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Scheiber, Walter A. oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Interview with Walter A. Scheiber by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Scheiber, Walter A.

Interviewer
Nicoll, Don

Date
June 19, 2001

Place
Bethesda, Maryland

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Biographical Note

Walter A. Scheiber was born January 1922 in New York City, New York to Augusta Abramson Scheiber and Israel Ben Scheiber. His father was a lawyer from 1914 to 1946, then became a law arbitrator until 1985. His mother was a concert pianist, and he had two younger sisters, Jodie and Sarah. He attended private school from age four to fourteen, and then the High School of Music and Art, which is now named LaGuardia High School. He went to Swarthmore College for three years until joining the Army during World War II. After, the G.I. Bill allowed him to enroll at Columbia Law School, where he earned his law degree in 1947. He then married Barbara (Gair) Scheiber and moved to Pennsylvania to attend the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphi, earning a master's degree in political science and focusing on city management. His career began as city manager for Grove City, Pennsylvania and eventually moved on to bigger communities like Rockville, Maryland. Later, he became director of the Council of Governments for the District of Columbia, a position he held for 25 years.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Scheiber family and educational background; relationship between the Scheibers and the Nicolls; Section 701G and Don Nicoll's legislative role; role of the Council of Governments; Scheiber's introduction to Senator Muskie; Scheiber's, and his

organization's, role in the Clean Air and Water Acts and the Safe Street; Section 701-G's role in educating young African Americans in city managing; Mark Keane; and Model Cities.

Indexed Names

Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday the 19th of June in the year 2001. We are in Bethesda, Maryland at the home of Walter and Barbara Scheiber, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Walter Scheiber. Walt, would you give us your full name and your date and place of birth.

Walter Scheiber: Yeah, my full name as I use it at work is Walter A. Scheiber. I was born in January 1922 in New York City.

DN: Okay, and how do you spell your last name?

WS: My last name is spelled S-C-H-E-I-B as in baker-E-R.

DN: And your parents were -?

WS: My parents were Israel Ben Scheiber who was brought over from Czarist Russia in 1891, wrapped in a rug on his mother's shoulder to hide him from the border guards. And my mother's

name was Augusta Abramson Scheiber.

DN: Was she born in this country or?

WS: She was born on January 1st, 1900 in New York City. She was a turn of the century baby.

DN: And why was your father wrapped to protect against the border guards? Were they seeking to prevent -?

WS: Well, yes. My father at that point was four months old and his mother was escaping from Czarist Russia, and she didn't want to go through the checkpoint so she carried him across the border hidden and wrapped in a rug.

DN: That must have stamped the family early. Did she come alone to the United States?

WS: She came alone. He was the first child, and my grandfather came a couple of years later. And as it ultimately turned out, my father was the oldest of nine children in that family. He was brand new.

DN: And they settled in New York City, I take it.

WS: They settled on the lower East Side of New York City with many, many other immigrants from Eastern Europe.

DN: And where did your father and mother meet?

WS: They met at a settlement house on the lower East Side called Madison House, and at first they were relatively indifferent to each other. My father was nine years older than my mother, but ultimately he persuaded her that he was the best thing around and that she shouldn't take a chance on missing him.

DN: Now what was his career?

WS: His career was, he was a lawyer initially from 1914 to about 1946, and then he became interested in labor arbitration and he was a labor arbitrator from 1946 to about 19-, well until 1985, he died in 1986. He also was very, very interested in community activity and community organization, and after buying a summer home, a forty-acre farm in upstate New York which he bought for twenty-five hundred dollars, he became very active in the community. It was a classic rural community. He saw that the quality of education was deplorable in the town in which we lived, and ultimately was the leading spirit in consolidating five little one-room schoolhouses into a single central school. And then he served as president of the board of education in that little town from 1934 to 1957.

And at the same time, because he was interested in politics, and not withstanding that it was a Republican community, he reorganized the Democratic Party in that town and became very

active in Democratic politics and ultimately became town attorney and served in that position for probably fifteen years. So I got a lot of my interest in government and community affairs just by osmosis from my father.

DN: And your mother had her own career, didn't she?

WS: Yes, my mother was a concert pianist and teacher, a very fine pianist, played with a number of major orchestras and played solo concerts as well.

DN: And how many children were in your family?

WS: There were three of us, I was the oldest, I was born in 1922 as I said. My sister Jodie was the second one, she was born in 1925, and my sister Sarah was born in 1929.

DN: And you went to schools in New York City?

WS: I went to a private elementary school from age four to age fourteen, and then I went to a public high school called the High School of Music and Art. It's now called LaGuardia High School and it encompasses not only music and art as major subjects, but also the performing arts and dance, and it's now located near Lincoln Center. From there I went to college at Swarthmore outside of Philadelphia, spent three years there, then went into the Army, saw combat with the 8th Air Force in flying out of England, and flew thirty-five missions, came back -

DN: What was your role?

WS: I was a radio operator and a gunner, an unlikely role for someone who had attended a Quaker college but it didn't seem to interfere with my military activities. And then I came out, and not knowing what to do but because my father had been a lawyer, and because there was a G.I. Bill, I enrolled at Columbia Law School and got a degree from Columbia in 1947. Those were the days when law school was easy to get into. I was discharged from the Army, when WWII ended September 2nd, 1945, I was discharged September 8th. I went up to Columbia and visited the dean on September 12th, not really believing that I could be accepted. And after they took my pulse and discovered that I was breathing and standing up on my own two feet they said, "Report on September 20th." So that twelve days after I was discharged from the Army, and eight days after I first walked into the dean's office at Columbia I started classes. Those were different days then. Today is now the LSAT.

DN: Now you were a contemporary of Paul Warnke at Columbia.

WS: Yes, he was a, I blush to say it because he should have been ahead of me, but I was a class ahead of him.

DN: Did you know that Paul went to law school because he couldn't get into journalism school?

WS: No, dynamite! Love to hear it.

DN: Yes, he once told me that his original interest was journalism.

WS: Journalism's loss and government's gain.

DN: Yeah. So your father, you said, had influenced you by osmosis. Did he also influence you directly? Was he one who talked a lot about politics at home?

WS: No, but my father was a non-driver, and because we lived in a rural community the only way to get to meetings and things like that was by car, and I eventually became his chauffeur. And that contributed to the osmosis I think because I would go to meetings with him, sit in back and listen. And ultimately after I had gone into his law firm in 1947, I discovered that law wasn't what I had hoped it would be, and that I really was more interested in community activity and government, and specifically local government. And so with a lot of agony I ultimately let him know that I would be leaving his firm, and that was not a happy -

DN: This was at a time when he had started labor arbitration work.

WS: Yes, the odd thing was that he was leaving the law, too, but he still thought of himself as a lawyer, so to have me say, "I'm getting out of your law firm," did not go down well. And Barbara, my wife, and I spent almost a year trying to figure out what I should do and what I could do, and ultimately I decided that I would like to become something called a city manager.

(*Phone Interuption*)

DN: That's uh-

WS: I'll just let that go.

DN: Now, when did you and Barbara meet?

WS: Well, I'll give you one answer, Barbara will give you another. We actually met in the spring of 1941 when both of us were attending a conference at Union College in Schenectady, New York to figure out how college students and university students could contribute to the needs that Great Britain was showing at that point, was feeling at that point. And Joe Lash, whose name may be familiar to you, convened this conference. I was at Swarthmore, which was outside of Philadelphia, and she was at Vassar, and on the way up to Union College we picked up these three gorgeous Vassar girls, but one was more gorgeous than the other two.

DN: I can confirm that.

WS: Thank you Mr. Nicoll. And that's how we met, but then after the war we didn't, I was too shy to even talk to her, I really didn't know how to deal with girls at all. But after the war in the summer of 1946 I was driving down a little country road near my family's home and I saw a name on a mailbox, the name was Gair, G-A-I-R, and I said, "That's the girl that I met in

Poughkeepsie, it's got to be." So by some finagling and taking advantage of my mother's acquaintance with that family, I determined that indeed it probably was that girl who I had met. And through various subterfuges I managed to make her acquaintance, and it's fifty-three years of marriage now.

DN: A wonderful union. And so you and Barbara talked and you decided when you were leaving the law firm that you'd like to go into city management.

WS: Well actually we tried many, many possibilities. I thought of becoming a clergyman, I thought seriously of becoming a community organizer and actually was admitted to Columbia's School of Social Work, now New York School of Social Work. And ultimately, however, I thought that local government was exciting, was the thing that excited me, and it was a thing to which I'd been exposed by my father.

DN: And where was your first assignment?

WS: I became, after I, after I made the decision, and we were living in New York at that time, I decided that the University of Pennsylvania had the school that was best for me. And so we picked up the three kids, then three, now four, and moved to Philadelphia, and I got a master's degree at Penn.

DN: And what was the field?

WS: It was political science with a specialty in city management. And I also interned, I set up my own internship with a wild man who was a city manager in the Philadelphia suburbs. And the first city I married, now, there I go, I've got marriage on my mind, that I managed was a little town called Grove City, Pennsylvania which was town of seventy- four hundred and eleven people in western Pennsylvania. Great place to learn how to be a city manager because you had to do everything yourself, and learning by doing is still a good way to learn. After three years there I came down to the Washington area and became manager of a community called Rockville, Maryland which is in the county in which we are now talking, Montgomery county, Maryland, and -

DN: How large was Rockville then?

WS: Well, I was there six years and it grew from six thousand to twenty thousand people in that period, which was a lot of growth.

DN: So it was actually smaller than Grove City when you came.

WS: Grove City, yeah, it was smaller but just by a hair, and it quickly surpassed Grove City in terms of population.

DN: How large is it now?

WS: Fifty thousand. And it's probably just about where it will stay. And I spent six years in

Rockville. It was a very exciting six years, very stimulating six years. At the point at which I decided that I really wasn't going to get much more out of it, by which time I had already met the Nicolls, I had a choice of either staying in city management and moving to a different place, probably a different part of the country, or taking a different kind of job. And I went in the latter direction and became executive director, executive vice president, of a real estate development firm in Rockville and did that for two years. Discovered that I really didn't like working in the private sector at all, it was just not for me, I'm not a bottom line kind of guy, and at that point two jobs came open.

One was as something called general manager of the new town of Columbia in the Baltimore-Washington suburbs, which James Rouse was building, and I was offered the position of general manager there. But concurrently a position came open as director of an organization called The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. I had been somewhat active in that organization when I was in Rockville as city manager, and I decided that that was closer to city management than the Columbia job would be, perhaps oddly, so I competed for and ultimately got the job as director of the Council of Governments.

DN: Now what year was that, Walter?

WS: That was 1966.

DN: And when was the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments started?

WS: It was created, and I think that's probably a good word, in 1957 by a group of local government officials in the Washington area, city and county officials and officials of the District of Columbia, who felt a need to begin to talk to each other and to see whether there was anything they could do to work cooperatively and with some degree of effectiveness. And they created it, and it was a very rudimentary organization as it started out, and I arrived as executive director of COG, a position which I held for twenty- five years until 1991, just after Ed Muskie had introduced and passed a piece of legislation which had a profound effect on organizations like the Council of Governments all over the United States. It was called in technical terms, Section 701g of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1954, as Amended. And it was Ed Muskie's baby, and I suspect that the midwife was Don Nicoll, and it changed my life.

DN: It's worth noting two things here, I think, before continuing with your story. First is that Walter referred to having gotten to know the Nicolls; his sister Jodie and the Nicolls were both Colby graduates. Jodie was a year or two ahead of us, and when we came to Washington we found that Jodie was here and then met her brother and sister-in-law.

The second thing worth noting is how Section 701g came to be. I was then Senate Muskie's administrative assistant and we had been doing some work in intergovernmental relations at which point a certain Hugh Mields, who was the assistant director I believe of the U.S. Conference of Mayors at the time, came to me and said, "Would Senator Muskie be willing to introduce an amendment to the Housing and Urban Development Act that would provide funding for regional councils of government?" And he explained all the advantages in terms of going beyond simple planning agencies.

So, I took it to Senator Muskie, he said yes he'd be glad to do so, and we took the amendment to the committee. The subcommittee was then chaired by Senator Douglas of Illinois, and on the day that Senator Muskie was to introduce the legislation, introduce the amendment during a committee mark up session, something happened at the last minute and he couldn't go. And I remember going over and telling Senator Douglas, this is our situation and would he be willing to advance it on behalf of Senator Muskie. And he said, "Yes." And I sat in the row behind the dais where the staff sat, and they proceeded through the legislation until they got to the point where this amendment was to be offered, at which point Senator Douglas said, "Senator Muskie has an amendment, unfortunately he can't be here today, Don knows all about it so explain it, Don."

WS: I love it.

DN: At which point I had to pop up and present it and answer the questions. There weren't very many, and it was adopted by the subcommittee unanimously as I recall. But that was the beginning of Section 701g.

WS: And it was a section that had a profound effect on the lives of a lot of people, the professional lives of a lot of people interested in government. It provided that local councils of elected officials in any area of the United States, urban or rural, would be eligible for two federal matching dollars for every one dollar that they would put up to strengthen and enhance the operations of these regional councils, most of which were voluntary organizations and desperately needed the money. And that piece of legislation was the one that really opened the floodgates to the creation of voluntary regional councils of governments.

At the point at which it was passed [?] by Senator Muskie there were probably fifty councils of governments across the United States, that is voluntary organizations of local elected officials in specific areas. By the time a Congress of a different party ceased to fund that section in the mid seventies, there were almost five hundred regional councils.

DN: When you came to work for the Greater Washington Council of Governments, or Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, what had it been doing? This is the pre-701g period.

WS: When I first made its acquaintance, it had a staff of three people, a program which was carried out essentially by the elected officials because the staff was almost non existent. The areas in which it was functioning and focused were public safety, a little bit on water pollution control, a little bit on transportation, and that was the limit of what it was doing. By the time Section 701g was no longer funded, and it had other benefits beside funding these regional councils and I'll mention those in just a minute, virtually every regional council of governments had a comprehensive program focused on: transportation, the environment, housing, social services, public safety, the whole spectrum of programs that local governments undertake. And the role of the regional council was to expand geographically those local programs into area wide programs conducted cooperatively by the regional council using the resources in terms of officials of the local governments, but staffed by the regional council because of Section 701g

and its benefits.

DN: How, now did the Washington Metro Transit System grow out of that?

WS: Yes, it did. It was being discussed contemporaneously on my arrival at COG in the mid-sixties. And in a legal sense it was a different organization, it was created by an interstate compact, which passed the Congress and then successively passed the General Assembly in Virginia, the General Assembly in Maryland, and the Board of Commissioners in the District of Columbia. But it came out of efforts by the same people who were creating the Council of Governments, to build a rail system and acquire a bus system, and who were and continue to be sister agencies.

DN: How has the Council of Governments, in this area at least, affected relationships between the communities in two states and the District of Columbia?

WS: In 1957 at the first meeting of the Council of Governments, the gentleman who had convened that meeting, Robert McLaughlin who was the president of the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia, began the meeting by saying, "I think we should introduce ourselves to each other since none of us knows the other." And now many years later, forty-four years later, every local official in the area knows those in other jurisdictions, has worked with those in other jurisdictions, has produced tangible effects, and the Council of Governments today is just taken for granted, it's a part of the scenery.

It's been through difficult periods. In the early years it was perceived by some people to be a Communist organization, which it was not. And it was also perceived to be a metropolitan government, something which a lot of people are scared of because it is felt to be another layer of government and is not popular in most communities of the United States. Although there are metropolitan governments in a number of places, in Nashville, in Columbus, Georgia, in Athens, Georgia, perhaps a dozen communities have had their cities or counties merge into metropolitan form. But it's, Americans are suspicious of that kind of form.

So Senator Muskie really, or I should say Don Nicoll, and in this case they were one and the same person, they reconfigured governments in the United States because they made it possible to create the structure of governments in areas, for example metropolitan areas or rural areas which had no government of their own, or consisted of communities in several counties, to join together and to do things together. And these councils of governments have done some significant things. There are now as we speak about four hundred and ten councils of governments or other kinds of regional councils in forty-eight states, and those are pretty stable, those will be here for a long time to come. And they are where they are to a large extent because of Ed Muskie and Don Nicoll.

DN: Now, during that period, I mentioned that Hugh Mields from the U.S. Conference of Mayors had been the one to bring the amendment, the proposed amendment to us. Presumably the Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities were very supportive of this kind of development. Where did the National Association of Counties stand?

WS: The National Association of Counties was somewhat laggard in its support of the concept because it saw these regional councils as competitors of county governments. In fact that has not turned out to be the case, and today the National Association of Counties is a strong supporter of regionalism, at least it gives it lip service. There is some degree of competition still, but NACO, as that organization is called, has always been worried, to some extent, about competition from regional organizations, and in some cases it has a justification for doing so. In San Diego County, the regional council consists of all of the cities in San Diego County, which are about twenty-five, and the county. And so the county understandably is a little bit antsy about the existence of the Council of Governments there.

DN: Is the Council of Governments territory co-terminus with the county?

WS: It is co-terminus, and the Council of Governments, for reasons you can understand, is perceived as an instrument of the twenty-five cities in San Diego County, and the county is not always on excellent terms with those cities.

DN: In this period in the mid sixties when you came to work for the Greater -

WS: Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

DN: I'm betraying my Maine residence in the Greater Portland Council of Government. At the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, when did you first encounter Senator Muskie himself?

WS: In April 1967 the directors of the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties had jointly gone to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I think it had become the Department of Housing and Urban Development at that point, to ask whether they would support with financial assistance the creation of an organization of all of these new councils of governments, as well as the old ones. And not being aware of that I had gone to the Ford Foundation for the same purpose. The purpose was to hold a national meeting at which the representatives of these, I guess then perhaps two hundred regional councils, or perhaps one hundred, I'm not sure, could get together and meet each other for the first time and exchange ideas and steal each other's programs and do other good things like that. In visiting the Ford Foundation, I met with a gentleman name Louis Winnick who is still active in New York and in public affairs. He's now with the Institute of Public Administration in New York.

DN: How do you spell his name, by the way?

WS: W-I-N-N-I-C-K, L-O-U-I-S, W-I-N-N-I-C-K. And as I was leaving, and he'd said, "We'll kick in eleven thousand dollars for a conference." He said, "Now there's one thing that you'll have to realize must come out of this conference. Unless you produce a national organization as one of the outcomes of this conference, it really won't be satisfactory to us."

So we were happy to comply with that request, and we met on April the 4th, 5th and 6th, 1967 at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington. Five hundred individuals from regional councils across the country came out. The conference was sponsored jointly by the Metropolitan Washington

Council of Governments, my organization, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey. And the main speaker was Senator Ed Muskie. And that was where I met Senator Muskie first. There was no other public official in the United States who would have been more appropriate to that role at that time, and luckily for us he was able to do it and was willing to do it.

DN: Do you remember that speech?

WS: I suspect that he exhorted us to higher things. Certainly wished us success. I'm sure he noted the existence of Section 701g as a tool that would be of assistance to us. And he was, he was very impressive, and the people attending the conference were very impressed that we could get a United States senator, and especially one who had sponsored the piece of legislation, which had been the basis for creating many of them, as a speaker. He was flooded with greetings when the speech ended. People wanting to touch him, people wanting to talk to him.

DN: Did you have any direct contacts with him in terms of legislation over the subsequent years?

WS: I never did. My only contact with him was at that meeting, and I have a signed photograph upstairs of him and me to prove it. And the rest of my contact with him was indirect through Don Nicoll.

DN: So your dealings with Capitol Hill were essentially through staff.

WS: Yes, that's right.

DN: What sorts of things did you come to Muskie office for, or other offices?

WS: Well, we were, we ultimately were created as a nonprofit corporation. And as a non-profit corporation, tax free status, so-called 501(c)3 corporation, we were not supposed to lobby. If we were, if we could get ourselves invited to a Capitol Hill office, we were permitted to place our desires before the staff. But we were very careful about not overtly lobbying and so my visits to Capitol Hill were the exception rather than the rule. We did get invited, and we made known that we would be happy to testify on pieces of legislation of interest to us. The Air Pollution Control Act of 1970 is one on which we testified, and the Safe Streets Act of 1970 was one on which we testified. But all these at least technically were in response to invitations from the senator or congressman.

DN: You've mentioned two issues that directly affected you. Did you have major concerns about the Clean Air Act of 1970 as it advanced through the Congress?

WS: No, actually, and this is something I'm not totally proud of acknowledging, but we knew that the act was moving through and we were pleased to see it. We had been trying to do something about air pollution in the Washington area without success. We couldn't even get our board to pass a resolution condemning air pollution. But while the Clean Air Act was going through the process of enactment ultimately, I took advantage of the fact that it was coming down the pike, and we were pretty sure it would pass, to say to my board of directors, "You

know, unless you configure a piece of local legislation on which all of you can conjoin on your own, you're likely to have the feds tell you exactly how you must organize and what you must do and so forth." And frankly, I used scare tactics and the existence of the bill that we knew was going to come down, although we weren't sure of the form. I used it to scare them into developing and supporting, and it's in existence today thirty-one years later, their own legislation.

DN: Now why don't you feel completely proud of that?

WS: It seems to me it's kind of a cheap way to do business.

DN: But was it an honest piece of legislation?

WS: Was it honest? Yes, and it has, work in the field of air pollution control has been one of the major programs of the Council of Governments ever since. And it wouldn't have lasted if it had been dishonest or phony.

DN: And were you also involved in water pollution control issues?

WS: Yes, we were. We subsequently became the so-called 208 Agency, being named for the subsection 208 of the Water Pollution Control Amendments of I think 1972, I'm not sure of the year. And we did a lot of work on water pollution control, and the clean up of the Potomac. There had been efforts prior to that. President Johnson in the late sixties had urged the communities along the Potomac to get their acts together and clean up the Potomac, do something about effluent that was coming out of sewage treatment plants, do something about sludge that was running off open fields into the river, or run off from parking lots.

And it never really worked until the federal legislation came in. But the federal legislation gave us teeth and money as the planning agency for the clean up of the Potomac, and we are still involved in that. Now our activities focus more on helping to clean up the Chesapeake Bay, of which the Potomac is a tributary, but we're still involved in the field.

DN: You limited your involvements on Capitol Hill during that period, but you must have had encounters with your own senators and members of Congress from this area, and you've mentioned testifying in connection with the Clean Air Act. Did you have an impression at the time of what it was like on Capitol Hill, how members of different parties and their staffs related and worked on issues like the urban legislation and the pollution control legislation?

WS: I think the reality is that there was one figure in the Congress, Senate or House, who we thought did everything and his name was Ed Muskie. I really think that. We did know that our local representatives would be supportive of anything on which there was an initiative, but it seemed to us that on virtually every piece of federal legislation was the name Muskie, it really did.

DN: And did you get involved at all in any of the work of the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee which he chaired?

WS: I may have testified once or twice before the subcommittee. I think I did, but I honestly don't remember. We did work closely with a commission, federal commission, on which he served, the Intergovernment-. Let's see, the Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, ACIR, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, and he was a member of that commission for a long time. They were an outstanding body under the leadership of a gentleman named Bill Colman who is now getting up in years but still lives in Montgomery County. And he's a guy who you should, his name is William Coleman and he's definitely someone to talk to. He was the executive director for ten years I believe of ACIR, and they did a lot in that field. And it may be that some of the ideas for the legislation came out of ACIR, I don't really know but I suspect so.

So to us, Senator Muskie was Mr. Metropolitan Area, Mr. Intergovernmental Relations. And he was the guy and we stood for, and cheered every time his name was mentioned.

There was one other thing that I should mention, I wanted to mention and I do, which was an outcome of the enactment of Section 701g. It was in a sense peripheral to the main focus of Section 701g, which was to fund these regional councils. But in the mid seventies, as more and more Black mayors were elected to office in large American cities, we began to realize, we in this case being members of the International City Managers Association in which I was involved. And I was the first president of the Association of Regional Councils, and I was also the president of the International City Managers Association later on. And it became apparent to us that in large American cities you were going to see more and more Black mayors elected -

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the interview with Walter Scheiber on June 19th, 2001. Walter, you were talking about the growth in the number of Black mayors being elected.

WS: An increasing number of Black mayors were elected in the seventies and eighties. But it became clear to us as they attempted to find professional assistance in the form of city managers or city administrators that there just weren't enough Black professionals in the field. And so I went along with a gentleman named Mark Keane, K-E-A-N-E, who was the executive director of the International, now the International City Management Association, to the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. They had had a program which they supported financially the enrollment of young Black professionals-to-be as city planners. But there was no program in which young Black people aspiring to be city administrators could find that they would be trained adequately. And we went to HUD and spoke to an assistant secretary about expanding that program, which was funded by Section 701g, to encompass support, financial support of master's programs in which the primary enrollees would be young Black people trying to become professionals in the field of city government, and specifically city administration.

We sold [Assistant Secretary] Jackson on the idea; that was in the mid seventies. The program was initiated and it continues today. There are probably thousands of graduates of that program. And some of the outstanding Black city managers, city administrators, county managers, county

administrators, and directors of councils of governments are young African Americans who came out of that program with their master's degrees. The program was run through five councils of governments across the country, in Washington, Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, and San Francisco. We ran the Washington program, and our program was run in conjunction with Howard University, which awarded the degrees after satisfactory completion of the academic program in public administration.

DN: This was a full-fledged master's program.

WS: It's a full fledged master's program, and at the end of the two years each of these young people have a fully paid master's degree program, and an MPA to go by their, beside of their names. And some outstanding people came through our program. A gentleman named Elijah Rogers who was the city manager of Berkeley, city manager of Richmond, and the city administrator for the District of Columbia, now in private business. A gentleman named Bobby Nash, who was the immediate past director of personnel of the White House. He was the director of personnel for the Clinton White House and got his governmental spurs through Section 701g. And that's a private Section 701g that is not normally thought about or identified as one of the benefits that came out of it.

DN: Now obviously that very short amendment did not mention training for African American young people, but came as a result of work done by you and others in the City Managers Association and your National Council of Governments organization. Were there others?

WS: It was liberally interpreted by the Department of Housing and Development. Well, Keane and I were the two people who made the sales pitch to Sam Jackson and convinced him that the program to award master's degrees to urban planners should be expanded to, urban administrators. But these days there are a large number of African American city and county managers, some county directors, and a lot of assistants, and of course the government of cities like that of the District of Columbia and other major urban centers are staffed by graduates of that program.

DN: Are those public administration programs still operating?

WS: Yes, they still are. The program has been expanded in two ways. It's been expanded to include non-African Americans who are economically deprived but would like to make careers in the field of city or urban government. And it's been expanded to encompass not just training for city management but for community organization and other related fields.

DN: And so the program really has influenced not only opportunities but it has probably influenced the nature of those public administration programs.

WS: Yes, and it has clearly influenced the quality of the governments in which these young people have served. And I didn't mention nearly all the people who successfully came through the program. And so we feel, and I think it's demonstrable, that the quality of city government generally in the United States has been enhanced by Section 701g, and specifically by this use of it.

DN: Is Mark Keane still living?

WS: Yes, Mark Keane is still living in Sedona, Arizona.

DN: Is he influencing Senator McCain?

WS: Mark Keane remarried after his first wife, who was a wonderful woman, died in 1977. He married a young woman who he'd met, a public administrator, and he has become a sculptor and she has become a city councilman, in Sedona.

DN: That's a fascinating twist of circumstances. Now, as you look back on your own career, oh, let me pause here, was the metropolitan area Council of Governments involved at all in Model Cities programs?

WS: We were not involved in the Model Cities aspect of Model Cities programs, but there was a provision in the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act of 1966, which was the one that set up the Model Cities program, that provided for review of grant applications for federal grants by these regional councils. That was another one of Senator Muskie's ideas for strengthening these voluntary regional councils. And we were given the assignment of looking over and commenting to the federal agency from which money was sought any grant application that came from the local or state government. So the Model, the, that act was perceived as the Model Cities Act, but we functioned in only that one small section of it.

But it was very important to us because we began to be perceived as important in the sense that if we said no to a grant application, it was unlikely to be funded. And of course conversely, we lived in terror that if we alienated one of our volunteer members, a large jurisdiction like the District of Columbia, or Montgomery county or Fairfax county, they might walk away from their membership. So it was a little bit of a tiptoeing around things. But it certainly, on balance it was, there's no question that it was a big help to us.

DN: Did it influence, did the existence of Model Cities program and your involvement in reviewing the applications, did that influence the members of the council as well as staff who would directly look at the applications?

WS: There's no question that when Section II, or when that act was passed and Section 204, the one about review was included in it, that local elected officials and state officials looked at us with new eyes. And they suddenly thought, "Well, maybe these people aren't just a bunch of toothless tigers, maybe we better be nice to them." And in that sense it influenced all the people who were associated with these regional organizations and any jurisdiction that was planning to submit an application to a federal agency. So to a large extent it was pluses for us.

DN: As you look back on your career in city management and regional planning and coordination, what strikes you about that period which lasted from 1947, roughly, until 1991, you said?

WS: Well, I was involved in local government from about 1947 as an assistant city [***sic*** town] attorney to my father in this little New York town. I actually became director of the Council of Governments in 1966 and retired in 1991. The most striking thing about that period is that to a large extent as a result of Senator Muskie's efforts, it became a matter of course that there would be regional organizations, and mostly volunteer regional organizations in existence across the United States. That simply was not the case when I came to work at COG. I suggest that there were perhaps fifty such organizations when I became director of COG, now there are four hundred and ten. So clearly the number of councils has grown dramatically.

In addition, there have been other federal acts patterned on Section 701g and other Muskie legislation which cover things like economic development, transportation planning; I mentioned the Safe Streets Act which dealt with criminal justice planning, virtually all of them patterned on legislation that Senator Muskie had introduced in the mid sixties. Although there was an act in 1962 called the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962 which mandated cooperative transportation planning. But it was limited to that, whereas Section 701g ultimately came to be used to fund almost every kind of local government or regional activity and it was the model for many other kinds of pieces of legislation.

So in effect it was responsible for creating the concept of the governments of metropolitan areas, as well as non-metropolitan rural areas, it created a whole group of programs, which were of benefit to the communities in those metropolitan or rural areas. It has become institutionalized so that in most places, like this one in the Washington area, it would be inconceivable that there shouldn't be a council of governments, whereas before 1957 it was pretty inconceivable that there should be such an organization. So the senator's influence in this respect was profound.

DN: One final question, Walter. By about 1980, had your father decided your decision to leave the law firm and pursue a career in public management made sense?

WS: Unhappily, my father was so hurt by my departure from his law office and my decision no longer to practice law, although he too was leaving, that he never for the rest of his life, and he lived until 1986, he lived to age ninety-five, he never could figure out what a city manager was. He literally didn't, he'd say to me periodically, "Now what is it that you do?" And this was at a time when I was president of the International City Managers Association. Couldn't quite get it straight, I mean it hurt too much.

DN: Well that raises another question and the difference in generations, and also personalities perhaps. His municipal government work was in a very small community. How large was it?

WS: Well, the place where I started was seventy-four hundred and eleven.

DN: Well that's where you were, but I mean when he -?

WS: Oh, where he was. I guess in that town we might have had two thousand people. And it's a town just north of Westchester County in New York, and he made a difference. For him, his wish was to be a big fish in that pond, which was a small pond, whereas I sought other things in my career and I wanted to be an important guy in a big arena.

DN: That's a fascinating difference that one might pursue in terms of individual outlooks within the same family.

WS: It was there.

DN: Thank you very much, Walter.

WS: It was a pleasure.

End of Interview