

Tape 16, Side 2

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 January 22, 1993, and this is Tape 16, Side 2.

I noticed in the Oregonian, on their summary of the session, that they mentioned that there was a controversial merger of the Fish and Game commissions. Why was that controversial?

VA I think we mentioned once before, but the Fish Commission actually represent commercial fishermen. That was the Fish Commission; and, then, the Game would be both recreational fishing and hunting. And so they just didn't want - you know, they figured they were combatants of one another rather than allies of one another. So it had been talked about many times before, and there was always this controversy. We're going to - we, meaning commercial fishermen - are going to be charged so much for commercial fishing, and you're going to put that all in the pot, and you're going to spend some of my money for the recreationals. I'm making it crude, but that's basically what it amounted to. So there's the controversy.

CH And where did you fall?

VA Actually, I grew closer and closer to this better efficiency in enhancing the resource, that they should be working together rather than separately.

CH Were there other issues that came up during this session that you recall?

VA I can't remember.

CH Or bills that were passed that were of significance?

VA We had enough controversy that session to last a lifetime.

CH It was somewhat of a controversial session, wasn't it?

VA Yeah.

CH Why this particular session?

VA It's hard to tell.

CH There were a lot of new faces, weren't there?

VA New faces, but the subjects that came up - and we've talked about them now - they just happened to come at this time. In a lesser sense, when you keep saying, well, now, here are some bills that have come before, and then you gave me some new ones of lesser importance, I've kidded any number of times. I said, you know, that the people of Oregon live very peacefully and very well for eighteen months. Then the legislature comes into session, and everything is wrong in the state of Oregon and needs to be cured. Then they go through all of this turmoil and controversy; then the session ends, and then we live very peacefully for another eighteen months.

CH Well, the Statesman Journal said, in regard to the session, that no session in memory has reconsidered so much of the legislation it has passed. Hearings have dragged on, floor debate is endless, inability to make decisions both in committee and on the floor, inexperienced legislature, members trying to make names, especially in the house. Is that the way you saw it?

VA I recall we were talking about, earlier, the quality of the legislature, the changes that have taken place, single-member districts, salaries going up, people being elected that really have not had the opportunity to make decisions, and therefore didn't know quite how to do it, didn't have enough experience behind them of a variety of sorts. And, yeah, they just - and that, again, has continued to today and not gotten any better.

CH One thing that they mentioned here that I found interesting was the reconsideration of so much of the legislation it had passed. Is that common for the legislature to reconsider something it's already dealt with?

VA No, and I'm not sure that the Statesman Journal was entirely correct. You know, it's - I noticed over the years that you pass a law to take care of some kind of a problem, but the mind of man is very inventive as to how to get around it, so, then, it comes back up again, and we've got to close the loophole that somebody found. So it's not unusual to revisit some legislation you passed, just to kind of take care of the inventive mind. But, I would say this, because it's true, that I don't care what law you pass, I don't care what it is, if the people won't accept it, it's not going to work. Even if it's law, it's not going to work. I suppose the classic example is prohibition. That's the major one. But that's not unlike a whole lot of little things that happen. If the people won't accept it, it isn't going to work. So you have to be somewhat in tune with the people on any law that you pass or it isn't - even if it's law, it's not going to work.

CH Have there been modern examples of that?

VA Yeah, but I can't remember them. By that, I mean I've - you

know, when I just told you I did, I noted as I moved through the process that there's another example of it, but I can't tell you what it is now. But what I just told you is entirely true; it is right. If the people won't accept it, it isn't going to work. You can pass any law you want; it isn't going to work.

CH There was another assessment by the Statesman Journal in regards to this session in which it said, This session was expected to move along smoothly, free from the conflicting motivations of coalition control. It isn't working that way. The senate seems more efficient and more under the control of President Jason Boe, but it hasn't had the workload from the house. I presume what they mean from that is because of all the turmoil in the house, that they didn't send over as much work to the senate.

VA It could be. I can't remember. You know, you go through it, and a lot of this stuff I kind of - well, you just go with the flow, I guess is the phrase.

CH Well, what was your assessment of the session, then, in general?

VA Again, you ask me these questions, and I don't know if I separate them session by session. I can't.

CH Were you involved in any interim work after the '73 session?

VA I don't think so. No, I don't think so.

CH Well, then, we move on to your first run for the governorship.

VA Ta-da.

CH [Laughing] Finally, we're getting up to modern history.
What was your motivation for running, and when did this idea first enter your thought? How long had you been considering it?

VA I had thought - you recall that I told you that I never developed a road map for my political future, and that's true. However, I thought to myself, you know, if I ever really wanted to do anything else, I think I'd want to be governor. I wasn't contemplating being a secretary of state or a state treasurer or anything like that.

CH What about in federal - the delegation...?

VA No, I never thought about it. It was never any part of any consideration I ever had.

I had watched the turmoil through the McCall years. There was an expression which really aptly fits: Even the future isn't what it used to be. There was a lot of turmoil. Things were just sort of dumped - taken and turned upside down constantly. And I thought, okay, that's not bad. We've made some constructive changes. There are some things that have been progressive in Oregon, and that's okay, but the time now comes in which you have to kind of pull it all together and make it operate correctly, make it operate more smoothly. And, it was an open seat. By that, I mean Tom had finished his eight years and could not run again, so I said, Well, I think I could do this.

CH And when did you start saying that to yourself?

VA Oh, I don't know. I think sometime - I can't precisely, because I don't remember. Probably sometime in the early part of

1974. Who knows what early means. I'm sorry, that's not right. It would be sometime after the session, the latter part of '73. The reason I'm saying that, because I finally announced, I think it was in October of '73, or something like that, that I was going to run. But I think it sort of gradually built up. You know, I went through all of this turmoil, I'll call it - and I don't use that negatively in the sense that I said we did some good things that were important and big, but that the state had been shaken, you know, and rattled and turned upside down, and I said, Okay, now's the time to kind of pull it all together and make it work like it should work. So it had to be after the session before I announced. Sometime in there. I thought, well, I can do that. I know enough about it and I feel confident enough; I think I can do that job. So that's when I said, Okay, let's try that.

CH Were you consulting with other people in making that decision?

VA No.

CH Dolores?

VA Oh well, certainly, Dolores, yes. But, you know, you hear the, That I have been urged by? I have to laugh about that. Everyone says, I've got a lot of people urging me to do this, which might be two of their closest friends. But no, these are decisions I think you always make personally, quietly in your own mind. And, of course, Dolores was involved. Yes, she was involved in it.

CH And how did she feel about that? It would obviously have a big impact on her life, wouldn't it?

VA Yes, but you don't really get guess how much. As she has been, If this is what you really want to do, okay. I don't know as if she'd made - if she was going to make the choice herself she would have arrived at the same conclusion. Our children were older by then; not old, but older. Well, Tom was twenty-six, twenty-seven, Suzanne would have been about twenty. So I think basically it came down to, if that's what you want to do.

CH How did your wife feel about public life in general?

VA Well, kind of, I think, mixed emotions. She enjoyed the - she does enjoy people, she enjoys being with people. She's very good at working with and being around people. But if it was her choice to make, she wouldn't have done what I did. Maybe this is the way to put it. If the roles had been reversed, I don't think she would have followed the same course I did.

CH For what reasons?

VA I just - you know, she likes home, she likes - and now bouncing really fast forward, after we came home in 1987, I suppose maybe a couple of months later, she said, "Gee, it's nice to be home." So that said a lot. So, you know, I - we are each all different. She was supportive, and it gets back, If that's what you want to do. She was willing to go along with it for my sake, which I think is very generous.

CH Who were your other supporters?

VA Oh, I had a lot of good, close friends, mainly, of course, in Washington County. People that I'd gotten to know and worked with. And obviously my two very closest friends since high school, both they and their wives.

CH Those being who?

VA Jim Campbell and his wife Donna, and my friend Tom ^{GALT} Gault [sp?] and his wife Doris. We've been friends since high school. As a matter of fact - and I still don't know how we did it - one term Jim and Donna and Dolores and myself, we all lockered together. Now, how we did that, I don't know. I go into high schools today and I look in these lockers, and I say, How did we do that? And it was particularly - through the winter season, you know, we're wearing coats, and I'm walking to school, which is - I don't know how far it is, a mile, mile and a half or something. I don't remember now, but, you know, a fair piece, and you get kind of wet, and here's all these soggy things in the locker with books and everything. I don't know how we did it. But anyway, my very closest friends. And, then, there are some others: Marge Russell, who was a really fine person. She'd been ~~kind of~~ a co-chairman or chairman of my various campaigns. And other very delightful people.

CH Were there any friends or advisers or associates that suggested you not run?

VA No. I didn't have that coterie of kitchen cabinet kind of folks. Again, you see - maybe it's a symptom of what I told you before, or proof of what I told you before. You know, when somebody plans their future, they kind of build something leading to it. I didn't.

CH What kind of staff did you assemble for the campaign?

VA In terms of anybody's staff for governorship, it was quite amateur. Mike Ragsdale was a great help to me in the sense that he was in Junior ^{CAMPBELL} Achievement, and he knew folks all over the

state. I just began to get my team together. He said, Well, I know somebody in Roseburg and I know somebody in Klamath Falls and I know somebody - you know, it was a great help to start with because I didn't know anybody outside of Washington County. Gosh, you know, it's hard - I'm trying to remember. It wasn't much of a staff in terms of professionalism. As a matter of fact, it wasn't much of a - professionalism in 1978, and I'll tell you that story when we get to it. I had somebody that was going to help me that was in the advertising business to kind of write - he could be a media representative. It was mostly a volunteer kind of thing rather than paid. It wasn't that highly organized.

I finally got a driver, which is kind of difficult. I mean, you drive yourself all your life. I'll jump ahead a little and then come back. You know, they say, You've got to have a driver. What do you mean I have to have a driver. I'm driving myself. What do I need a driver for? Well, you've got to have a driver. Well, we were busy, you know, getting going in '74, but, then, I won the primary - we'll get to that in a minute - and, Now you've got to get a driver. So we got a driver. And they insist I - they drive you to the grocery store. What do you mean? No, you don't do that. And, then, it was quick how that was that on election night I lost, and the next morning I could drive anywhere I wanted and nobody cared [laughter]. I love to tell that story because that's what really happened. But anyway, we got a driver, a young fellow. I just heard from him the other day. He was a student at Portland State University.

Anyway, there wasn't much of a what you'd call a highly professional, well organized - I just got a bunch of friends together and started running.

CH Well, when you started running, Clay Myers, who was secretary of state at that time, had entered and had a huge lead.

VA Yes.

CH His support came from the moderate and liberal wing, and he had won four statewide races. Did you consider him to be vulnerable? You must have. Or did you?

VA I didn't think about it.

CH You didn't think about it?

VA No. And when you speak about a lead, I think you relate it to name familiarity, and I do recall that Clay was 90-plus percent and I was twenty whatever, low twenties. I recall taking my first trip out. When I say out, outside of Washington County. Among the very first of the events was a breakfast in Corvallis in the early morning, 7:00 in the morning. I hadn't quite gotten used to these very early things and late at night because I'm just starting. But we made several other stops along the way, and I came back, and I said, Hey, I think we can win this thing. And then you come to the realization that, yes, Clay had name familiarity, that's one thing, but you don't get intimidated by that. It's how they know that's important. They know you, but how do they know you. And then we began to develop polls, and you ask certain questions. I don't recall, but it would be positive and negatives in terms of words, and he had some very high negative words. They knew him, but they weren't really all that hot about him or excited about him.

Out there, there was a presumption that Clay was going to be the candidate. He was appointed to the position he had by Tom McCall. Tom McCall was a very popular governor, he was supporting him, and it was just presumed because he already had a statewide recognition. I - you know, I'd been just Washington County, that's all, and it was just a general presumption that he

was going to be the next one. So when people ask me today, you know, who's going to run for governor against Governor Roberts, obviously there's Norma Paulus, and there's Denny Smith, Larry Campbell, maybe - you know, some of those names - but I said, How do you know - because I'm going back to my experience. All of a sudden this guy out of Washington County came and beat Clay Myers, so how do you know what's going to happen. One wouldn't have said that we've got Atiyeh on the bench, you know, and he's one of the likely prospects for governor. No one would have ever said that. So you don't really know. You expect some things, but anything is possible in politics. So anyway, we made the race, and he had - you know, these words were, What do you think of this, this, this, and this, and there were some negatives. So you just go out and campaign, and people say, Why are you running against Clay? I said, I'm not running against Clay, I'm running for me. He wants to be governor; I want to be governor. It's not that I don't want him to be governor, it's that I want me to be governor. And that was my own attitude. And that also, incidentally, comes from the business that I had come from, the rug business. I had made up my mind a long time ago - we had a lot of competition and it was really tough - that I wasn't going to spend time telling people why the other guy was bad, I'm just wasting - I mean, I don't want to spend that time. I was going to tell them why we were good, why they ought to buy from us. And I suppose I - well, I don't say I suppose; I know that's what carried over in my campaign. I'm not going to go around telling people why Clay Myers is bad and you ought to vote for me; I'm going to tell them why they ought to vote for me, why I'm good.

A great story comes out of all of this. Near the end of the campaign, Marge Russell said...

CH In the primary campaign?

VA This is the primary.

... "You've got to go down to Brookings for the Azalea Festival." Now, I know where Brookings is. "Oh, Marge, I'm tired. I don't want to go down there." "No, you've got to go down to the azalea festival." "I really don't want to do that." I mean, I was tired. I was exhausted. And that's a long haul, from here to Brookings, Oregon. A wonderful place. And finally, after some discussion back and forth, she finally said, "Oh -" she was scheduling me. That's the toughest job for anybody.

CH Marge being?

VA Marge Russell. She said, "Well, okay, we won't send you down there." Well, when it all came down, I think I won every county except Curry County, and I can tell you, I've been to the azalea festival many times since then [laughter]. Marge said, "See! Now, if you'd gone down there, you would have won that."

CH Well, what was your relationship with the Republican party like at that point, and its leadership?

VA Good.

CH The leadership as well?

VA I have to say yes. I don't recall who it was. I really - I had good relations with the Republican party, with my fellow Republicans.

CH The other Republican top political leaders in the state? I mean, you've talked a little bit about Tom McCall. We haven't really discussed much about Mark Hatfield or Bob Packwood.

VA They didn't get too much involved in these sort of things. Tom McCall was the big one, and, of course, he didn't support me, he supported Clay Myers. Incidentally, he never supported me at all, in the general election of '74 or the general election of '78.

CH Well yes, I'd like to talk more about that later on because I know that became a rather contentious issue.

VA Yeah.

CH Well, in Clay Myers's defeat, he said he believed that the factors contributing to his defeat were the firing of the state elections director, Jack Thompson, for taking the Voters' Pamphlet material after deadline, and he thought that it was best to conduct a low-profile campaign; and he also felt that he was outspent. How do you feel about those reasons of his for his defeat?

VA Well, first of all, I don't think that's true, but let me put it in the right context. Clay had been expecting to be the gubernatorial nominee. Clay had, contrary to my own course in politics, had envisioned himself, and maybe planned for, being governor of Oregon. So it was in his mind, it was something that he really wanted badly. And anything that would make him feel good, I'll accept. And when I say that to you, being outspent, that's why I lost; the Thompson affair, that's why I lost; that's not really why he lost. Maybe in a very small way it would be somewhat of a contribution, but I - I like Clay very much, I like his wife, Elizabeth, very much, and I'm saying to you that if that makes him feel good, that's legitimate. In his mind, that would be it. I think fundamentally it was that he didn't inspire a great deal of enthusiasm among Republicans for his race, and I

filled a gap. Who knows, if it had been somebody else, maybe it would have been different, I don't know, but I just filled a gap.

CH Were there other contenders in the primary?

VA I don't think so. No, it was just the two of us.

CH How did you feel about the Jack Thompson affair?

VA Oh, I don't - it's one of those, they call them a scandal. It really wasn't that big a deal. There's constant mountains out of molehills. That was not of his making, that is Clay's, it was just a media affair. I didn't contribute to it, nor did I refer to it or make any comment in regard to it. I just didn't think that was my role to do so, and so I didn't.

CH Well, there was a very curious quote in the Oregonian about you, and I believe it was about you, although they didn't mention you by name, and I'm wondering how you feel about it. Quote, And then the little man who once wrote a high school term paper with the theme that he would one day be governor of Oregon bounced through his Southwest Tenth and Alder headquarters - that's the reason why it made me think of you - grinning broadly and shaking the hands of his many supporters. Was that in reference to you or not? Who would that have been?

VA Say that again?

CH And then - [tape stopped].

VA The only thing that would relate itself was Tenth and Alder, which, of course, was where our store was, but that's not where my headquarters was. I think it was in this building before we

owned it. I think it was in this building. That would not have been me, because I never wrote anything like that. It would fit Clay Myers, except for Southwest Tenth and Alder. So I don't know what they're referring to.

CH Of course, he would have no reason to be grinning broadly and shaking the hands of his many supporters, either.

VA Right.

[End of Tape 16, Side 2]