

Tape 11, Side 1

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 December 28, 1992, and this is Tape 11, Side 1.

In our last session we had just ended with mentioning Cecil Edwards as the secretary of the senate, and you had a few other comments you wanted to make about him.

VA Well, Cecil was a very unusual man. He served the legislature in a variety of capacities, but always served well. No one ever really had a feeling of his being partisan in any way. A great historian; loved it. Loved to get into the details of past Oregon history, both in terms of the executive branch, and, to some degree, the judicial branch. He really knows more about it - I mean, there could be a ten-volume book of what Cecil Edwards knows about the history of Oregon. And he knows it in kind of personal ways. I think he was chief of staff for one of the governors at one time, or secretary of a governor, and he served in the legislative branch and - I always liked Cecil. I mean, he's just a really neat guy. We had a mutual interest, which was guns.

CH Really?

VA Yeah. I think he must have had a collection at one time. He didn't while we've known each other, but we talk about guns from time to time. But he certainly - if I've got some point of history that I want to find out, then Cecil Edwards is the guy to go to. I mean some remote part of history. It was interesting. As the governor I vetoed, one time, forty-two bills. Well, I thought, gee whiz, that's got to be a record of some kind. Well, Cecil dug out and found that, no, that wasn't. It was Governor Os West. He vetoed seventy-some-odd bills. And as a matter of

fact - this would be early nineteen hundreds - what it really amounted to was about a third of the bills that the legislature passed that year, because they passed something like - I've forgotten - two hundred and something, or whatever it was. A huge percentage. A quarter, at least, of all the bills they passed, he vetoed. So I just refer to myself as the modern-day record setter, although I would say I think - well, I'd have to really add it up. Maybe I couldn't even catch up with Os West in my eight years, but I vetoed a lot of bills, but I've never counted them all. Whether I reached seventy, I'm not quite sure, but I vetoed a lot of bills. But that's what I mean, the kind of remoteness of questions about what happened when, and special sessions. He just remembers a lot of things. A keen memory, and a really nice guy. But as I say, he's quite unique in government. I don't know of anybody he could be compared to. From those I knew in the past and those now, today, there's nobody like a Cecil Edwards around.

CH I've heard that he's probably held a position in state government longer than anybody else.

VA Oh, I'm sure that's true. We used to kid him that he was there at Champoeg when they voted on ^{STATE HOOD} [laughter]...

CH You know, we were talking about committee assignments in reference to John Burns, and I noticed a quote in the Oregonian saying that Burns had drawn animosity from some senators who did not receive committee chairmanships, and antagonism from chairmen of some committees because of the way Burns has routed some bills. Do you know who felt antagonized by that?

VA I'm sure it was the liberal Democrats, angry about the fact that John - actually what John did was, he finally said, Okay, I will join you, the coalition, which left all the other Democrats out. So it had to come from them. That's an interesting thing.

When I say that to you, that, meaning there's been a great love affair with being chairman of a committee, and I just never understood that. Whether you're chairman or a member, to me it was never a big deal. But they like to put on their letterhead - and, incidentally, congressmen do the same thing, as if that impresses somebody. It doesn't really impress anybody. Well, it impresses them, ^{SENES} and they feel good about it. But I never really understood this great allure of being chairman of a committee. But that's where it would come from. Republicans got chairmanship that Democrats thought they should have had; and in terms of assigning bills to committee, maybe they wanted some bills in a committee in which they were, and John didn't give it to them. So I'm positive - although I don't recall precisely, I'm absolutely sure, if we got into who was doing the complaining, it had to be a Democrat.

CH Your reference to committee chairmanships, there is more control over one's situation, isn't there, or over legislation going through that committee if they're chair?

VA Yeah.

CH So wouldn't that be a strong reason for wanting to have that kind of control and see certain legislation passed?

VA Yeah, that sort of came long with it. But their main thrust was, I'm chairman of, telling the outside world. But, certainly, you're right, you can determine what bills go through and what don't, and there's some, obviously, took a great deal of advantage of it, just scheduling hearings as to when a bill was going to be heard, or be heard at all. If a bill is not being heard, the committee members can make a motion to set a hearing for it, but they don't do that too often. Once in a while it will happen. You kind of let the chairman go ahead and run the committee. But, you know, the main thrust is put on their

letterhead, they're chairman of something.

CH One of the Democrats that you might be referring to that was complaining at the time was Berkeley Lent, Bud Lent.

VA I would have said Lent. He was their main contender.

CH Sure. But he said that in consolation for his not being - or it was speculated that in consolation for his not being senate president he was made chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, but, then, that he really didn't have much control over the Ways and Means Committee because the other people on the committee were working around him. And he would find out that certain things were going on that he had no - in the committee that he had no recollection of because of this alternate structure that had been set up to circumvent him. Was that true?

VA I'm sure it was.

CH And why? Why did that happen?

VA Well, the whole idea with the coalition was to try to maintain - and again, it depends on where you're sitting, but to maintain a moderate stance. Although he did get chairmanship, I don't - I wasn't on Ways and Means, so I didn't get involved in the machinations of that, so I'm doing some presumption, was to make sure that he was surrounded and really couldn't take off on his own to do whatever he wanted to do, and I'm sure that was part of the device. He's chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, but apparently in title only.

CH Well, he left the senate during the middle of that term to get a judgeship.

VA Yeah. We suffered under that for quite a long time

[laughter].

CH Under his judgment?

VA [Laughing] Oh no. I really do like Bud. He just has a different philosophy than my own, and those things - I wouldn't even use the word clash. We just don't agree, and we agreed we don't agree. I mean, friendly. We just don't agree.

CH When you would have time to socialize with other people in the legislature outside of the legislature, would you tend to socialize with people that you tended to agree with or disagree or mix, or how would you - who would you spend your time with?

VA Oh, most often with those that you kind of get an affinity to. I always liked Mike Thorne very much, and his wife, Jill. I think they're great people. A close relationship with Lynn Newbry and his wife, and, during my time in the legislature, Tony Yturri, Stan Ouderkirk while he was there. Gosh, I have to stop to think about it. I wouldn't really socialize with Ted Hallock. I see Ted, like him very much, knew him very well, but he's not somebody I would seek to go out and have dinner with and say, Come on, let's go have dinner. I wouldn't avoid him, I just - it's the normal human reaction. You just - kind of those people that somehow or other kind of strike it off well.

CH You were chair of the Education Committee that term, and on that committee you were serving with Carson, Hartung, Roberts, and Willner. That's Wally Carson, isn't it?

VA Correct.

CH Who later became chief justice of the supreme court?

VA Yes.

CH What was your impression of Mr. Carson?

VA Wally and I were very good friends, very good friends. [We] quite often voted in opposition to one another. Not frequently, but we'd find ourselves in different directions. But I always liked Wally. As a matter of fact, I appointed him to the supreme court, and when I was reelected - it didn't really make any difference, but you - out of protocol, I said to the chief justice, "I would like Wally to swear me in." So I was really proud of that. He swore me in my second term as governor. So I like Wally. He's a good man.

CH You also appointed Betty Roberts, later on, to the supreme court.

VA Yes.

CH What was serving with her on these committees like?

VA It was very good. It was a good committee and good people, and I liked - I respected them very much. Both Don Willner and Betty Roberts, more often Don Willner than Betty, again, philosophical differences of opinion, but I did respect them very much. That, incidentally - I can recall, when we talked about the power of a chairman, I didn't really abuse the power. What I did was that every bill was up, some bills I didn't really particularly care for, but, nonetheless, they had a hearing. I can remember specifically a bill that Betty Roberts was enamored with. This was a bill to eliminate the senior year in high school and to substitute kindergarten throughout our school system. And I do recall a conversation with her in which she was saying that the last year in high school wasn't really meaningful, and that the thing to do was to just lop that one off and put in kindergarten. I didn't have any problem with kindergarten, but I said to her, "Betty, there's two ways you can

go about it, one of which is your way, eliminate it, and the other, heaven forbid, is to make the last year meaningful." Anyway, I brought it up for a hearing, and it did come out of committee, but I told Betty, "I'm going to fight you on the floor," which I did, and we beat her on the floor. So I could have more easily just not gone through that hassle and gotten in her way and not have the bill go out, but that's not the way I operated. But that's because I respect each one of the members of the committee, very much so. And incidentally, that was a unique committee, one of those five-member committees.

CH You got a lot done, I imagine.

VA You get a lot done with one of those committees, yeah. That year, Carrol Howe was the chair of the House Education Committee, and so we split up our duties. I think we both ran ours very efficiently. He was rewriting the community college code, and I was rewriting the teacher tenure act, and so we spent a lot - we each spent a lot of time on the bills, and, then, when we traded them - that is, the senate passed our bill and the house passed theirs - a lot of the work had already been done. Now you get to the very end of the session, you know, and some committees are still operating, We closed shop - and we did a lot of work. We closed shop I think two weeks before the session ended. We had done all our work. And that's just because the house and the senate committees worked together, and we regarded each other quite highly for the work that was done.

CH Was that typical that the two chambers...?

VA That's not typical, not typical, and many committees just drag on, and, still, bills are hanging in and work to be done, and there's not too much communication between the house and the senate.

CH Why?

VA I don't know. It's just some people don't understand how to run things. They just don't understand.

CH So is it more that kind of absence of leadership than it is antagonism between the two houses?

VA I think so. Leadership not only meaning speaker and president, but leadership as far as committee chairs are concerned. You've got to know what you're doing, you've got to know your subject. In the case of my Senate Education Committee, all the members knew their subject. You know, we didn't have to go to school for a month to find out what education is all about in the state of Oregon. Some committees, start off their committee hearings by having a - well, I'd call it a school; I think they'd call it a briefing - on what this is about, whatever their subject might be. We didn't have to do any of that, either in the house or senate. The other element that's important is that you have some rapport with the house chair, that you trust that person, you know that they're competent to do a good job, and I had that sense of feeling about Carrol Howe. Carrol was a superintendent of schools down in Klamath Falls, and a neat guy, really a neat guy, hard working, intelligent, knew what it was all about, and so we had a personal relationship as well as a committee relationship.

CH In reference to some of the work that you did do in that committee, there was Senate Bill 223, which was on education of children, which got left in committee. Do you - I know this - I don't have a lot of information on some of these, but there were several that the governor signed and another one on common school districts, which was tabled. What bills came out that year that - you had made reference to this kindergarten bill. Did that fail?

VA That failed.

CH You know, I see that a lot of things are left in committee or tabled in various committees. Is that just a way of not having to deal with them, or is it a way of permanently keeping them...?

VA Well, it's kind of interesting. Everybody's got a strong feeling about whatever it is that they personally like, whether it's a legislator or some constituent out there that wanted a bill, or a larger group of people, and committees would handle things in different ways. They really didn't care to table bills - well, that's not quite right. It would have to be not particularly controversial, the committee members had to agree there wasn't too many people out there that were looking over their shoulder, and you just table. When I said we closed our committee, that means we dealt with all the bills, whatever. However, sometimes the committee would agree to move the bill to what they call the back of the book. In other words, nothing would ever happen to it. They would agree - they wouldn't table it, they wouldn't pass it out, they'd just move it back to the back of the book. That way, you're not going to offend anybody. They're not going to table it, which might offend somebody, it will just move to the back of the book, and it would just go off into the sunset when the session was over. That would happen.

CH What's the difference between a bill ending up being tabled or dying in committee? Is there really a difference between the two?

VA Yeah. There could be a motion to send a bill out, and that motion would fail. And maybe nothing would happen, but there's not enough votes there to send it out, and no one really wanted to particularly make a motion to table, which kills it, so it's just sort of out there in limbo.

CH Do you recall any other legislation that went through your committee on that particular term?

VA Not really. I remember those big ones that I just told you about. And we changed teacher tenure to a fair dismissal law, and had a lot of debate on that one. A lot of debate on it.

CH Was that sponsored by Betty Roberts?

VA I can't recall sponsorship.

CH But she was big on teacher tenure, wasn't she?

VA I suppose she was, but I don't recall that either. But this was a major thing, as was a rewrite of the community college code. Those are major efforts, and so that's, I think, why I remember both of those.

CH The move from teacher tenure to fair dismissal, was that something that you were pushing for?

VA Yeah. I thought it was - first of all, tenure wasn't a very good idea. It does exist, which is unfortunate. But it was a matter of fair dismissal, but also the opportunity to dismiss. It's such a messy thing, trying to get rid of someone in public office, whether it's in schools or in government. And that carried over. When I was governor, there was evaluations, supposed evaluations of everybody in state government. I told my agencies, I said, You know, an evaluation is not an accumulation of material in your file so you can ^{FIRE} can somebody. Actually, if you use it correctly, what you're going to do is help somebody, and so we'll approach it on that basis, that you're going to [do] an honest evaluation, that you should do it honestly, but not with the idea of positioning yourself to fire them, but to help that person advance in their career. It's kind of hard to make

that shift, but I think that they did a lot of that while I was governor.

CH You were also on Human Resources. Ted Hallock was the chair of that, and Burbridge, Bain, and Hoyt were also on that committee. Another five-person committee. There was a mental health bill that was signed by the governor, and also for the mentally deficient in day-care facilities. Day care ended up in committee, but was that a big issue in the legislature at the time?

VA It's never been what you'd call a huge issue. It's always been sort of one of those issues that's been there. I'm trying to recall the bills you're referring to. I don't have much recollection of them.

CH Were there other bills that you recall that went through Human Resources at that time?

VA Not really like these others that are quite prominent in my mind.

CH You had a lot of concern for the mentally disabled.

VA Yeah.

CH And was there anything in your own personal experience where that came from?

VA No, it's just a philosophy of my own that there are certain people in society that need to be cared for, but not just need to be cared for; cared for in the best way. Going back, you recall, to this trainable mentally retarded, in which it was delayed for a two-year period of time, it wasn't that I didn't have a real concern for those folks. I knew that wasn't the right way to go

about it. And you end up, if you do it deliberately, with a much better way of really, really helping people. Again, I - we haven't got to my governor's years, but all this carried forward. My interest was not in just saying something or cosmetically doing something. My intent was to actually do something and do it well. And if you make some mistakes, that mistake carries on into the future and creates more problems. And, back again to fiscal conservatism, if I'm going to spend the taxpayer's dollar, I want to make sure it gets spent well and does what it's supposed to do. I carried that into my years as a governor. So that's the kind of feelings I had at the time, all during my time as a governor. And so much of it does relate, curiously, to LBJ, because LBJ had the great society. He highlighted some very important things, no question about it in my mind, and we spent billions of dollars in the process, and, yet, we didn't really solve it. And I said, Hey, I'm not interested in that; I'm interested in solving it. I'm not interested in - you know, this was the Great Society. We remember the term Great Society, but we don't recall whatever happened to the Great Society. Discrimination, we still have it, maybe even worse; housing, we were going to solve that; hunger. Tell me we solved it. We haven't. Well, he identified all of these things that were essential in terms of a good country, of a democracy, but all we did was, we benefitted the office furniture makers and the office equipment and people that wanted to rent space and - and when we got to poverty, we hired a few people, and that's the extent of it, and we spent billions of dollars in that whole process. Billions. Well, I just was not interested in that whole idea of using these great gimmicks and these slogans and all the rest. I'm not interested in that. Is it going to do the job or isn't it going to do the job. That's where the interest lies.

CH Did you have solutions that you were trying, or possible solutions that you were trying to pursue either...?

VA Not necessarily. I'm sure I did have some, but as I faced whatever issues, whether it was some bills I had or some bills that I was dealing with from other people, I always looked at it, is this really going to do the job.

CH You were again in Taxation, of course, and with many of the same people that had been on there before. Cook and Wingard?

VA Wingard, yeah.

CH You haven't mentioned Wingard before. Well, maybe you have. Yes, you have. We have talked a little bit about him. What was he like to work with?

VA God, he was as difficult guy to work with [laughter].

CH Was he really? Why?

VA Oh, I don't know. George was - he had his own way, and - God, in our caucuses we'd have some really knockdown and dragouts, and - a nice fellow, really believed in what he was doing, but he was just awful hard to move sometimes, awful hard to move.

CH Did anybody feel that way about you?

VA [Laughing] Well, I don't know. It's really hard for me to tell. I can recall when - getting back to governor, my staff used to say, Governor, you're stubborn. That's what they told me. So maybe I was then. I don't know.

CH Well, Dick Groener was also on that committee. What was Dick Groener like to work with?

VA Dick is one of the fellows that I really got to know very

well, like very much, continue my friendship today. We, oh, a couple of times a year go out and have lunch or see each other or talk to each other on the phone. I've got some great stories to tell you about Dick when the time comes. He's a true-blue - well, I guess I would say a true-blue Democrat, but a lot of Democrats wouldn't tell you that. He supported me as I ran for governor, which, of course, the Democrats didn't like. He had the most unique event. He called it the garden party. Unique in the sense that he would invite people to come to his house - he loved to garden. He just spent hours of time in the backyard of his house gardening. Loved it. And he would invite people to come on over, and get the lobby to put in money for the food and the drinks and things of that kind. There wasn't too much booze. Maybe some beer and some soft drinks. And they would - they, meaning some legislators, some lobbyists, would do the cooking. But he'd have the darnedest mix. I mean, he'd have the head of the AFL-CIO and the head of Associated Oregon Industries, and, then, everything in between. It was really - it was a mix that you just never found anywhere else. He just had everybody. It was all there. And they'd come and enjoy each other's company.

CH Would things get accomplished in a situation like that in terms of...?

VA No, that was purely social. Sit around, eat, talk, have a good time, but that's what the party was all about.

CH I would imagine that as people from, especially, opposing viewpoints would be able to socialize with each other, they would establish a rapport that would, then, eventually help them communicate over differences they might have.

VA Oh yeah. It was ease in communication, there's no question. That didn't mean, however, that they would be able to convince you, but there was always ease in communication, which is not

bad. Never bad.

[End of Tape 11, Side 1]