July we will have celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary, so she's been a very patient woman.

CH Is that what you mean by longsuffering?

VA Yes. I think she's suffered long, too. Among the ways she's suffered, which, of course, I think would be mostly apparent, she loves to cook. She has a collection of cookbooks. She reads a cookbook like anyone would read a novel. She reads it. I will get her a cookbook, and she will sit down and read it. Part of her longsuffering is I'm sort of meat and potatoes and I don't eat a lot of things that she would like to make. So I think she would like to cook - [laughing] if she'd gotten a husband who was less

narrow in food tastes, she probably would have been very happy about that.

CH You know, during one of our sessions here you had a woman who came to visit you and you were going to have a meeting with her later. She was the woman who had been in your house as a pregnant teenager, and then she ran away. What was your encounter with her like after all those years?

VA Actually, we talked to her on the phone and we talked to her at the house. It was very pleasant. I mentioned about what had happened and how we then, after she had been gone for some time, ran into her as a Girl Scout leader. It was very satisfying to know that even in that short span of time that we had some influence in her life, and apparently it was a very positive influence for her.

But, you know, it was wonderful to see her again, but it's kind of strange, because she was no longer that young, pretty high school student. But, of course, I'm not either, but, you know, that was then, and you have that picture. That was the snapshot I carried. Well, now she's - gosh, that would be - oh, my goodness, Sue has to be in her sixties, I suppose. I'm seventy, so we weren't - I'm not even sure we were ten years older than she was at the time.

[laughing] I just ran into - I was at a meeting at the Scouters Mountain - that's a facility the Boy Scouts have - and these were four people that we call part of the Heritage Society. They have indicated that they will put scouting in their wills. We don't know what or how much or anything. That's not the important point. And all of a sudden this young man - well, young. This man comes up to me, and he says, "Do you remember me? I'm Charlie Coulter[?]." Well,

he was a Boy Scout when I scout master. He is retired.

CH How does that make you feel?

VA [laughing] That's what I'm saying, he's retired. It was good to see him, though.

CH Are there any other people that you'd like to comment on?

VA Well, I think I'm a very lucky man in the sense that I made a very close friendship with two men, Jim Campbell and Tom Galt[?]. We made that friendship in high school, it's lasted through all these years. Actually, all three of us married women from our high school. Jim Campbell, Donna, then Shulson[?] now Campbell, Dolores and I, we all lockered together at Washington High School. And I think to myself - you know, I have friends, you have friends, but to have that kind of friendship is very rare. And to have two of them, you know, that's rarer yet. And I met a lot of people and I have really a lot of friends that I consider good friends, but this is a relationship that's extraordinary. I would count, now, Donna and Jim as my two close friends. It's strange, this is husband and wife, but it just worked that way. And Tom as well, of course. So I think that I need to record those two as - I feel very blessed to have that kind of a friendship for so long.

I was kidding Jim Campbell. I said, "I bet you're glad I'm out of office." "Why is that?" [laughing] I said, "Well, now nobody calls you anymore and says, 'Call Vic and tell him to do -' 'Why is Vic doing this?' They don't call you to do that anymore.

CH Well, you know, I found a couple of interesting comments, as I kind of reflect and as you reflect on this whole process. One was on fishing. It was in the Oregonian in 1982. It said, Those who think of Vic Atiyeh as a quiet, low-key administrator should go trout fishing with him on one of the two or three excursions a year his job allows.

This was on a trip to the Deschutes. I guess somebody was following you around Deschutes Club. And you said, Fishing is a lot like politics. And they also commented that you didn't hunt.

VA No.

CH What did they mean by this, if they think you're quiet and low key, they should see you fishing?

VA My demeanor, I think, gives people the wrong impression. I'm not mean and I'm not mad, but - maybe the best way, and I said it earlier on one of the tapes, my staff said, Governor, you're stubborn. I persist. When I'm fishing, I'm fishing. And I'm fishing for trout, and I'm fishing to catch trout, and I work at it. But, you know, I'm not wrapped up in it and my teeth aren't grinding or anything. I mean, I'm just - wherever that might - probably over here, and what fly do I use, and I work at it in that fashion. Maybe that's - that was Bill Monroe, who is a nice guy at the Oregonian. I enjoyed being with him.

But it's no different than as a governor I knew where I wanted to go; as a candidate, I was going to win. But my demeanor would not - people wouldn't see that.

I mentioned it earlier, I'm competitive, very competitive. When we were competing for companies to come

into Oregon, I was intense about that. I mentioned, again earlier on the tape, I recall when RCA Sharp went to Camas. Others said, Oh, well, isn't that wonderful, they're in the area, and I was madder than hell about it. I was mad in the sense that they didn't come to Oregon. And my - I mean, I was fighting for Oregon; not fighting for Washington, fighting for Oregon. So I am competitive. I am. And I don't want to lose.

When I say "I," there wasn't - obviously, I wasn't going to - well, in a political campaign, obviously it's me. But in terms of trying to have Oregon improve, that's not something that comes to me, it's just that I wanted that for Oregon, and I wasn't going to let go.

CH Did you ever read the book by the Oregon author, David Duncan, The River Why? It takes place somewhere around here, out by the coast, and he talks a lot about his fly fishing religion, almost.

VA Well, I never quite made a religion of it.

CH I mean, they weren't religious except for fly fishing.

VA I know, I understand.

No, really, actually, as I look back on it, how people might see me, they see me as they would see any other politician. They - that is, trades and - we've already covered all that kind of territory, none of which I did. But the intensity of when I decide I want to do something, you know, I will work with it, I will deal with it, I'll listen to people, I'm trying to sort out what good ideas are going to fit, but the point is that I keep going. All

during my eight years I was moving toward diversifying the economy. That's what I wanted to do. When I left, we did it. I took a whole lot of steps, but they were all aimed in that same direction because I knew that's where I wanted to go.

And I didn't - I saw a little saying. It happened to be in a Korean elevator. I remembered it. I may walk slowly, but I never walk backwards.

CH But you never walk backwards?

VA That's right. I may walk slowly, but I never walk backwards. I just keep moving forward.

There are those that - I watch the politics of it. They just shoot flares in the air and the firecrackers go off and people get excited and - but I look past that. Okay, fine. I hear you. Now, let's see the product. I want to see the product. I don't care about the fireworks and I don't care about the firecrackers. I want to see the product. Well, that was the challenge I put to myself. Don't spend a lot of time and energy in this political flair, go do it.

And we talked about, you know, should I have had blue-ribbon task forces and studies and all the rest of it, and maybe politically I should, but that's not where I was coming from. You have at best a limited amount of time. Eight years is not - it's a long time, but not that long a time. And so if you're going to do something, go do it, don't spend time talking about it.

So in the terms of what someone would expect of a politician, I wasn't. But when you ask me the questions you do, I just knew what I wanted. It was clear to me, very

clear. I knew what the results were, I could see it. It wasn't a matter of speculation, if we do this, maybe that will happen, that's not - "maybe" was not what I was after.

CH We talked a little bit about some of the things that you do, and I was wondering whether you've read anything since leaving office or are currently reading anything that you particularly enjoy or find enlightening.

VA I've never been a heavy reader. I used to read a lot, and maybe that's why I don't read much now, but it related to government, reports and studies and all the rest of that, and so reading for recreational purposes I just never get into. Dolores does, my friends do, and they enjoy it. And I'll find myself - every once in a while I'll pick up a book, and I just devour it. I mean, I just - once I get into it, I go. I've read quite a few things that relate to the Civil War, which is of interest to me.

CH Why is the Civil War of interest to you?

VA Oh, I don't know, it was a period of time in history that was I think a great - much more dramatic than most Americans even think it was. And I'm always amazed at the number of men that were killed or died during it. It was a huge number of Americans died fighting each other. A great amount of property destruction, huge amount of property destruction. But behind it all was about the Union. And there's slavery too, but actually the first thing was secession and are we going to be a divided United States. Always percolating in the background was slavery.

I do like history. I've read a lot - some things that

relate to that. I've read some things that relate to our constitution as they were meeting and building the constitution. A lot of the issues that relate to the Civil War, mainly slavery, was because the framers of the constitution really never addressed that. They just didn't do it. They talked about it. It was a great discussion. It wasn't that they overlooked it, because they looked at it carefully, but they also carefully avoided putting something in our constitution. But we paid for it. I believe the...

CH It's interesting that you say that, because a lot of people look at the constitution or what the framers of the constitution said as it's almost the word of God and as though they were infallible, and here you're pointing out something that they consciously sidestepped.

VA I've said the constitution guarantees us nothing. It doesn't guarantee us anything, except it does guarantee us the right to make it better. It does give us that guarantee. But these are words, and you breathe life into it, into the words. To say all men are created equal, fine. That's nice. Does that guarantee that all men are created equal? No, it doesn't guarantee it. You know, they said it on a piece of paper. But until we're ready to say all men are created equal, no matter what the constitution says, it isn't going to happen. And so the only right that we have, and it's a guaranteed right in my mind, and the only freedom that we have is the freedom to make this country better, and we have that freedom.

I suppose that's - although I didn't think of it at that time, I'm sure, now articulated, it may be the reason I got involved and stayed there for twenty-eight years, trying

to make it better, because that was my opportunity.

Yes, they did a lot of good things. When you stop to think - I think about, for example, that if anyone wanted to have a paternalistic system of government, it would be those people there. They weren't the farmers, they weren't - you know, these were wealthy people, highly educated by the standards of the day. Many slave owners. Wealthy people. You'd think they'd want to protect that, and, yet, they said No, let's see if people can run it. Instead of us running it, let's see if people can. It's amazing it came out that way with those that were there, but that's the way it came out.

It's a shame, you know, those that were there at that time had the greatest fervor. As years moved along and new generations came along, we lost a lot of it. And, yet, you have to ask yourself, why do people from other parts of the world want to come here? And you have to ask, why are the people that come here and become citizens the greatest patriots? Because they know what we have and what they had. And so you think somebody would step back and say, Hey, maybe this is - maybe I overlooked something here, maybe this is a pretty good deal. But, unfortunately, Americans don't quite do that.

I express it in many ways. I've got this - it's my speech file, I call it. All kinds of things tucked away in it. One of the speeches I remember giving about - and I told the story: And today is our ninetieth day on the trail and it's been tiring, and on I go that way. We pause for a minute to bury Sarah, and her dreams are now in the ground here. Ah, but tomorrow is the Fourth of July. We will break out the goodies for the children and we will dance and we'll sing, and what a marvelous day this is.

And then I do this telescoping of time. Hey, tomorrow's the Fourth of July. We get a free weekend. We're going to put the kids in the camper and we're going to the - a lucky thing they've got showers and TV and blah, blah, blah. You know, all of a sudden you've lost the flavor of the - why is the Fourth of July. It's just a vacation, that's all it is.

CH Do you think people need adversity to be able to appreciate things?

VA Well, I'm not sure I'd say "need" it to appreciate it. That's when it happens, that's when that understanding and patriotic fervor - that's what the fervor was in World War II. There was great pride in this country in Desert Storm. But it just comes and goes. And I don't expect people to be at a fever pitch their entire life. That would be an awful way to live. It's just that being damn proud of the fact that you're an American and feel just damn lucky to have been born here, and just to say that once in a while.

You know, I don't have any shame at all in standing when the flag goes, take my hat off; I don't have any shame at all in the fact that I believe in this country, and I don't mind saying it. I don't know why anyone should be ashamed of saying it. I'm not the "America, love it or leave it," you know. As I told you, sure, there are some things that are not as they should be, but, then, my role is to help make it better. It's not a matter of love it or leave it, you know, or take it like it is, warts and all. No, no, no, no. It's got warts, and let's see if we can get rid of the warts. But, still, it's a great country, and we should really feel lucky. And we don't feel as - we don't

sense that as often as we should.

CH What advice would you give Oregonians?

[End of Tape 61, Side 1]