

Tape 58, Side 2
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 58, Side 2.

You were just mentioning that the wagon train for the sesquicentennial of the Oregon Trail is ending in Oregon City on this Labor Day, and you're going to be participating in that.

VA Yes. They invited folks from time to time to join up and ride a segment, and my opportunity, really, is the last one. You know, I almost feel like - I think it was Robert Kennedy who climbed Mt. McKinley, but took a helicopter to within eight hundred feet of the top and then climbed it. You know, everybody else worked real hard and did a fine job, and I just kind of jump on at the end. I think it's a marvelous thing that's happened, initiated and worked very hard from the Oregon side. A lot of states participated, but I think the point was Oregon. Credit a great deal to Jill Thorne.

Anyway, I'll go down to Clackamette Park, and then we'll go up to the school, and, apparently, we ride from the school back down to Clackamette Park. And they want authentic costuming. I think I'll dress up a little bit.

CH What do you have for an authentic costume?

VA Well, I mentioned I might wear my vest. Warmer, but probably even more authentic, is a fine - it's hard for me

to describe it. Cape is not the right word; it has sleeves. I was up at Umatilla one time and admired this young man. His name is Lavadour, L-a-v-a-d-o-u-r. He's a fine artist, Indian. It's red, like a red blanket, beaded down the sleeves, long rawhide - what are the...

CH Strands that - frills?

VA Fringe. A very handsome piece, but it's warm. But I may wear it anyway, because it is really very attractive. I think I'll do that.

CH Is that designed as a Native American design or a pioneer design?

VA No, it would be more Native American, but, you know, they wore all kinds of things, whatever they could get their hands on. It isn't really a buckskin thing that a pioneer might have worn, but, you know, as we say, it's close enough for government work [laughs]. Anyway, I kind of look forward to doing that.

CH Well, speaking of government work, you were wrapping up on your governorship last time, and you were talking about a set of principles and common sense, and I believe that you wanted to carry that on a little further.

VA Well, unless you have some further questions to ask, I do have what I'd call a wrap-up, and...

CH Well, I do have some other things in terms of activities since then. Should I go ahead with that?

VA You mean into the business?

CH Business and some of the ballot measures and things like that.

VA Okay, we're about to leave office, is that what you're saying?

CH Yes, we're at the end of your office.

VA Okay. Now it's time for me.

CH Okay.

VA You know, I've thought a lot about this all during the course of our interview. As I had told you much earlier, I never really kept inventory. There were things to be done, and I did them, and then I didn't, you know, jot on the side, Well, this is what I've done, or even a definition of what I'd said on, I think, probably the first tape, that you go into office with a set of principles and common sense. But it kind of confirmed it in my mind, because I never put it together in my mind. As I was answering your questions, everything seemed to fit the pattern of what I had said then. Not that I didn't believe what I was doing, but it kind of confirmed in my own mind that from Day One that remained unchanged.

Oftentimes, people talk about pressure - Gosh, don't you feel pressure? - and particularly when it comes to something quite controversial. I never did. You know, I think you put pressure on yourself. That would mean that you're less certain of what you're doing. That's how you

finally come to it. Or you're thinking in terms of, Gosh, where are the votes? If I vote this way, are there more people on this side than on that side? That's where the pressure comes, that's what they worry about. Gosh, I'll lose my seat. Those are all external things that apply the pressure to someone. I never had that sense.

I believed very much in the system. I think I told you when I lost in 1974 I wasn't depressed. I didn't want to lose, obviously; no one wants to lose. But I didn't feel there was some massive rejection and all the rest of it, I just figured, well, I just didn't do a good enough job. Of course, who knows how many votes the pardon for Nixon cost me. I don't know the answer to that, never will, of course. But I just - that's the system. People don't want you right now. So I went back to the rug business. So I never felt pressure. I would think about things.

The Sorus[?] test - and that actually is a selected word, Sorus. When we were cutting budgets and we had to do it very precisely and you had to use your entire mind, the whole mind - which, incidentally, is an exciting thing to do. We don't do that very often - and working in close conjunction with some very, very bright people in state government, but still making those kinds of decisions that you really prefer not to make but you're going to make them anyway, I had something happen that had never happened before to me. Before or since. I'd go home at night, and my body was sore, as if somebody had been beating on me. Obviously, nobody had been beating on me.

But, you know, in spite of all of that, okay, what's our principle? For example, let's talk about welfare for a minute. I believe that most people don't want to be on welfare. I believe that the state is there to help them

through their problem, with the operating word "through."
And that's to help them; not help the state, to help them.
I believe that if we don't do that, we rob them of pride and
self-esteem, which is a terrible thing to take from any
human. And so in the process, you apply that. When you
start dealing with, okay, we have to cut back on welfare,
but what can we do? For example, we had in place, even from
that day when we spoke of in the tape where we were going to
cut out the two-parent family and we prepared to find them
jobs, we really would work hard at that. When someone
applied for welfare, they would not automatically go on
welfare. For about a month we'd give them emergency
assistance and work real hard to get them jobs, which is
what they wanted anyway. And we were successful.

So, okay, we cut the budget, but we did it in a
positive way. We didn't just cut them out of it, we did it
in a positive way. So when you operate under the theory
they don't want to be on welfare, you have to help them
through it, you have to help them get out of it, and
sometimes you have to maybe apply some regulations that
would maybe, I say force them out, and I don't mean force
them out against their will.

CH Give them incentives?

VA Incentive. A great story. Keith Putnam, who was the -
they call it Adult Family Services, welfare of state
government in the Department of Human Resources, he told the
story, which I've told many times.

The story was of a little green frog, and this little
green frog was hopping down the road, and all of a sudden he
looked down in this deep rut in the road, and there was his

friend, another little green frog, down in the rut. "Oh," he says, "you'd better get out of there. That's a dangerous place." The little frog down in there said, "I've been trying, I've been jumping, I've been trying real hard, but I can't get out." And his friend up on the top said, "I can't really help you, I just wish you the best." So he hopped away. The next day, that little green frog is hopping down the road, and he sees his friend, now out of the rut. "Oh, I see you got out. How did you get out?" He said, "A wagon came by, and I had to." Now, you see, there was a major impetus to get out [laughs].

And so, as you deal with it and you think about pressure and you think about what needs to be done - and throughout the whole experience, I slept every night. I didn't lay awake at night, tossing and turning. I would think about what needed to be done, I'd get very good advice from those whom I depended upon. We were all generally on the same wavelength, and so we just went about doing the job that needed to be done. And I've thought back on it, thirty-five years full-time in business, prior to that working, you know, part-time, summers, working your way, but then thirty-five years full-time, twenty years in the Oregon legislature. And the thought occurred to me, there's a lot of people that would like to or want to be governor, but how many of them are prepared to be governor? Not too many.

CH What does it mean to be prepared for being governor?

VA Just what I said, the twenty years in the legislature and thirty-five years in business. The real world - I say "real world." The real world where people live or people are, knowing what government does, seeing what happens to

them, seeing that - you know, living it daily, complaints that people have, now shifting gears over to the law side in the Oregon legislature, dealing with bills and things of that kind, it gives you a perspective. And it gives you not only perspective, but it gives you the skill to make decisions. You've got to make decisions. You can't just kind of futz around. And it's still going back to those that are worried about their job, where's the politics of it, which way is the wind blowing? If that's how you make your decisions, it's terrible to live that way. We said, Okay, what's right? What's the right thing to do?

I've gone to the Republican caucus and told them a number of times - I may have said this before, and there may be other duplicates in this conversation I'm having - if you're talking about sheer politics, raw politics, the most political thing you can do is do what you think is right. It's that simple, it's not complicated. It isn't how many people over here, what the last poll said, all the rest of it. What's the right thing to do?

During the course, I know that as a governor I gave up some of the tools of politics. One of them is that I am not vindictive. If somebody does something that I don't like, I'm not out to get him. I'm not the kind of a person, "don't get mad, get even." I'm not that kind of person. Well, that would then mean that you're not a threat to somebody. You know, "I'm going to go out and campaign against you," or "I will veto your bill," or those kinds of things. I'm not that kind of person. And if you're not, you do give up some tools.

I'm watching Clinton. You know, what's he going to trade for to get his medical, what did he trade for to get the tax bill passed? That's an awful way to do business.

That's an awful thing to do. It's terrible. It happens all the time. But, you know, it's just terrible. This isn't Clark wants something and Vic wants something, we're talking - it isn't you and me, it's all those people out there. But that's an unfortunate. I don't know how you change it, and I just have to give my opinion as to how government should operate. It sounds naive, but it's not naive. It's important for the health of this country that we have people to face the responsibility in that fashion. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen. So I gave up some things. I don't trade, and you give up some things.

But still, you know, even if I know that, and I know it - you know, I've been around long enough to know all these things - I'm not going to change. So maybe some things that I could have had I didn't get. Well, that's the way she goes. It wasn't worth it to me. And I don't think government should operate that way, and so I never did.

CH Do you recall major junctures where you knew you were giving something up at that point or you knew you were crossing some roads that...

VA No. It would happen, you know, oftentimes. There were cases - I mean, I didn't pay attention to it. Because I wasn't out there doing any bartering, I didn't know where I would have lost. I just know because I've been in the process long enough that you lose something in the process. I just happen to know that. Where it happened or how it happened, no, I don't know. I didn't keep track of those kinds of things.

I think in that context - you know, we're in an area that sounds awful self-serving, but I think I need to do

that. I'm not going to write the history for Vic Atiyeh. I know that. All I can do is point someone, whoever's going to look at me, I'll say, Okay, as you're looking at Vic Atiyeh, look at this. Now, part of this is what I just said. Who's Vic Atiyeh, who really is Vic Atiyeh, not somebody's idea of who Vic Atiyeh is. You know, they would apply, well, oh, gosh, everybody trades, you know. Everybody does that, everybody is "don't get mad, get even." You know, that's normal politics. Look at it, Mr. Historian or Mrs. Historian or whoever you are. That's Vic Atiyeh now talking, and this is who I am, and that's the way I am. And I think I don't - I don't jump at something, I think it out, do the best job I know how, get good advice.

So some of the things I want to point to, I made a list of it. You know, a lot of good things happen. What I most often hear is that, you know, Vic kept the state on an even keel during this recession, and I'm proud of that. I really am. I don't know who else could have done that any better. And not only in the context of whatever - I believe, incidentally, that a governor should lead. I'm talking internally. You've got to tell government where you want to go. But the execution has to be upon the shoulders of really knowledgeable people, and I had very good people.

Goldschmidt did a terrible disservice to people who worked for state government and the people of the state of Oregon when he was talking about dry rot. That's a terrible thing to say. These are very good, very hard-working people, very knowledgeable people, and because of them we were able to go through all these times together and get it evened out.

But, there are other things that Vic Atiyeh did. Some of what I'm going to tell you is just sort of taken for

granted. You know, that's the way we do things. One of the early things that I did was this econometric modeling for forecasting, and to do that on a quarterly basis. And I did mention to you once before, we had a single economist who would occasionally, maybe annually, give us a forecast. A pretty sloppy way of doing business. The econometric model is actually some software that we finally - we did have some errors in it, but we made a major change so it fits Oregon, Oregon law, Oregon tax laws, Oregon history of employment, you know, all the things that go into software. It's been in operation now, gosh, it'll be probably ten, twelve years, maybe more than that. No, it is more than that. Yes, about twelve years, I suppose. And I mean fully in operation.

Now, we didn't know at the time, we just thought this was a good way to do this. We didn't know at the time it was absolutely essential, because when we got into the recession, you really had to keep on top of it. We couldn't wait for a year to get a forecast, because by that time we'd already have spent a lot of money that we needed to save. And so we were able to deal with the budgets, the budget process, what the income was going to be, we could track it, we could come up with quarterly estimates.

But then I added an economic advisory committee, so rather than depending solely on a machine, we had some very bright people that were economists who would be advisory. Then we got a really good picture of what was going on. That's going on today. One would think it's gone on forever. That started in my administration. That's now a permanent thing that's of long-range benefit for the state of Oregon.

The Northwest [Power] Planning Council, Northwest energy planning. I described that to you, but I want to

recount it, that I believe that was important. I described our Northwest area, which is Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and western Montana, as a single lake of energy, and the lake doesn't rise and fall according to our boundaries, the whole lake rises and falls. But at that point in time I asked Lee Johnson, who was then my chief of staff, I said, "Start doing a little shuttling." So he went to see Schwinden and he went to see Evans and he went to see then Dixie, and kept kind of going around until we came to a consensus of how a bill should be framed. It was at my insistence that each state have equal representation. The state of Washington - we were going to have this council. The state of Washington said, We have the largest population - I don't know whether - probably western Montana had the smallest amount - and so, you know, kind of proportional. No, I said, in order to keep us going and do it correctly, each state had to have equal representation.

I also said this matter of fishery, knowing, having been a Sea Scout, having been in the river being a fisherman, I knew the dams had a lot to do with the lack of fishery. And so the fish conservation, that's also part of what I put into the bill

Then we had to work it through Congress, and once we agreed, that is, four governors agreed, it gave it a lot of impetus, and now, of course, we know we have it. And I don't think people say, Gee, when did it start? But it started with my administration, and it's going now.

One of the great things that I started when I was just beginning, and we talked about it earlier, and that's the Columbia Gorge legislation.

CH The protection.

VA The protection of the Columbia Gorge. That's even been in my address to the legislature. But I persisted, I mean from Day One. The Friends of the Gorge didn't exist when I started, those that grabbed a hold and said, This is mine. That's all right, I have no objection, as long as we got the job done. However, sometimes it got to be very difficult.

I remember specifically talking with Nancy Russell, a determined Friend of the Gorge, and I said to her, although I don't think she ever believed me, "Nancy, if you keep going like you're going, we're not going to have a bill at all." And I like Nancy. I'm not picking on her. But, you know, sometimes an overenthusiasm, and you're making demands way out of your reach, and you just can't budge people that far. I wanted something that was going to do the job that was necessary to be done. But I meant it, if she was going to continue doing what she was doing, we weren't going to have a bill at all.

Well, we got some - the first major step was agreeing with Governor Spellman. We needed to have that. Then we now have the delegations from both Oregon and Washington, Republican and Democrat, because the two governors agree, and we move forward on that. Oregon had a Columbia River Gorge commission, as did Washington. Oregon's was a little more active than Washington, but they weren't working in concert with one another, they were independent groups. They would meet and discuss and try to coordinate, but there wasn't much teeth. I mean, it was not their fault, there just wasn't any teeth for them to do anything, or the kinds of things that were necessary.

Now, I can't take sole credit. Nancy Russell, certainly, with her advocacy; Mark Hatfield, as I'd said earlier, a major player in this. But, as I also said

earlier, that would not be law today had I not called Jim Baker and asked him not to have President Reagan veto. He was going to veto the bill. And the specific words were, "Jim, I haven't asked you for anything." And he said, "Yeah, you're right." I said, "Jim, I want this." So anyway, I can claim major credit for the Columbia River Gorge, to initiate it, to start it, to push it, to get Spellman behind it so we got it going. We got the other players in it, and then, at the very end, keep it from being vetoed.

Oregon Food Share. That all came about by Congress, I really believe, made a terrible mistake. They were talking about when can you get food stamps and what is counted as income, and they changed their formula, and I think they overkilled, and so we began to get complaints in our office about the fact that people were going hungry. And I said to then-Jackie Winters[?], who was my ombudsman, I said, "Jackie, we can't wait for Congress to correct this thing, we've got to do something right away." Out of that came Oregon Food Share. That name doesn't exist right now. It's now coordinated with others. I've forgotten what it's called, but Oregon Food Share is a well-known name.

Oregon became the very first state in the nation that was collecting, warehousing, and distributing for food. That exists today. You know, you say, What would have happened had we not done that? Well, I think that people would have been fed, let's say, in metropolitan areas, and, yet, I saw it at work in Prineville, I've seen it at work in Condon. You know, people get hungry out there, too, not just in the city of Portland. But the fact is that we began that, that began in our office, that exists today.

Deschutes River purchase is one of the great - it was a

happening. You know, we use that word, it's a "happening." It really was. Sportsmen's groups are pretty diverse. Some have their own particular interests, some are interested in bass and sturgeon, some are interested in trout and salmon and some are interested in upland birds and, you know, it's just really a diverse bunch. Guides and - really, for the first time, everybody was pulling together. It all came about, a fellow came to my office, and he said - he knew I was interested in the Deschutes - Hey, this piece of property is going to become available. Why don't a bunch of us get together and buy it and then we'll all have our own little chunk.

CH How large a tract of land is it?

VA Nine thousand acres on the lower eighteen miles of the Deschutes River.

Then I got Dave Talbot on it, and we began doing the negotiations, but we needed to raise the money. It was a marvelous thing. It was so exciting to see this happen. It really exciting. Everybody thought this was the neatest thing in the world, and sportsmen groups of all kinds and companies helping us, and it was great. We got the money and bought it.

The real significance of that is that you cannot fish from a boat on the Deschutes, so - and that, incidentally is a matter of conservation of the specie on the Deschutes. That's why it's such a great river. So in order to fish in the Deschutes, you have to tie up the boat and fish from shore. Well, if it's in private ownership - the river is public, there's no question about that, but you can't go ashore on private land and fish. Well, now it's all in

public ownership. All that whole stretch you can get off the boat anywhere, and it's public.

But it was a wonderful thing for me. I mean, I was just so excited in seeing all this energy, and it was a good cause, and we acquired that.

I created the Senior Services Division, created the Black Commission, the Hispanic Commission. It was interesting on the Black and Hispanic commissions, I - we created them and we had a budget. The budget was not a large budget, but we had a budget.

[End of Tape 58, Side 2]