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Interview with Jim Wright by Henry Sirgo

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Wright, Jim, 1922-

Interviewer

Sirgo, Henry

Date

April 10, 1998

Place

Fort Worth, Texas

ID Number

MOH 104

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Biographical Note

Jim Wright was born in Fort Worth Texas on December 22, 1922. He attended Weatherford College, 1939-40, University of Texas, 1940-41, and joined the U. S. Army Air Force in 1941. He was commissioned in 1942 and flew missions in the Pacific, where he received the distinguished Flying Cross. He served in the Texas House of Representatives from 1947-1949, and was Mayor of Weatherford, 1950-1954. He served as President of the League of Texas Municipalities in 1953. From 1955 to 1989, he served in the United States House of Representatives representing the 12th District of Texas. He held various positions in the House, including Deputy Whip, Majority leader (95-99th Congresses), and Speaker of the House, 1987-1989. He ran for Majority leader, 1976; and was a delegate for the Democratic National Convention, 1956, 1960, 1964, and 1968. He served as co-campaign manager for the Presidential election of 1968 in Texas. He was Democratic National Convention chairman in 1988, and wrote *Balance of Power*.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: the 1968 vice presidential campaign; the 1969-1972 presidential campaign; Muskie's term as Secretary of State; environmental protection; Wright's work planning a November 1963 Kennedy fundraising dinner in Fort Worth; John F. Kennedy's

last speech given in Fort Worth; being a member of the Kennedy motorcade on November 22, 1963, when the President was shot; raising funds for abolition of the poll tax in Texas; being one of 71 candidates for Lyndon Johnson's vacant Senate seat, the 1961 Democratic primary; Hale Boggs; Sam Rayburn; serving as Majority leader in the House for ten years; soil conservation; Weatherford, Texas; 1960 matching funds for cities for waste water treatment facilities; James Watt; conservation radio addresses by the Carter administration; barge canal project; evolution of Congress with environmental legislation; 1972 unanimous vote for the Clean Water Act; Anti-impoundment and Budget Pact, 1973; genesis of budget committees; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Indexed Names

Albert, Carl Bert, 1908-2000
Babbitt, Bruce E.
Billings, Leon
Blakley, Bill
Boggs, Hale, 1914-1972
Bonior, David E.
Bush, George W. (George Walker), 1946-
Carter, Jimmy, 1924-
Clay, Henry, 1777-1852
Clinton, Bill, 1946-
Connally, John Bowden, 1917-1993
Eisenhower, Dwight D. (Dwight David), 1890-1969
Frost, Jonas Martin
Garner, John Nance, 1868-1967
Humphrey, Hubert H. (Hubert Horatio), 1911-1978
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
McCormack, John W., 1891-1980
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Pickle, J. J.
Rayburn, Sam
Reagan, Ronald
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Savage, Sean
Tower, John G.
Udall, Morris K.
Udall, Stewart L.
Watts, Jim
White, Frank
Yarborough, Ralph Webster, 1903-

Transcript

Jim Wright: . . . leader in his time, I thought he was very inspirational and I was very attracted to him, I think he's a great fellow.

Henry Sirgo: Yeah, it's very interesting, yeah. Your library has some materials about him, and also I checked him out at Tulane University when I was there during Mardi Gras, or pretty recently. Now, the main focus is environmental, and I haven't read any, it's entirely up to you, but I'm also a party person, and I'm teaching the, I'm teaching legislative process right now, and in the fall I'm teaching political parties. And I have this colleague, actually I've got two copies here, and I'll go ahead and I'll ask the questions, but you might look at them, too, you know, if you care to be involved with them at all.

JW: Yeah, you had asked about -

HS: Yeah, about the party, this fellow is the Thomas P. O'Neill Junior Fellow from 1986 to '87. He just came out with this, actually I think it's been pretty well received. He's this place is Indiana, I met him at the Southwestern social science (*unintelligible word*) and he'd just come out with that, so he gave me some questions and I'm like, I ask, well, I mean, you know, if you're so inclined. Again, it's, you know, it's off the environmental, more on the party aspect.

JW: That's fine. Either or both, whatever (*unintelligible phrase*).

HS: Okay, and I'll have them here and I'll read them and, you know -

JW: How do we pronounce your name? Sirgo?

HS: Yeah, you got it, yeah, it's, very few people, it's so straightforward, most people get it incorrect. So, yeah, my brother's with Lockheed Martin here, he does the simulation, computer simulations for the pilots, to train them on that sort of thing, he was an Air Force lawyer for twenty years and got into computer engineering.

JW: The (*unintelligible phrase*), the training of a pilot in a simulated environment rather than a ten million dollar aircraft.

HS: Yeah, yeah, well, I'll go ahead, I'm going to start off with the, with Sean's questions (*unintelligible phrase*), then we'll get into the original thing which is the environmental, and that'll be fun. So the first thing -

JW: Are we broadcasting, is that recording?

HS: Yeah, we're, yeah, I turned in on about a -

JW: You better shove it over closer to me because I'm not (*unintelligible phrase*), I have a little problem from cancer that I had.

HS: Yeah, I remember, (*unintelligible phrase*). The first one is, and again, you were, been

involved for, you've been involved for so many years since, well certainly since, well at a national level since 1955. The first one was, Mr. Wright, were you involved at all in planning the November 1963 JFK fund raising dinner in Fort Worth? If so, in what capacity?

JW: Yes, I was, I was very closely involved, inasmuch as I was a supporter of President Kennedy, and an admirer of his program and his policy and his person. I gloried in the idea of it being in my home town, and in our state, and from the very beginning, the inception of the idea, I was brought in and made a part of the plan. I helped plan the entire program in Fort Worth, including the promise to be available for an early morning appearance outdoors for people who could not come to the breakfast, people who had to work for a living. Punch in at eight o'clock in the morning. This had been the first time a sitting president had visited my home town since 1936, when Franklin Roosevelt drove down Main Street in an open touring car. I wanted the public to be able to see the president, I didn't want him to be confined to fund raisers and small groups of elite, or select attendees, because there were thousands of people out here who worked their hearts out for his election, many of them believed in him strongly, they were citizens (*unintelligible word*). And early in the morning, before they had to punch in to go to work, people were assembling out on what then was a huge parking lot just south of the old Texas Hotel. There are a lot of pictures of that day, of the president emerging from a hotel and I accompanying him, along with President Johnson and Governor [John] Connally¹ and others. There's another shot of, he's addressing the crowd, and I have dozens of those pictures, but those two will give you an idea, a feel for it. I also was involved in raising money for the dinner in Austin, the single fund raising event. I helped in selecting those who would be invited to the sit-down breakfast in the Texas Hotel that morning, and so I was very much involved with him on the last two speeches of his life.

HS: Fort Worth was the last speech he gave, was it Fort Worth?

JW: Yes, his last speech was here. And then we traveled together in Air Force One over to Dallas, and John Connally and I were visiting with him about the cultural and political differences between Fort Worth and Dallas.

HS: Wow, oh, fascinating topic. I know the, recently experts Southwestern Social Science Association is, he's a native of Fort and he goes on about that a great bit.

JW: Well, President Kennedy found it a fascinating subject. Connally and I approached it from slight different aspects. When we arrived at Love Field in Dallas, President Kennedy said, "Well we've got to resume this conversation on the way to Austin. I'm intrigued by it." So that was a conversation, of course, that never got concluded. I was in the motorcade, a few cars back, and that was a traumatic day for all of us, of course.

HS: During the 1960s, did you have much contact with the Democratic National Committee's voter registration project in Texas, or its implicit effort to end the poll tax in Texas, and if so,

¹ John Bowden Connally, born Feb. 27, 1917. Republican, served in U.S. navy, WWII. Governor of Texas, 1963-69. U.S. Sec. of Treasury, 1971-72. Candidate for Republican nomination for Pres., 1980. Wounded Nov. 22, 1963 in Dallas. Prosecuted for bribery and conspiracy of milk prices, acquitted. Died June, 1993. (www.politicalgraveyard.com)

how?

JW: Yes, I was even long before that an advocate of abolishing the poll tax. When I was in the state legislature in 1947, I favored the abolition of the poll tax, and was involved with Jake Pickle² and others in the fund raising drive. And we, you know, we tried to raise dollars for Democrats. Somebody in Austin, when Jake Pickle was chairman of it, he said, “Dollars for Democrats, but not a nickel for Pickle.”

HS: Oh, that’s great. Is he doing well, at least, he -

JW: Jake is fine, yeah, I talk to him frequently.

HS: It is about four years ago he retired?

JW: Yeah, yeah, he’s been out now for three years, I guess.

HS: Now, this next one, from seeing the exhibit right before your collections opened for research, I somewhat know the answer to, but I’m asking his question here, the third one. Did you involve yourself in any way in the special 1961 Democratic primary in Texas for LBJ’s senate seat? If so, how?

JW: I was the first to announce for that seat, thinking I would be so formidable that I’d frighten everybody else out of the race. Seventy others followed my example. The biggest field ever in the search of a political office, seventy one candidates. John Tower, the lone Republican, and the rest of us. I ran third in the race, which is in a horse race in the money, but in an election it doesn’t count. I barely was inched out by Bill Blakley³ to run it off with John Tower⁴. If I had been in the running with Tower I would have beat him. But Bill was brilliant at some things, yet not very smart politically.

HS: Do you believe that LBJ did enough campaigning and other forms of assistance as a party leader in the 1966 mid term elections? If not, what more could or should have LBJ done?

JW: He did everything he was asked to do and everything he was encouraged to do. I have utterly no reason to question, I’m surprised at the question and I don’t know, you know, the

2 James Jarrella a.k.a. J.J. “Jake” Pickle. Born October 11, 1913. Democrat, U.S. Navy, WWII U.S. Rep. from Texas, 10th Dist., 1963-1995. Director. Texas State Democrats exec. Comm. 1957-1960. Elected to Congress during special election to fill vacancy resignation of Homer Thornberry. (www.politicalgraveyard.com)

3 William Arvis Blakley, born Nov. 17, 1898. Democrat, U.S. Senator from Texas 1957, 1961. U.S. Army, WWI, admitted to bar, 1933. Apptd. to fill vacancy in Senate caused by resignation of Price Daniel, 1957. Declined to be a candidate for election to fill vacancy. Unsuccessful cand. for Dem. Nom. for U.S. Senate, 1958. Apptd. Again to fill vacancy left by LBJ, 1961. Died Jan. 5, 1976. (www.politicalgraveyard.com)

4 John G. Tower, born September, 29, 1925. Republican, U.S. Navy WWII. Delegate Rep. Nat’l. Conv. ’56, ’60, ’64, ’68, ’72, ’80. U.S. Senator from Texas, 1961-85. Nominated, Sec- of Defense, 1989. Killed in a plane crash, April 5, 1991, Chairman, Rep. Policy Comm. (political graveyard Congressional biography)

source of it. But Johnson always was willing to campaign for colleagues and for the party. As long as I've known him he has been an indefatigable supporter of the Democratic cause.

HS: Well, I don't know if I should even ask you the next one because you pretty much answered. It was do you think that LBJ could have done more to help Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election, and if so, what? But I suppose you've basically answered that one already.

JW: Well, he, it's conceivable that he might have. I don't know limits on what he did. On the weekend prior to the election, I believe it was a Sunday afternoon prior to the Tuesday election, Johnson appeared with Hubert Humphrey in the Astrodome in Houston, we had a state-wide crowd bussed in from all over the state. I was very active in promoting that event, as well as the whole campaign, I was a kind of co-campaign manager for Texas, and we carried Texas barely, as you know. I don't know what else Johnson might have done that he didn't. He was not prominent and vocally active as he might have been, but it's my impression that some of Hubert's advisors didn't think it would be helpful for him to be.

I'm not certain that Hubert didn't want him to be until the end, but I was with Hubert on his tour of Texas, his one three day tour of the state. He gave no indication that he didn't want Johnson's help. I traveled with him all the way across the state, as I did Muskie. But we carried Texas, and dog gone it, that was a pity, that election turned on so few votes.

HS: Yeah, very, very close. Well, that takes care of Sean Savage's. I have one which, it's still party related and it's, a couple of them, oh, kind of put together so maybe I'll go through all three of them. And -

JW: Who was asking me those questions?

HS: Oh, this fellow, Savage⁵, he's from St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana. I think he's originally from either middle or western Massachusetts.

JW: Yeah, obviously a student of the party, but obviously didn't know a damn thing about me. Which is all right, people run in droves that don't know a damn thing about me.

HS: What's, would, I'm going to kind of put this one together, it's about the -

JW: If he's interested in my reaction on these, I'll send him a copy of my most recent book, which answers them in greater detail than I addressed them here.

HS: Oh, terrific. The, these are kind of, a couple, they're still related to party and it's, I'm going to kind of just put them all together because they're all kind of related. Would you please discuss your relationship with speakers John Nance Garner⁶ and particularly Sam Rayburn⁷.

5 Sean Savage, also tenure track at Boston College Political Science, (www.bc.edu/bc)

6 John Nance Garner, born Nov. 22, 1868. Democrat. Count, judge 1893-97. Texas State House, 1898-1902. Delegate to Dem. Nat'l Conv. 1900, 04, 1916, 1924, U.S. Rep from Texas, 15th Dist., 1903-1933. Spkr. Of the House, 1931-1933. Cand. Dem. Nom. For Pres., 1932. V.P. of U.S., 1933-1941. Died Nov. 7, 1967. (political graveyard congressional bio.)

Was he a mentor to you, and could that also be said of his relationship to majority leader Hale Boggs⁸? And how did his mentoring style compare to that which you employed with individuals such as majority whip David Bonior⁹ of Michigan. (*Unintelligible phrase*).

JW: I never really knew Mr. Garner. Met him once, that's the limit of it. But I did know Mr. Rayburn, and he was a mentor to me whom I admired, respected and followed, and from whom I have learned a great deal. He was kind, generous, helpful, in every way encouraging to my aspirations, and I couldn't have had a better mentor. He was that to Hale Boggs, and I know Hale was very fond of him, and very supportive of the speaker. I heard Hale on more than one occasion, once comes to mind, on Mr. Rayburn's birthday or on some occasion commemorating his breaking the previous record of longevity for, held up to that time by Henry Clay¹⁰, as speaker. And Boggs made a splendid speech quoting "Rayburnisms" throughout the speech. Such things as Rayburn's quote, "If you tell the truth the first time, you don't have to remember what you said"; Rayburn's quote that the greatest asset for a public servant in the Western world, and particularly for a parliamentarian was to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable; Rayburn's comment that "any jackass can kick a barn down, but it takes a real carpenter to build one." Comments of that kind which were characteristic of Rayburn's tutelage were all compiled in the speech by Hale Boggs, which revealed his devotion to the speaker. He was indeed influenced by the speaker Rayburn, and I by speaker Rayburn, and I by Hale Boggs. Surely the influences you have, consciously and unconsciously, color and flavor your own brand of leadership, and while I wasn't consciously imitative, I'm quite sure that many of the things I did and said in helping other younger members in congress were founded in things I had heard from Sam Rayburn.

HS: In the party leadership chain, did you, well, the one thing, were you the longest serving majority leader at ten years, is that the record? I suspect it's close to it if it's not.

JW: I don't know the answer to that, I really don't. If there were a modern equivalent, it would have to be McCormack, John McCormack¹¹ who served under Rayburn's speakership I know was speaker from, oh I guess, I mean he was majority, he was, McCormack was speaker for ten years, you know, the second longest after Rayburn. And Rayburn was speaker so long, and McCormack his next in command that McCormack probably was majority leader longer than I was, probably. I don't know that for certain.

7 Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn, born Jan. 6, 1882. Democrat, U.S. Rep. from Texas, 4th Dist., 1953-1961. Spkr. of the House, 1940-47, 19449-53, 1955-61. Member, Texas State House, 1907-1913. Deleg. Dem. Nat'l. Conv., 1936, 1940, 1948. Died Nov. 16, 1961. (political graveyard)

8 Thomas Hale Boggs, Sr. Born Feb. 15, 1914. Democrat. U.S. Rep. from Louisiana, 2nd Dist. 1941-43, 1947-72. Cand. Gov. of Louisiana, 1952. Father of Cakie Roberts. Presumed dead from a plane crash, Oct. 16, 1972.

9 David Edward Bonior, born June 6, 1945. U.S. AF, Vietnam, Michigan State House, 25th Dist, 1973-76. U.S. Rep, 1977-1999. 12th, 10th Dist. Dem. Nat'l Conv, 1996, 2000 (political graveyard congressional bio)

10 Henry Clay, born April 12, 1777. Kent Statehouse, 1803. U.S. Sen. 1806-7, 1810-11, 1831-42, 1849-52. U.S. Rep., 1811-14, 1815-21, 1823-25. Speaker of the House for all years except 1821. Cand. For Pres, 1824, 1832, 1844. U.S. Sec. of State, 1825-29. Died in office, June 29, 1852. (political graveyard)

11 John William McCormack, born Dec. 21, 1891. Mass State Const. Conv., U.S. Army WWI. Mass statehouse 1923-26. U.S. Rep., 1928-71. Spkr, 1963-71. Dem. Nat'l Conv., 1932, 1948, 1960. Died March, 22, 1980.

HS: How did your work in the leadership, were you part of the whip system and then became assistant deputy whip, or how did (*unintelligible phrase*)?

JW: Well, yes, I was a deputy whip, and appointed by Carl Albert¹² as deputy whip, chosen as whip by the delegation, Texas delegation, and appointed by Carl Albert as a deputy whip. But I didn't go up through the system in the sense of the Masonic Lodge or any other system of chairs in ascendancy. I ran for speaker at the urging of colleagues in 1976, never having been majority, I'm sorry, I ran for majority leader in 1976 never having been whip, never having been the majority whip. I did that for a number of reasons, all of which are listed in a chapter in the book, Balance of Power, you can read that whole story there.

HS: And, I'll now take a look at some of the more explicitly environmental matters, and one of the, oh, I also teach state and local government every semester so I'm interested in your having been there. How was your interest in the formulation of environmental policy affected by your tenure as mayor of Weatherford, chair of the Texas Municipal League, and as a Texas, I believe you were in the senate, a Texas senator, or -?

JW: No, state legislature, yeah.

HS: So you were state house, okay, in the Texas legislature.

JW: Well, of course it was influenced at each level. I had believed for a very long while in soil conservation, I had become a disciple of soil conservation before I served in the military. I had been a friend of the county agricultural agent in (*sounds like:* Parsal) County, followed him around, went with him on some of his activities because I was fascinated by his work. I became a disciple of soil conservation when I saw the ways in which some of our farms had washed away, denuded of life giving topsoil. I became friendly with a man named Frank White, who was a district supervisor of soil conservation activity, introduced a bill in the state legislature which passed giving modest amounts of money to soil conservation districts to match their efforts to acquire equipment and carry out soil conservation activities, such as terracing, cover cropping and so forth. I was interested of course in water conservation by reason of my experience with the drought of the 1950s.

During the first four years of the 1950s, I was mayor of the little town of Weatherford. It hardly dripped a drop during that seven-year period. We were in danger of exhausting the underground water table, we were worried about the wells from which Weatherford drew its water running dry. So I negotiated with Texas and Pacific Railroad the acquisition of a small lake it had maintained near Weatherford, and then in the planning for the building of a much larger lake to be a permanent water supply for our community. All of that, as background, prepared me for my efforts to help clean water, help anti-pollution efforts. During my mayorship I sold to the community a bond issue which passed by nine to one, at a time when bond issues were being rejected by Texas communities, to build a new waste water disposal plant.

¹² Carl Bert Albert, born May 16, 1908. Democrat. Rhodes Scholar. U.S. Army AF WWII. U.S. Rep., 3rd Dist, 1947-1977. Spkr. of the House, 1971-77. Dem. Nat'l. Conv. 1952, 1964, 1968, 1992. Died Feb. 4, 2000. Majority whip, Majority Leader. (political graveyard)

HS: Now, was that in 1957?

JW: Fifty three, yeah, '52 or '53, and we built a new waste water disposal plant and began work on what has been Weatherford Lake, Lake Weatherford, in addition to which I had bought Sunshine Lake, a smaller body of water from the Texas Pacific Railroad for twenty thousand dollars, which was a steal really, but they wanted our good will I guess and sold it to us when they realized our need for additional water supplies. While I was mayor, we had to introduce water rationing among our citizenry, too. We allowed watering, first we allowed watering on west and north sides of the streets on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays, and on east and south sides of the streets on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Saturdays. Then after a time, when our problem still was unabated, skies had not yielded any moisture, we outlawed the watering of shrubs, and the toast brown lawn became a badge of good citizenship. We allowed for a time the watering of shrubs but not lawns, and then the whole thing was so curtailed by the time we got some rainfall that it had become a very troublesome problem for the city.

HS: One thing from the standpoint of the environment and your tenure in the house, you certainly do cover an impressive time period, what work did you do on the Public Works committee which pertained to the 1955 Clean Air legislation, which I understand was the first U.S. act dealing with air pollution and largely if not exclusively dealt with research.

JW: You talking about air pollution or water pollution?

HS: That's air, and let me ask, I'll kind of put them all together. The water pollution control bill which was vetoed by President Eisenhower in 1960, the -

JW: Well, there was one before that that we, yeah, that was passed over veto. Nineteen fifty six, I guess, was the first concerted effort on the part of the federal government to match and, therefore, encourage and assist the creation of water quality efforts on the part of cities throughout America. We provided a matching fund for cities that were financially in dire straits to help them build waste water treatment facilities. That was opposed by the Republicans in congress; we passed it anyway in 1960. I was a, you know, an active supporter and I think people would say a prominent supporter of the water quality legislation from 1956 on. The 1972 act, the 1965 act, and while I was speaker in 1987 we overrode another veto, we overrode a Reagan veto of water pollution and clean water legislation. The '72 act passed I think without a single dissenting vote in the senate and very few in the house. I was on the conference committees that reconciled differences between house and senate versions of those bills.

HS: Were the coalitions for water pollution largely the same as, say, for the clean air acts, such as the Clean Air act of 1963, was it pretty similar political groupings in terms of support and -?

JW: I think similar but not precisely identical. Cities that needed clean water help tended to be small cities, not confined to the big cities by any means. Small cities in Texas, for example, have always had financial difficulties in raising money. They were not allowed to have a local sales tax during those years. The only taxes they were allowed to levy were property taxes and selected franchise taxes for certain types of businesses. That was it; their only source of revenue.

Now, they could float bond issues against the good faith and credit of the city and attach a bond service to the tax rate, but the maximum allowable tax rate was, I think, four dollars and a half a hundred dollar evaluation, which was higher than we ever went.

HS: What was your involvement in, just recently I was in Corpus Cristi, and also I do have an interest in this one, well, all of them, but what was your involvement in the establishment of the Padre Island National Seashore, which was the, it was the second national seashore in the country?

JW: I was for it, of course, and supported the Padre Island project. It almost was defeated, it almost fell apart on the shoals of a disagreement about how much development would be allowed on the island. There were some people who wanted it to be a pristine nature island without any development, any commercial or economic development. Senator Ralph Yarborough¹³, who was its chief sponsor in the senate, tended to that viewpoint. Others thought of it in terms of a tourist mecca, which its north and south boundaries had somewhat become, wanted development. And I was in the position of trying to work out compromise between those two, which we achieved, thus allowing for the passage of the legislation.

HS: I really enjoyed it. I was at a, at the Southwestern Social Science Association in Corpus Cristi and we made sure we got out there to see the, this, a beautiful area.

JW: It really is, isn't it.

HS: Oh, this next one is just kind of a big overarching question, I'll go all the way through it, take a while. Do you have, well, anyways, it's a real overwhelming one. Do you have any perspectives and/or evaluations to offer concerning your work with presidents and their interior secretaries from Eisenhower through Bush in the realm of environmental policy? Also, any views concerning President of Clinton, Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt¹⁴, and/or Gov. George W. Bush would also be welcome since the latter is mentioned as a candidate for president in 2000.

JW: Well I have worked with secretaries of the interior and with water quality authorities, czars as we called them for a time, became acquainted with all of them. Stewart Udall¹⁵ was my friend from the days we entered congress together, he and I were in the class of '54 and so I knew him well, and enjoyed my association with Stu. As I did with Moe¹⁶ when he came to Congress. And I worked with all of those people, I was always, you know, trying to help those

13 Ralph Webster Yarborough, born June 8, 1903. Dem. Dist. Judge, 1936-41. Cand. For nom. Texas State atty. General, 1938. Col. U.S. Army, WWII. Cand. In primary for Gov. of TX, 1952, 54, 56. U.S. Senator from TX, 1957-71. Defeated in primary, 1970, 1972. Dem. Nat'l Conv., 1964. Died Jan. 27, 1996. (political graveyard)

14 Bruce Edward Babbitt, born June 27, 1938. Dem. Arizona State A.G., 1975-78. Gov. of Ariz. 1978-1987. Cand. Dem. Nom. for Pres., 1988. U.S. Sec. of Intr., 1993-2000. (political graveyard)

15 Stewart Alee Udall, born Jan. 31, 1920. Dem. U.S. Rep. from Ariz, 2nd Dist., 1955-61. U.S. Sec. of interior, 1961-69.

16 Morris King Udall, born June 15, 1922. Dem. U.S. Army A.F. WWII. U.S. Rep. from Ariz. 2nd Dist. 1961-91. Cand. Dem. Nom. for pres., 1926. Pres. Medal of Freedom, Pro Basketball, Denver Nuggets, 1948-9. Died Dec. 12, 1998. (political graveyard)

who wanted more conservation and more environmental activity, a more activist program. I tried to prod those who lagged behind and dragged their feet, didn't seem to want so much. I was at odds with, I forget his name, the first guy from Utah I think whom Reagan brought into that job?

HS: Watts?

JW: Watts, Watt, Watt¹⁷ was not a really very diplomatic person and he made some statements that I thought were very offensive to people in the congress and I called them to his attention in an effort to help him, because I thought he was doing these things through ignorance, not through design. I learned differently, he just felt so archly that a conservative, small government policy was in God's mind when he created the United States and then surrounded it with the rest of the earth, that he had no tolerance for anyone who thought the government could help people do anything, and he was an anti activist, you know, in the secretaryship.

But most of them I found were fairly reasonable people, and had they not had some interest in the environment wouldn't have been there. So, I don't have any personal things to say about any of them except kudos for my old pal Stu Udall in particular and friendship for all the rest of them, and mild approbation for Jim Watts.

HS: One thing about Watt that I learned at the Carl Albert Center which, well is quite understandable, was that he served as director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation during the Nixon administration. I came across some documents. Was there any indication back then that he would later achieve notoriety in the environmental field first as a, I think he like a lawyer lobbyist before he was Secretary of Interior, and then later as Secretary of Interior.

JW: Well I never knew the man until he was appointed Secretary of Interior and was somewhat shocked by his manner, his demeanor, his lofty scoffing at the ideas that those who had been friends of the environment were advocating.

HS: How did, this one is, I'm going to go ahead and ask it like it's asked here, although you've already sort of answered it, and then I might elaborate a little bit. How did you develop your relationships with Stewart L. Udall, Moe Udall, and U.S. Senator and Secretary of State, Edmund S. Muskie? And one of the reasons I'm interested in Muskie is I'm going to be doing a research at Bates College on his papers, which apparently his environment policy papers have been largely untouched, that (*unintelligible phrase*) informed me, so I'm going to be on up there this summer.

JW: Muskie and I were often thrown together in conference committees, he representing the senate group and I representing the house group, and sometimes our opinions differed. There was a guy named Leon Biddings, or Billings, there whom he, as his aide, his staff person, and the senate conferees on almost any bill, most bills, surely this one, were very staff dependent as contrasted to house members. Members tended to become authorities in their own right on this legislation in the house because the typical house member has one or two committees to which

17 James Garus Watt, born Jan. 31, 1938. U.S. Sec. of Int., 1981-83. (political graveyard)

he's assigned, and after ten years or so figures himself somewhat authoritative, and rightly so, having attended committee hearings and listened to reams of statistical apologia and appeals from all aspects, all sides or parties.

On the contrary, in the senate, senators may belong to a greater number of committees, or are less prone to attend the committee hearings, more frequently resort to proxies rather than their personal attendants. So that, in these situations, I would sometimes find myself trying to explain to Muskie some of the things that we had unearthed in our hearings that the senator really wasn't aware of. And Muskie would be sitting there with all these proxies from his other conferees, maybe as a lone member of the conference. So I got to know Muskie well that way, as well as knowing him while he was running for vice president and during the time he served in the senate.

When he ran for president initially, I was a supporter of his, I initially supported him for the nomination and tended to like him, got on with pretty well, knew him later as, when he was Secretary of State for Jim Carter, and had a very high regard for Ed Muskie, though we didn't always agree. He, for example, could not imagine why anyone in any state would oppose the idea of requiring cooling towers for water used in the generation of electric power and then returned to the stream. He wanted a law that required the cooling towers to cool that water down to at least seventy degrees, and preferably sixty or sixty five. His experience, obviously, was with the lobsters off the Maine coast, and if it gets too warm up there it's deadly to the lobsters. Understandable. But I had had some experience with people trying to raise catfish, and the catfish loved to hover around the intake of the cooling towers, and the outflow of the cooling towers, where it was warm. They loved warm water, they thrived in streams where the water generally ran in the summer time at ninety degrees. Muskie couldn't believe this, he just, he couldn't understand that at all, he thought I was crazy when I said that there were fish that preferred warm water. It was a useful experience for me; I hope it was to some degree for him.

HS: This next one's maybe in a little bit lighter vein, but, how is Cynthia Ann, your then seven year old peach tree which I read about in "The Tale of Two Trees" in the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*. I think it was last summer I read that article (*unintelligible phrase*).

JW: Yes, I did write that article about Cynthia Ann. Thank you, I shall tell her you were asking about her. Yeah, no, she's leafed in greenery at the moment, lots of leaves. I'm afraid that last freeze may have severely inhibited her production of fruit this year. But we had an abundant crop last year.

HS: I enjoyed your conservation radio addresses during the Carter administration. Was, well I, I mean actually, it was last summer when I was listening to them on the, you know, here at, over at (*unintelligible word*).

JW: At TCU?

HS: Was your program a feature of most of your tenure in the house?

JW: I had a weekly radio address that was carried by five or six different stations. When I first

went to congress I had a weekly television broadcast for each of two stations, I was producing two programs a week for television and one, a five minute program for radio but it got to be too much effort and I, and moreover television stations became more numerous and more competitive and less anxious to share this kind of time with political persons as public service broadcasts.

HS: This next one, I might be phrasing it the wrong way, but I think it was also something I might have, may have heard one of your radio addresses on. What became of your barge canal project? There was like a major -

JW: In nineteen hundred and seventy three, I, having worked it laboriously through congress, authorized a appropriation of two billion dollars to match local taxing authorities up and down the Trinity who jointly would be expected to raise two hundred million dollars, matching ratio of ten to one. In 1973 we held an election for the bond issue for the Trinity, and it was defeated in Dallas primarily, and barely in Fort Worth, in these two counties whereas every one of the other twenty some odd counties up and down the Trinity voted heavily for it. So thereafter I dropped it. People tried to revive it and I said, "No, don't ask me to revive a project that I've spent all that time and effort because I thought people wanted it, unless the people want it." And if you want to revive it, go down there on your own and schedule another bond election and if the public is willing to support it, yes, I will take up the cudgel again. But nobody ever called for another election.

HS: And that was to make a navigable waterway from the Gulf of Mexico to Dallas?

JW: Fort Worth.

HS: To Fort Worth.

JW: To Fort Worth.

HS: To Fort Worth, okay, okay, yeah, definitely. This -

JW: Through Dallas.

HS: Through Dallas to Fort Worth, and then Fort Worth. Have, I might have dealt with this but I have it here so I'll go ahead and ask. Have partisan coalitions in the realm of environmental policy changed over time, and if so, what have been watershed periods? Like in terms of the, oh, say party support in terms of environmental measures (*unintelligible phrase*)?

JW: You talking about bipartisan coalitions?

HS: Well, I guess, well I guess primarily things about, you know, have there been times when there's more, been more conflict between the parties over environmental issues, and times, other times where it's been less? Within parties might be interesting as well, but primarily the -

JW: Between the parties.

HS: Primarily between the parties.

JW: When I first went to congress in 1955, environmental policy was not nearly as popularly received or embraced as it later became. The public was not aware of it as a major concern, and in those days the classic dichotomy between those who believed in an activist government, the Democrats, most of the Democrats on the one hand, and on the other, those who believed in small, restricted government found themselves expressed in the two parties. Republicans on the committee and in the house tended at first to oppose clean air, clean water, the various initiatives that we in the Democratic Party pushed forward in the public works committee and in the interior committee. Only when they became popular and well received and understood by the public at large, did we develop a coalition. But ultimately we did, and as I mentioned to you, by 1972 in the senate there wasn't a single vote against the clean water bill, which was a massive expansion of our anti pollution activity.

HS: Which year was that one, the Clean Water bill?

JW: Nineteen seventy-two. There was one in '65 which was a big one, there was a still bigger one in '72, there was one in '87 when I was speaker, and I believe in '87 that practically every senator, I know we carried a big majority of Democrats and Republicans to override Reagan's veto in '87, as we did, also we overrode Nixon's veto in '72, didn't we? Don't you recall it that way?

HS: I'm trying to recall, I know there was that business stuff, the impoundment fund, funds with Nixon on water pollution (*unintelligible phrase*).

JW: Oh yeah, he just arbitrarily took it upon himself not to expend public funds for things that he didn't want to do, which gave him in, effect, a veto which allowed no opportunity for the congress to override it. And, therefore, I held it was wholly unconstitutional, and so argued on the house floor, and we created the anti impoundment and budget pact of 1973, was it, which was the genesis of the budget committees of the house and senate.

End of Side A

Side B

HS: Okay, and, yeah, one area that might be of interest to me, I guess thinking about Texas and Texas party politics, the, well anyway when, I guess the last half dozen years or so the Republicans seem, you know, very prominent and in a, but one exception of that seems to be with respect to the U.S. house delegation from Texas, which is still predominantly to, predominantly Democratic and is, oh, what are some of the factors contributing to the relatively greater Democratic success in that area? And a for instance is one thing, Martin Frosting [Frost]¹⁸, head of the Democratic congressional campaign committee, which I suppose he has

18 James Martin Frost, born Jan 1, 1942. Dem. U.S. Rep. from Texas, 24th Dist. 1979-. House Dem. Caucus Chair. Dem. Nat'l Conv., 1976, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000. (political graveyard congressional biography)

been for about, I'm guessing about half a dozen years or so.

JW: Not that long, but, well maybe, almost that long. And he's an active and energetic person and one who takes his responsibilities of that type very seriously. Martin has done a good job. But there, I think are other underlying reasons for our doing better at the district level than we have been able to do at the state wide level recently.

The principal reason, I believe, is the overwhelming demand for big and ever bigger campaign war chests year after year. It has gotten to the point where campaigning for congress in the big metropolitan areas is almost prohibitive for anyone of moderate, surely modest, circumstances, unless one is a willing ward of the wealthy. It has gotten to be a rich man's game. When I first ran for congress in 1954, against an incumbent, I ran a successful race for thirty four thousand dollars. Half that was money I saved up and owned, it was my money, about half of it I raised in contributions which I arbitrarily limited to no more than one hundred dollars from any one source, that was my rule. Thirty-four thousand. Well, one primary reason that you could do it then for that much was because thirty minutes prime time on the dominant station in the area, and there were only two, to which people could be tuned, cost only five hundred and sixty dollars. Thirty minutes at seven thirty in the evening, you could be in the living room of three fifths of the people in the district for five hundred and sixty dollars for a half hour.

Now today, you can't touch a thirty second ad, a quickie which doesn't tell anything about your qualifications, your personality, your deep feelings, your abilities, nothing, you can't touch it for less than, oh, five thousand dollars, for thirty seconds. And in those days we were buying, you could buy thirty minutes, and you had the attention of a much larger percent of the electorate than now you would get on any station in the metroplex. So it costs now often a million dollars to run for the house. That being the case, and the tendency of fund raisers to go to such things as so-called soft money, which is not inhibited in amount nor source, you can get it from corporations, all that put together has made it harder and harder for anyone representing the average people, let alone the poor people, to get a hearing, let alone get elected. Add to that the propensity of people to stay home and watch that boob tube instead of going out to meetings, in those days when I was a member of congress, I, when I was running for congress the first time and for the first half of my tenure, people would come out in droves.

Even the last time I was a candidate in '86, we had ten thousand people turn out to a rally, as I had at Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum. It's very difficult to get people out nowadays because they've become cynical. They see this big money, this big spending, where I spent thirty four thousand and won, they see people spending a million and losing and so it's discouraging.

Moreover, it discourages, I think discourages conscientious people in congress by requiring of them the demeaning task of getting on the telephone, begging fat cats for money. I never did that, I wouldn't do it. I was fortunate, I guess, to have come along when I did and to have had friends who did the fund raising for me, but as long as I ran for office I still maintained limits. And when the federal government finally established limits, I adhered to them religiously. And I think the healthy party, the Democratic Party, was the party of the masses, of the people, the working people.

I would typically have four to five thousand individual contributors in the campaign. There weren't any great big contributions, but there'd be that many people. I would have as many as six thousand block captains who would assume responsibility to go around and knock on doors. In my last contested election, I had thirty three thousand people who had yard signs in their front yards. That was the way I ran for office, and that's the way I think Democrats always have to run for office generally, if they really are democrats, with a little 'd'. On the contrary, people now are jaded and they're turned off. I was for taking away the poll tax, getting rid of that, I was for motor-voter registration, I was for letting people vote at eighteen, I was for the voting rights act of '65, all those things that made it easier for everyone to vote. But I've been saddened by the spectacle in these last few years of a smaller and shrinking percent of the population actually going to the polls. All of that tends to make things easier for Republicans who represent the big contributors, harder for the Democrats who represent the common folks.

HS: One thing, I think the president currently supports it, and I've done a, like a mini biography on this (*unintelligible phrase*), and I've read it in one of his works, is the idea of free television time for candidates (*unintelligible phrase*) -

JW: Yes sir, I'm for that, very definitely for that. Equal time, but not for the damn little old quickie commercials that insult the public's intelligence. I'd make the candidate himself or herself face that camera, look squarely into it, and talk with the people. I wouldn't let them send a singing commercial to represent them, and I'd make them do it for, you know, a minimum period of five or ten minutes as a minimum, so that the people can get a feel for who these folks are, what they really look like, how they sound, what they believe. That's what I'd do if I could wave a magic wand and make it happen.

HS: Yeah, with a certain block of time they have to do it, a serious presentation.

JW: Yeah, a serious presentation and free time equal to both political parties. Now, you really couldn't do this in a primary because so many people would be running there wouldn't be anything on TV but that. However, if you, any television station, which after all has the privilege of broadcasting on the public airways by public consent, could easily afford to give an hour and a half to each of two candidates running for congress in blocks that they may choose, or give an hour, give them six ten minute presentations, or two thirty minute presentations, or four fifteen minute presentations each at the times of their choice in prime time. I wouldn't let them get by with what they finally began to do with any public service broadcast, and that is to relegate it to Saturday morning or, you know.

HS: Strange hours.

JW: Yeah, strange hours.

HS: I think, well let me double check, I think that's pretty much it. Yeah, that pretty covers it. I want to thank you very much, I (*unintelligible phrase*) appreciate it.

JW: Well you're welcome indeed. Pleasure to be with you, hope it's helpful.

End of Interview

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