

Tape 59, Side 1
September 3, 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 September 3, 1993, and this is Tape 59, Side 1.

VA Well, I mentioned about the Black and Hispanic commissions, and the legislature gave us a buck. Now, what they actually did, then, they instituted that into law, so now it's a legal entity. But the buck was like, This is your fishing license. Go see if you can get some money. That was a disappointment.

Incidentally, I don't happen to believe, I said earlier, that we should corral people. You know, here are all the blacks, here are all the Hispanics, here are all the Asians, here are all the seniors. You know, all this corralling business, I don't believe in it. But I do believe that you need to push, there needs to be governmental push forward. All the things that relate to discrimination is really basically in people's minds. You put laws, and it kinds of pushes it and brings it to their attention and gets them thinking about it, but nothing is ever going to be solved until people change their mind.

I was just watching on television last night. I don't know the exact circumstance, but somewhere down South there was an area that was all white, and they were trying to integrate it and had a black live there who finally actually moved out but the next day was murdered, but it was coincidental, it had nothing to do with where he was. It was just another black young guy that killed him.

CH This was just recently?

VA Yes.

CH In Vidor, Texas, I think it was.

VA Texas, okay.

But, then, I'm listening to this woman. Now, this is today. And she's saying, "I just believe in being with my kind." That's today. Of course, that's in her head. Texas can have all kinds of laws, but as long as that's in a person's head, nothing's going to happen. So I knew that there needed to be a creditable group speaking for, in behalf of, blacks and Hispanics, and that's why we came up with the commissions, and they exist today.

The Senior Services Division exists today. There was a Senior Services Commission, it began with a commission, and now a division. That exists today, and we started all that.

We spoke earlier about my indignation of the cross burning and getting the bill passed on racial and religious harassment, and I feel very good about that. It was more of a signal. It was a law, but it was a signal saying, That's unacceptable practice. This is not something that this society should stand for. I wonder, with that statute, why in the world we - it seemed to grow through Goldschmidt's and now even Governor Roberts' tenure, this whole matter of harassment. It seems to be growing. I said, Well, where's this bill? There's a law on the books. But anyway, I feel good about that.

I said earlier that one of the things that I lamented that I could not do that I wanted to do was to get the state more involved in prevention - and I'm talking, oh, in the

main, crime, but child abuse and many other things that take place - that prevention really is a good way to go. This is the way to go. We could get on top of the problem if we could empty the pipeline. Criminal justice is easiest to speak of because the jails are full. You can't say, Our constitution says that criminal justice is based on reformation. But we're not reforming anybody. You know, they go in and they go out. We're not really reforming anyone. And it's just because we have too many of them. We don't have time to do any of that.

So I said, Okay, in order to do this and do it correctly, make, first of all, sure that there's certain punishment; if you're going to jail, you are going to jail. That's because you've got space to put them; that there won't be decisions made, Well, we'll prosecute this, no, I won't do that, because even if we convict him, we don't have jail space. You know, there's decisions being made. We have to empty the pipeline.

Well, because all we could do was to take care of the things that we could take care of during this recession, I was unable to really institute a good program of prevention in the state. On my own, then, we began something else. I can remember very vividly at the old - the governor had a - not a very good looking office in the old state office building, and I gathered - actually, there were about three, maybe four at the most, and I said, what can we do about this? I'm thinking about how are we going to formulate something with youth. So out of that came Health, Fitness, and Sports. And that just worked marvelously, and people were very interested, and a lot of people are really interested in that sort of thing.

And out of the Health, Fitness, and Sports came the

Oregon State Games, and the first Oregon State Games was in 1986, my last year in office. Today, it's a super success. I don't know how many, fourteen thousand, and this is of all ages, from young people to seniors, and it's a marvelous thing. I started that.

The court reform, which is now taken for granted, that puts the chief justice the chief administrator of the entire court system in the state of Oregon. That would be appeals, circuit, district, and to have it really operate more - the whole court system operate more efficiently. That is current practice, that's going on today, that was started by my administration.

We were the first state to receive a waiver for alternatives to nursing home care. The federal government would pay the cost of - they call it welfare nursing home care if you were in a nursing home. And we went to them, and we said, There are better ways of doing this. Why don't you let us try to find alternatives to nursing homes. In other words, you can pay, but not just if they go to a nursing home. So finally - and this was under the Carter administration - we got the very first waiver for alternatives of nursing home care. The thing I think I did mention earlier on the tape was the frustrating thing is that it came up for renewal four years later under President Reagan. I had a hell of a time getting it renewed. I couldn't understand it. But we did.

And I hear people speak of it now, today, as being a great thing, but it was just because we thought we needed to find a better way of doing it. Not unlike - and this goes back. You know, when you deal with the federal government, sometimes you have successes. We had a gasoline shortage early in my administration - now, this was a nationwide

thing - and the president, President Carter, and the administration, they were going to tell states they had to conserve on gasoline, and they were going to tell them how to do it. And I went back there, and I said, "Don't tell me how to do it. Tell me what your goal is, and then say, 'Go do it.' If I don't meet my goal, then you tell me what to do." By George, they let us do it, and Oregon got through that very, very well. And we not only met the goal, we exceeded the goal for conservation. Exceeded it. But I said, Don't tell me how, just tell me to go do it. Anyway, once in a while you win.

I mentioned earlier this job program for welfare applicants. It's one of the things that you kind of worry about. I don't know whether you remember or not, but before Dukakis ran for president of the United States, there was this workfare, and the caucus was getting a lot of attention for getting people off of welfare.

I said to Leo Hegstrom, who was the head of the Department of Human Resources, "Leo, we've been doing this." Anyway, we looked at it and made a comparison. At that time, Massachusetts was at very low unemployment. This was the, what, Massachusetts Miracle.? Of course, they ran into some really bad times. But at that time the Massachusetts Miracle. We had high unemployment. So, okay, they've got employment, we have high unemployment. We got more jobs - now, I don't mean percentage according to the population, I mean actual more jobs for people on welfare - than Massachusetts did, and we did it for one-third the cost. And, here, we had all the disadvantages of unemployment. So we did a hell of a lot better job, and, yet, he gets some kind of national attention for it.

CH How did you go about accomplishing this?

VA Attention?

CH No, no, no, the - actually, that's an interesting area, but I mean in terms of accomplishing your change in Oregon.

VA How did we?

CH Yes.

VA Oh, we just embarked on this program of working very hard to get jobs for people on welfare. Not only entering welfare, which I mentioned before, but those that were on welfare. We just thought it was part of our job to help people, quote, through.

A little unknown thing that doesn't exist today, that is, the commission doesn't exist, but the results of the commission does, and probably the - well, not probably, it was the very first international thing that I did. I worried about the fact that foreign languages in the school was just almost dead, and so the very first, let me call it, international thing, I appointed a commission on foreign languages in the schools. Some very good people involved in it, very good people. At their initiation, they began to figure out ways to get this thing going. Today, foreign languages is very much alive and well in our schools. It was really almost dead in - well, practically dead in 1979. But you have to lift people's minds out of provincialism, you know, that the foreign language, we're part of the world. It didn't make any difference what the language was. We didn't say, Take French or Spanish or anything. Whatever

you want to take, Russian or Japanese or Chinese, just foreign languages. And today it's extremely healthy. So the result of that commission exists today. Obviously, the commission is not supposed to last forever anyway. They did their job and did it successfully, and they went home.

As part of trying to have government operate well we formalized a state employees' suggestion award program. Formalized it. That really worked extremely well, and the reward was 10 percent of what was saved, up to five thousand dollars. I did give several five thousand dollar checks, and their savings were very large, obviously over five hundred thousand dollars. But it was marvelous to see this operate.

Incidentally, we did - deliberately, the directors of state government were not participants, it had to be the employees, and that was because our system would put these suggestions through their managers, and obviously they'd say, They stole my idea, and all the rest of that sort of thing. But it worked so well. I presented, myself, at an open house, checks to people in recognition.

Two instances that I remember, and it shows you what you're up against in public life. One day I read in the Oregonian that the OLCC had wasted, I think it was, \$3,600. Les Sites[?] wrote the article. Front page. Well, how the OLCC wasted the money is they had a training session out at - I think it was at a Holiday Inn out by the airport. Part of the training concept was that everybody was to be together. And, obviously, there were people that lived in Portland that went to the Holiday Inn. That's how they wasted - they could have gone home instead of going to the Holiday Inn. It isn't as if they went to the Benson or places like that. But anyway, that was the gist of what

happened.

I saw Les that morning, and I said to him, "Les, I read the article. I think I should tell you that today at my open house I'm going to present a check to a state employee that saved \$45,000." Nobody ever read about that. That wasn't even on the back pages. That was not news at all. You know, that's how you get perplexed. You wonder about things like that. Front page, Wasted three thousand six hundred; saved forty-five thousand, that's not news.

CH What was his response to you when you mentioned that?

VA He just said, Oh, okay. But he wasn't there, he wasn't at the open house, and, of course, it never appeared anywhere.

The other thing I remember, I went over to Human Resource one time to make some presentations, employee suggestions. There was a group of people, so I was kind of going around the table; you know, what was it you did? and what did you do to receive this award? Finally, I got to one man, and I said, "What did you do?" He said, "I recommended they eliminate my job." Hey. [laughing] I'm sure he stayed in employment, but they eliminated the job. You know, he was thinking about it - there's no need for this job - and that was his recommendation.

The point was not how much you saved. We're not looking - it was just that people were thinking about how can we do a better job of what we're doing. And the people that can best do that are the people that are doing that, and so you get them thinking about it. So that was the motive, to get them thinking about it, get them to think about how they can do a better job. And it worked

marvelously well. I don't think it exists anymore, but we had it going. It was a formal program. I mean, it was not ad hoc, it was a very formal program.

CH Why would they have discontinued a program like that?

VA There are some people who are not interested in saving tax dollars, whoever they may be. I've already covered who they are [laughs].

Well, those are some of the things that I've listed.

I'm very proud of the fact that I traveled, personally traveled, over a quarter million miles inside the state of Oregon. I think I've already made mention of the fact that I think that governors, both Goldschmidt and Roberts, really are denying themselves one of the great pleasures of being a governor. I did not think it was cute, the electronic communication with Oregonians, and I thought, Barbara, you could really get a lot more information and do it in a lot more pleasant way than via electronics and a television set.

But I'm really proud of that, I really am. I think it's a - in terms of whatever mark I may have put on it, I enjoyed it. It wasn't a matter that I had to go. I was just down at the state fair Wednesday, and, Oh, you're still coming down? I said, "Yeah. I didn't go to the state fair because I had to, I went to the state fair because I want to." It was very much - I went to every county fair in Oregon, every county fair I've been to in Oregon. And my staff said, You don't have to go, Governor. You know, maybe this is after my reelection or something. I said, "Hey, you think I'm going because I have to go. I'm going because I like it. It isn't because I have to go."

CH What other things did you really like doing as governor?

VA Well, I like people. I liked my open house, I really liked my media availability. I did like traveling Oregon, I truly did. I really liked it, flying or on the ground. It was being with Oregonians, and I really liked it.

I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet - this is not what you'd call something I've done, but it's one of the real values that occurred because I was governor. I've met President Nixon, President Carter, President Ford, President Reagan, President Bush; been to the White House a number of times, flown in Air Force One. I have personally met, not just in a mob, but one-on-one, with President Mubarak of Egypt, President Assad of Syria, Prime Minister Shamir[?] of Israel, Nakasoni of Japan, Prime Minister Nakasoni; Jao Zhang, who was then premier of China; President Chun of Korea, President Pak, who was assassinated, of Korea; President Chung of Taiwan, who's passed away, and then I met and know President Lee of Taiwan. Those were great opportunities that I wouldn't have had any other way.

And I think to some degree, if someone would remember, you know, it leaves a good flavor about the state of Oregon. And how does anyone know what the result of that might be?

I'm not through.

CH You're what?

VA I'm not through [laughs].

In a more generic sense, when I look back at my administration, at least five of my eight years, maybe a little bit more, we slid into a recession and emerged out of

recession. And in our history, state of Oregon history, there have been eight special sessions called to rebalance the budget. Now, we've had more special sessions, but for the purpose of rebalancing the budget, there were eight. I called four of the eight; three in one year. And it kind of was an indication of the time in which we lived. But I am proud of the fact that we did manage government without destroying it. It really was the worst of times, but we kept government on an even keel and we moved forward at the same time on programs that were important to the future. We moved forward on improving higher education, we moved forward, certainly, in terms of economic development.

And so, while we were consumed with the problem with the recession, I think, as I've listed other things, but in a major way the diversification of the economy, which indeed has happened. And I, with some degree of pride, notice when economists are talking about the general economy of Oregon they say, well, we've done well because we have a diversified economy. Well, we didn't have in 1979; we did have when I left office in 1987.

It's always interesting to me that people have referred to me as boring and noncharismatic. As a matter of fact, I was - I was interviewed by Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes." He didn't use it, because whatever I said, they found it not exciting at all and it was not interesting.

CH Maybe that's a compliment.

VA [laughing] Well, it could be. But, you know, he just asked questions and I answered them, but not in a charged way that "60 Minutes" liked, and so they never did use it when they aired it.

But, you know, it's interesting. You look back on it. I ran twenty races; I lost one. I ran against, particularly statewide, major candidates. I was clearly, in 1978, against former governor McCall, against then-governor Bob Straub; against Clay Meyers in my first race, in the primary; against Ted Kulongoski, and we've covered that pretty well. But I won all my races except one, and I - you know, I keep speculating - maybe it's for my own ego, but, you know, if Ford hadn't pardoned Nixon until after the November election, who knows, it might have been different. I don't know. I don't know. But that was the race that I lost. I was chairman of the Western Governors Association, chairman of the Republican governors. Really, I had the one loss to Bob Straub in '74, and then I would count the sales tax, which we covered, in 1985 really about the only two real losses, political losses, major political losses, I had.

And so you wonder whether a fellow that's boring and noncharismatic, how does he do that? So, historian, take a look and see if you can figure it out.

To my knowledge, and I can't really go back much beyond 1959 backward, but I can go forward, unprecedented access, unprecedented for legislators, the public in my open houses, my media availability on a weekly basis, state agencies. And, you know, in a time of stress, a lot of people would keep their head below the trenches and not be accessible. I mentioned earlier about traveling the state. I had these open houses all the time. I mean, anybody could come in. The doors were open from 12:30 to 1:00 when I was in Salem. There I am. I don't think anyone's had the access, any other governor has provided the access for people. And I liked it, I liked it.

Legislators had priority. They'd knock on my door - you know, I've got appointments, obviously, and I don't have them in my office, but they knock on the door, they're there. That's not true, hasn't been true. I know for sure it was not true under Governor Goldschmidt's regime, and I know it's not true under Governor Roberts. Access. McCall had access, Straub less so, Hatfield somewhat, but I don't think anyone - anyone - had the broad access that I put together. And so I think if anyone looks at it, okay, that's part of the character of Governor Atiyeh.

I said many times that I'm chief executive of the biggest business in Oregon. Forty-five thousand employees, branch offices in most counties and most cities. It was interesting. I really thoroughly understood government, budgets, sources of revenue. State managers knew it, and the important thing here was that this was - you know, a lot of times they say, Well, he's going to be gone, but I'm here, and I'll do it my way; he really won't notice. That's not the kind of thing they deal with with me because they knew I would notice. But, you know, when I would select my department heads, I'd say, I am asking you to do this job because I think you can, and, beside, I expect you to. And they responded to that.

It's so often that people in government have been snagged by a leash and say, Go do it, but keep telling me what you're doing. I said, No, you're talented, I know you're talented, I want to use your talent, go do it. I said to them, I'm willing for you to make a mistake. I said that to state employees, I said that to state managers. Two different groups. And what I was really saying to them is that I want innovation. I will take the heat with you or I'll accept it myself. I want you to be innovative, I want

you to try ideas. I knew that the files in the state capitol were filled with what I call save-your-ass paper. "Oh, it wasn't my fault. See, here, this piece of paper protects me." And it's a shame. The public doesn't allow government to make a mistake. Remember this OLCC, the front-page thing, that stymies innovativeness. It does. You can't get the best out of it.

I'm saying - I said to them, You know, I'm not asking you to go make a mistake, but I'm willing for you to make a mistake. As long as you say, I tried this, and this is the reason I tried it and it just didn't work, that's good enough for me. And that was a matter of making government function the way government ought to function. The employee suggestion award was one. I want you to be innovative. Pick the best people to head it, give them good direction. That's how things happen.

Another thing that's been very difficult for governors, all governors, and that's where it ebbs and flows, but I think it was pretty well taken care of. While I was governor, I really - this is what we called the "other Oregon," outside of Portland, Salem, Eugene, really feel like they've left out of the whole thing. And I think there was greater comfort that they really had somebody that was looking out for their interest, meaning in the "other Oregon." I had talked to cities and counties. I said, Look, I don't expect...

[End of Tape 59, Side 1]