Bob Brown: I’m interviewing Dan Kemmis at the Mansfield Center on December 9, 2009. Good morning, Dan.

Daniel Kemmis: Morning, Bob.

BB: Maybe you could just tell us first, for the historical record here, when and where you were born.

DK: Well, I was born on December 5, 1945, in Fairview, Montana.

BB: And what were the dates in which you served in the legislature?

DK: I served there in ’75 and ’76, and then took a term off, and served again from ’79 to ’84.

BB: And you were speaker of the House of Representatives in the ’83 session?

DK: Yes, that’s right, and I was minority leader in the ’81 session.

BB: Now not everybody who serves in the state legislature is motivated to run for public office, so what caused you to become interested in public service? Was there an experience or a person or something that may have pointed you in the direction of public service?

DK: Well, there was. As I was growing up on our farm in eastern Montana, I was aware of the presence and reputation and reverence for my father’s uncle, Walter D. Kemmis. And we had a beautifully framed picture of Uncle Water that hung in our living room. And so as I got old enough to inquire about it, I learned that Uncle Walter—as we always called him—had served in the Montana Legislature back in the early 20th century. He had actually been a supporter of Teddy Roosevelt’s when he ran on the Bull Moose ticket and had been a presidential elector then. And Uncle Walter had then taken some time off and had gone back to the legislature later and served up into the early ’50s. So he was so clearly revered within my family that something about that made me think—before I had any way of knowing what I was even thinking—that I might like to do something like what Uncle Walter had done.

BB: Did you meet him?

DK: I did. I was very young when I met him. He baptized me, actually. Among other things, he was a Methodist lay pastor, so we knew him in that context also.
BB: Now your political party is Democrat.
DK: Yes.

BB: And he was a Republican?
DK: Yes.

BB: But he also left the Republican Party to follow Theodore Roosevelt into the Progressive Party in 1912?
DK: He did, but then he went back as Republican.

BB: Went back as a Republican? Because some Republicans did, but some of them who were the Bull Moose Progressives then became Democrats afterwards.

DK: Well, I don’t think with Uncle Walter that there was any likelihood of that happening. The Kemmises since the time of the Civil War had really been Abraham Lincoln Republicans, and he was a strong Republican. He was very active in civic and business leadership in Sidney. So if anything, his foray into the Progressive movement was probably the aberration, not his remaining a Republican.

BB: (Laughs) I see. And so your political philosophy was probably different than his, would that be correct?

DK: Well it sure is, and the story there is not about Uncle Walter but about my father, who was born in 1902. And when the Depression came along, and of course as you know the agricultural depression started well before what we call the Depression, my father being a younger son of a younger son had not a whole lot of land or wealth behind him, none in fact. So the Depression hit him pretty hard. And when Franklin Roosevelt came along with some of the programs that he was advocating for rural America, my father was drawn to that. And the first time that he voted was in 1932; he voted for FDR and he never looked back. His father, Walter’s brother, was so angry at my father for becoming a Democrat that he threatened to disown him. He didn’t do that, but he was serious. He was very, very angry. The idea of any Kemmis being a Democrat was just unheard of.

BB: And so did you discuss policies and things with your dad that kind of cemented his philosophy as far as you’re concerned?

DK: Oh yes, and it was even more than discussion. My father, like most of our neighbors, was a member of the Farmer’s Union. We were pretty active in the Farmer’s Union where we sold our grain. That’s where we bought our supplies. So the Farmer’s Union was an important part of our lives and later so was the REA. We didn’t have electricity until I was about 8 or 9, but it was
the REA that brought us electricity. Those, of course, were progressive organizations, and most of the people who were very active in them were Democrats. And so it was there in Farmer’s Union Juniors, for example, that I think my political philosophy got driven home.

BB: And how would you describe it?

DK: At that level, it was this strong belief in the importance of neighbors helping neighbors. Now that in itself is not a partisan matter by any means. But in organizations like the Farmer’s Union and the REA, it sort of went a step further in terms of developing a kind of social philosophy that we should not only help each other out and work together at that sort of associational level, but that we should do the same thing at the higher societal level. So I think that’s where a Farmer’s Union kind of philosophy fits into and reinforces what would be called a liberal philosophy of government.

BB: And to help me understand: maybe the idea that people help each other and that that’s more important than the rugged individual idea.

DK: Yes, I would say so. I mean of course, anybody who lived under those conditions had to be pretty darn rugged (laughs). And people took care of themselves; there’s no doubt about that. But yes, I think that the part of it that was maybe a little different and began to develop some partisan differences was that that Farmer’s Union kind of philosophy was, “We’re not on our own. We’re in this together and we ought to remember that.”

BB: And during that period then, Dan, we’re probably talking the 1950s.

DK: Yes, right.

BB: Is there a political figure you can remember—or two perhaps—that kind of stand out in your memory, that maybe you particularly were inspired by?

DK: Well, sure. As I mentioned, FDR and my father’s reverence for FDR was pretty clear early on. And I can also remember then a time when—well, I remember one time when we were all gathered around this battery-powered radio that we had before we had any electricity. It was a cute little piece of furniture that looked like a little house, sort of. And some of our neighbors had come over and they were listening to this show. And while I was used to people listening to the radio, I couldn’t understand why they were so intent on this. And I asked my father, “What’s this all about?” And he hushed me up and it was unlike him to speak to me in that way and he said, “It’s the president.” Well, it was years later that I figured out that it was Harry Truman that he was talking about. So I could tell he liked Harry Truman. He liked him in a different way than he liked FDR, of course. So there was Truman.

The person, though, that really then captured my attention during grade school was Mike Mansfield. By the time that I was in third or fourth grade, my fascination with politics was so
strong that when I learned that Mike Mansfield was the majority whip of the United States Senate, I just thought that was the biggest deal I had heard of.

BB: Now most third and fourth graders aren't particularly interested in politics or fascinated by it. I think you and I have that in common because when I was in the fifth grade, I was. At least I've had my family members tell me that I would ask them questions that kind of startled them. Why in the world would a 10 or 11 year old, or a 12 year old, be interested in this kind of thing? And I have some recollections too of political figures during that period. J. Hugo Aronson was someone I had an opportunity to shake hands with, and he'd be the one I probably remember the best. But I certainly was aware of Mansfield too. But so it was primarily just your family discussions and that sort of thing and your Farmer's Union involvement that seemed to create a really stimulating interest in you.

DK: That's sure where it started, as far as I know. But, of course, I was what my family called a bookworm and so I started reading as quick as I could and read everything in sight. One thing that I started reading whenever I could was political biographies, so that started feeding that fascination in a different way, sort of opened up the world more broadly.

BB: Was one of the biographies you read of Woodrow Wilson?

DK: No, you know, I didn't read a biography of Wilson until probably in the last 10 or 12 years. But I read lots of other biographies including reading Profiles in Courage as soon as it was available.

BB: Now tell me just before we leave this topic, do you remember what your childhood impression may have been of Republicans?

DK: Oh yes, absolutely. I can remember my father, who was a gentle and mild-mannered man, having nothing gentle or mild-mannered to say about Ezra Taft Benson, for example, the Eisenhower secretary of agriculture. He hated him, hated him with a passion. And he didn't speak of Eisenhower that way but he did of Richard Nixon. And so yes, I had an impression of Republicans. It was not a very favorable one.

BB: Now, when you mention Benson, I remember that name too, and I remember a term—my agricultural roots aren’t as deep as yours, but I’ve got a strong connection in that direction—and I remember the term “parity.” Do you remember that in the 1950s?

DK: I do, yes.

BB: Does that mean anything?

DK: Well, it had to do with the level of price support payments that were made for wheat and so on. But I have to confess that I was too young to have figured it out in any depth.
BB: I’m sure that however that concept fit in probably had something to do with your dad’s impression of Benson.

DK: Yes, I’m sure it did.

BB: And so then you had an opportunity to go to college. Where did you go?

DK: Well I ended up going to Harvard, and that again was sort of driven by my political passion because so many of the political biographies I had read, the folks I was reading about, had gone to Harvard. And so I thought, “Well that must be the place to go.” So that’s the way that turned out.

BB: Now you had family gatherings in this period before you went off to college and came home and that sort of thing. Did the rest of the Kemmis family remain more or less in the Republican camp?

DK: Some of them certainly did, yes. My mother’s family tended to be quite a few Republicans over there too, so we had to be a little careful about talking politics in those family gatherings. And my grandfather, my father’s father was the only grandparent that I remember well. And I liked Grandpa John, but I knew what his politics were so I was careful about that.

BB: Even then you were well aware of that difference. He was outspoken and so was your father. So you got back to Harvard. And tell me a little bit about that experience.

DK: Well, I had gone to Harvard with the vague idea that I would learn about politics and government and that then I would come back to Montana and get involved in politics in some way. It certainly was not a straight line because I happened to go to Harvard in the early 1960s, right when the Vietnam War and resistance to it were heating up and the whole cultural revolution was beginning, and fairly quickly I kind of lost sight of that goal that I had had of coming back to Montana. For one thing, it sort of seemed like from out there on the banks of the Charles that Montana just did not matter very much. It was not a very important place.

BB: Coming from Montana, how did you get the opportunity to go back there? There are hardly any kids from Fairview, for heaven’s sakes, that got an opportunity to go to Harvard. How did that happen?

DK: Well, it probably happened in part because Harvard had developed a policy of trying to have some geographic distribution in its enrollment. And so that class of 1968, I was the only one from Montana and I may have been there because I was—

BB: You must have scored high on some kind a nationally known test or something, too.
DK: Well I was driven as a kid. And I was determined to get a good education if I could, so I worked very hard in high school. I got good grades, and I did score well on the SAT. And so I got a scholarship at Harvard.

BB: Did you feel overwhelmed?

DK: Oh, I felt overwhelmed in a lot of ways. The cultural shock was just amazing, of course. I had never been outside of eastern Montana, really.

BB: And you’re associating with these people—I think of Harvard as a place where you’ve got these legacy families with old eastern pedigrees, family wealth and that sort of thing. And so that must have been a real eye-opener for you.

DK: Oh, it was, it was. The range of social classes and so on was like nothing I had ever encountered: ethnic backgrounds, religious backgrounds and so on. It was all brand new to me, and it was sort of overwhelming. But I hung in there and got what I think was at least the beginnings of a good education out of it. But the part of the education that was a surprise, of course, was the education that came with the war and the way that the war forced you to take sides one way or another. So I became—not in any real aggressive way—but I became an anti-war activist, I suppose you’d say. So that shaped my politics in a way that I hadn’t expected.

BB: I’m sure that that was a place that notable speakers came, I’m sure Harvard was. So during that period of activism can you remember—?

DK: I remember Robert McNamara coming to Harvard and having his car surrounded on the street and almost overturned, that’s an example of the sort of thing. What was so strange about it at Harvard—of course Harvard was this very sort of prideful institution. I went there in 1964, which was the year of the free speech movement at Berkeley, and I can remember Harvard’s attitude that you could just practically hear as you walked across the Yard was well, “That sort of thing is about what you’d expect in Berkeley.” (Laughs). But by the time I graduated, Harvard had been shut down by a student strike. It was a tumultuous time there as well as everywhere else.

BB: Did you have professors or classmates who later became prominent in any way?

DK: Well, Henry Kissinger was still very active on the faculty at Harvard at that time and so was John Kenneth Galbraith, Samuel Huntington, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who became Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor.

BB: Did you have any classes with any of them?
DK: Oh, I had classes with all of them except Kissinger. I never did have a class with him. And by that time, Kissinger was commuting between Boston and Washington and spending more time in Washington.

BB: And students, classmates?

DK: Well there were some and I’m trying to think now of who are in the political world. Al Gore was a year behind me at Harvard.

BB: Did you know him at all?

DK: I did not. The person that I did spend time with was Barney Frank. Barney Frank was the assistant senior tutor at Winthrop House, which was where I spent my upper class years. And all of us who were interested in politics were at Winthrop House mostly because of Barney Frank because he was such a fascinating character, even in those days.

BB: And now he’s a prominent member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts.

DK: Yes.

BB: Just before we leave Harvard, you mentioned Winthrop House, and I’m just curious to know, having no familiarity at all with how Harvard is organized, would that be what would amount to a dormitory?

DK: Yes. The way that it was organized then and to a certain extent still is is that the freshmen all live together in or near what’s called the Yard, which is the center of Harvard. The upper class—in those days it was all men—the upper classmen lived in what were called houses, which were separated dormitories. And in those days the houses had their own kind of characteristics, and Winthrop House was where the politicos tended to hang out.

BB: So you, even though Montana’s getting more distant in your rearview mirror and you’re becoming more involved back in Harvard, still you came home?

DK: I did.

BB: You didn’t go to graduate school or law school or anything back there. Is there a story about that?

DK: Well, there are various stories about it, and I won’t tell you all of them, but I did apply to and got in to Harvard Law School. But at that point the whole kind of counter-cultural movement and so on had an impact on me, and I was just not sure that I wanted to get into what we then called “the establishment.” And so I left all that behind and ended up spending another four years in New England, most of that in Connecticut, working at various jobs and
sort of getting an education in a different way, but eventually came to feel just a little stifled by
the atmosphere in New England and the number of people and everything. And I started
thinking I'd like to come back to Montana. So I did that eight years after I had left Montana.

BB: And did you return to Fairview?

DK: No. Course Fairview was just where I was born. Our farm was near Richey and I went to
high school in Sidney. But when I returned after those eight years, I came to Missoula to enroll
in graduate school at the university.

BB: And what did you enroll in there?

DK: I was studying philosophy and found here a very, very good philosophy department and
had the good fortune of spending a couple of years with some excellent professors. But then I
finally got drawn back into politics.

BB: And that happened in the election of 1974?

DK: Well, it happened just before that election. And there's a little story there that I might tell
you. One day while I was in graduate school, I took my young family over to Helena just on a
little day trip. And we wanted to go and visit the historical museum, which we did and enjoyed
that. I had never been there before. While the family was there, I said, "I think I'll walk up and
take a look at that capitol" 'cause I'd never been in that building before. And so I walked up
there. And it was a Saturday; it was very quiet in there. I walked around and eventually made
my way up to the second floor to where the legislative chambers are. I walked down the hall
and I went past the room that had the sign "Senate" over it. And all at once I thought, "Uncle
Walter. Uncle Walter served in this room." I took a look in there, and I started feeling this kind
of tingling and this recollection from my childhood of all that that had been lying quiet for
many, many years. And then I walked over to the House, and I walked up to the balcony. And
with all due respect, the House is a much more beautiful chamber than the Senate. And I sat in
that balcony and looked at that Charles Russell painting and something about that room just
went all the way into the marrow of my bones. And I said, "I think I'll run for the House."
(Laughs).

BB: So you went back home and laid the groundwork for your first run for the legislature?

DK: Well, I was in pretty good shape actually. I had been studying philosophy and I already
knew eight or nine people here in Missoula, all of them philosophers. So I thought, "I've got a
pretty good political base here. I'll see what I can do with that." But yes, I did.

BB: Now until 1972, legislators were elected on at-large basis in the more populous counties.
But beginning in 1974, they were elected from single-member districts, so you had to find a
district that you could run in. And there’s got to be a story about that. I mean, you just didn’t indiscriminately run; you had to do some thinking about that.

DK: Well, I had to do some thinking, and it turned out that I had lots of people helping me do the thinking. So as you say, the legislators had all run countywide up until ’74, and ’74 was the year that I decided I was going to run. So I started going to Democratic Party meetings and sort of indicating that I’d be interested in running for the legislature. So I can remember sitting there with all of the Democratic legislators who had already been elected, and they were sitting around trying to decide what districts they were going to run in. Well, they were naturally—because you didn’t have to live in your district—they were picking the best Democratic districts to run in. And it was fascinating to me to watch this process. And so I was sitting sort of in the back and when I saw a chance, I’d raise my hand and say, “You know I’d like to run, too.” And basically they were saying, “Yes, we’ll get to you. Just wait a minute, boy.” Finally, they got around to me and said, “Well, there’s this really good district down in the south end of Missoula.” Well, of course it was a Republican district and one that they didn’t want to run for. And of course, the Republican legislators were doing the same thing. They were sitting there, picking their plum seats. So it turned out that Tom Haines, who was the dean of the Montana House, who’d served longer than anybody else in the House, had picked that district. So I ended up running against Tom.

BB: You ended up running against Tom Haines, very well-known, long-time Republican legislator from the district he had probably chosen because it was a Republican district. And here you are, a brand new freshman—you’ve only been going—or brand new person interested in politics, you’ve been going to political meetings for a year or so prior to that.

DK: Oh yes, not even that. Just a matter of weeks.

BB: So you get dropped into this district where you have almost no connections, no name recognition.

DK: That’s right. Exactly.

BB: Well, how in the world did you pull that off?

DK: Well, pure luck. There were two factors that worked for me there. One was what you mentioned already: that prior to this the people had been running county-wide, and Tom Haines had been running county-wide longer than anybody else. That’s what he had always done, and he knew how to do that. And he had no notion whatsoever of how to run in a single-member district and really didn’t want to learn. He wasn’t about to go door-to-door.

BB: Which is very possible in a single-member district.

DK: Right...

Dan Kemmis Interview, OH 396-063, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: But it was totally impossible running county-wide, so he didn’t think along the lines of that. And you’re young with no connections and no money, so it’s the perfect thing for you to do.

DK: Exactly. It’s the only thing for me to do. It’s the only possibility I have at all. So there’s that. And so I went door-to-door twice throughout the whole district, and Tom never budged from his home, as far as I know. And then the other factor was: this is 1974. It’s the year of Watergate. It turns out to be the perfect year to be a totally unknown Democrat running against a deeply entrenched Republican. Couldn’t have asked for a better year. I mean, that was the year when—what did we elect?—75 Democrats to the House or something like that. [67 Democrats, 33 Republicans.]

BB: Yes, in the state House an overwhelming Democratic majority. Both House and Senate. So you rode, you campaigned door-to-door and became better acquainted with the people in that district, certainly than Tom Haines ever was. And then based on that and just riding the crest of the Democratic tidal wave here you are. How old were you?

DK: Let’s see, I would have been 29.

BB: 29 years old and you arrive over in Helena as a brand new freshman state representative in 1975. What were your impressions?

DK: Well, it was exciting. I did love politics and so I love being surrounded by it. I can still remember just this almost physical feeling of being down there on the floor of the House, which I had looked at from that balcony, and being surrounded by all these people, many of whom obviously knew darn well what they were doing. I can remember we held our Democratic caucuses in the governor’s conference room, which was the only room in the Capitol big enough for that Democratic majority, and I can remember how thrilling that was. I can remember being struck by the fact that there were certain people that sort of seemed to prowl around the room and keep an eye on everybody. And before very long, I figured out those were mostly Butte legislators that were doing that. So I started getting a little sense of Butte’s role and so on. But, it was an amazing education.

BB: Any Butte legislators stand out in your memory specifically?

DK: Well, J.D. Lynch for sure. And I guess not Butte, but Anaconda, [William] Red Menahan, with whom I then had a history and finally became close friends. Those are the ones that stand out most probably.

BB: Now Dan, you mentioned that they’re kind of circulating around the room in the caucus and that sort of thing. Why does that typify the behavior of a Butte legislator? I mean, why them more than other legislators from Billings or Great Falls or someplace?
DK: Well, I guess the way that I came to see it is that they were all Democrats, of course. Butte was entirely Democratic, had been from time out of mind. And the Democratic caucus was sort of their turf. They, one way or another, considered themselves to kind of own the Democratic caucus because of the seniority they built up from being a totally Democratic community or pair of communities. So they understood the importance of the caucus; they understood the importance of the decisions that were being made there, the appointments that were made. It was basically their home turf and they walked around it as if it were their home turf.

BB: But do you suppose too, that there was maybe an element of insecurity among them because you've got this huge influx of brand new people into their turf, and maybe they're kind of trying to take the new guys' measure a little bit.

DK: Oh, I'm sure of that. I mean, they were nothing if not cagey and street smart. So they had enough sense to know that they needed to figure out who was who.

BB: Did they have a particular way of operating?

DK: I felt that they did, and of course part of my education was to figure out what that was. Part of it was just plain sticking together.

BB: Voting as a block, making deals, that type of thing. And they were experts at that type of thing?

DK: You bet.

BB: Governor Judge?

DK: Governor Judge was governor at that time and I got to know him, certainly not as well as I would come to know Ted Schwinden. I always kind of liked Tom Judge. There were different feelings about him. I was sometimes a little disappointed in the fact that I might have hoped that some of his appointments would lean a little bit more in the progressive direction than they did. But as a person, I liked Tom Judge pretty well. He always seemed to me to be a little bit—what shall I say?—aloof or distracted. You didn't feel like he was just 100 percent focused on either the political or the policy issues at hand. Now that may have been in part that I just didn't know him that well and was too young and inexperienced to understand it. But certainly by the time I got to working with Ted Schwinden, I knew that Ted Schwinden was always focused on the issues at hand.

BB: How would you contrast the two?

DK: Well...
BB: They’re very different individuals, I think is what I hear you saying. Describe Judge and then describe Schwinden. You’ve somewhat described Judge but...

DK: Well...

BB: Is there a story that typifies Judge that kind of stands out in your memory that maybe helped you to formulate your opinion of him?

DK: You know I can’t think of a specific story. What I can remember is a kind of impression about Tom Judge, which was if you’d be at a Democratic Party or other kind of gathering talking with the governor, it seemed like more often than not that he was looking over your shoulder at the next person that he was gonna talk to. I contrast that most vividly to—I had the opportunity to meet Bill Clinton, and now Bill Clinton was somebody who had this skill of being right there with you at the moment that you were talking with him. Tom Judge did not have that skill.

BB: So Clinton made you really feel as though you were connecting directly with him. And you’re thinking Tom was just working the room? He’s just—

DK: Yes, right. He’s sort of thinking about the next person he’s gonna talk to. Whereas with Ted Schwinden—now I had actually clashed a little bit with Schwinden over some policy matters when he was the lieutenant governor, and so I was a little bit wary of Ted Schwinden. But by the time I got into leadership and Ted was governor, I was well aware that Ted was on top of whatever it was that he was involved with and that if you were going to deal with Ted, especially if you were going to be in any kind of struggle with him, you had had to have your ducks in a row and know what you were talking about. I don’t mean to imply that we spent most of our time struggling. Ted went out of his way to make sure that he met on a regular basis with the Democratic leadership. He was a good team player, but he was the captain of the team.

BB: My impression of him was the same as yours. I remember meeting with him in his office once, and I could probably remember the issue, too, if I thought about it for a little while. But anyway, I was really impressed by the level of detail that he knew about what I went in there, pretty carefully prepared, to talk to him about. And I made an appointment beforehand, and I remember when I met in the governor’s office with Judge and then fairly frequently with Stephens and Racicot, it wasn’t uncommon at all for them to have an advisor in the room that knew specifically what I was there to visit with them about. And in Schwinden’s case, it was just Schwinden and I, and he knew the questions to ask in detail. He didn’t need anybody sitting there whispering in his ear. He knew exactly what the lay of the land was. So I think all of us felt that he was a really confident, hands-on governor, and a firm, sort of tough-minded governor, too.
DK: Yes, he was, right. And from a sort of liberal Democratic perspective, part of what that meant was he was tough-minded about his more conservative brand of being Democrat. He understood that, for example—now you can correct me, but I think in 1980 he may have been the only newly elected Democratic governor in the country during that year of the big Reagan sweep. Now Ted Schwinden knew that he had gotten into office by pursuing fiscally conservative policies and so on, and he was not about to vary from that.

BB: He was, I think, a partisan Democrat but not a particularly liberal Democrat.

DK: Nope, that’s right exactly. And he came from that same agrarian Democratic background that I did. So we at least had that in common.

BB: You would have had the Farmers’ Union roots in common with him.

DK: Right. Well, I don’t know that his family was Farmers’ Union, but he came from that part of the state where that kind of agrarian politics had sort of shaped, I think, all of the Democrats who came out of there.

BB: Now, what—is there an issue? You were in the legislature for two years when Judge was governor and then you left the legislature to go to law school.

DK: Yes.

BB: And completed law school and then returned to the legislature, which is a little unusual too. Did you get back in the legislative district again?

DK: No, but in ’78 when I was ready to run again, it turned out that there was a little domino effect going on in the Democratic party. We had an open congressional seat, and we ended up with five or six Democrats who ran for that congressional seat. And one of them was Gary Kimble, who had represented the university district in the legislature. So when Gary stepped aside, I decided, “Well, I may as well try for the university district. Among other things, I live there.” And so—

BB: It would have been an easier district for a Democrat to win in.

DK: Exactly. It turned out that it was not all that easy to win that first primary. I had a sharply contested primary that first time around. But once I won that, then it turned to be pretty much a safe seat.

BB: And just out of curiosity, who replaced you in the House in that Republican district? Did a Republican win it back in ’76?

DK: Yes, Ralph Eudaily won that.
BB: And he was there for some time?

DK: Yes, he was.

BB: Now there was another sharply contested primary in 1980 for the Democratic nomination for governor. What are your recollections of that and whose side were you on?

DK: You know, I think that I stayed out of that race.

BB: That was between the incumbent governor Tom Judge and the lieutenant governor Ted Schwinden.

DK: That’s right. And by that time I was hoping to get into leadership in the House and I just don’t remember taking sides in that primary. If I did, Bob, I think I supported Tom Judge, but I’d have to go back and make sure of that. I was not deeply involved for sure.

BB: I was interested in asking that question to just know what you remembered about the campaign, but if you weren’t deeply involved, you might not have a very vivid memory of that.

DK: What I do remember about it is that now as you say, Ted Schwinden had been Tom Judge’s lieutenant governor, and here he is running against Tom. Now Schwinden very astutely chose for his lieutenant governor George Turman, who had been mayor of Missoula, who had represented Missoula in the legislature and then originally been a Republican. He was one of the Republicans then that switched parties in the early ’70s. And so George Turman, who was a gentle but very popular man in Missoula, which by then was already one of the key Democratic strongholds in the state—it was a good move on Ted Schwinden’s part to pick George.

BB: Because then that helped their ticket in the Democratic primary.

DK: Exactly. What I remember about that was that whereas Ted Schwinden as lieutenant governor had been out all across the state every chance that he got, building his own political base when George Turman became lieutenant governor, I used to joke that Ted had George chained to his desk in the Lieutenant Governor’s office. I don’t know that George ever got outside of Helena and Ted was not about to run the risk of his lieutenant governor doing to him what he had done to Tom.

BB: That’s interesting. And your interpretation of that is not that it was just that George didn’t particularly want to go out and cut ribbons and do the kinds of things that lieutenant governors do? It was that the governor preferred that he not do anything?

DK: Well that was my interpretation. I may be dead wrong about that.
BB: Now you were minority leader in ’81.

DK: Right. I was elected minority leader in that caucus at the end of 1980 and served there.

BB: Now, we talked about the huge majority the Democrats had in 1975. And then when you returned in 1981, I don’t remember: where the Democrats in a small minority then?

DK: My recollection is that we obviously were in the minority, but it was not a tiny minority. I think we were within five or six votes of the majority.

BB: Well, that may be significant because of a comment you made earlier in our conversation about the Butte Democrats always voting as a block. Well, their identity would be kind of lost with the rest of the Democrats if they always voted in a block with all the other Democrats. So the significance of that would be that they sometimes didn’t.

DK: Yes.

BB: Was that a problem for you? When you’ve got about five or six Butte Democrats and you’ve got a majority on the Republican side of, you know five or six—I don’t know, I guess it would be more significant if it were the other way—but do you have any thoughts or recollections of that?

DK: You’re exactly right that it can become a real challenge when you’re in the minority and particularly when things are a little bit close. And if the Republicans have any people that might defect from them once in a while, then they’re going to come over to the Democratic side and see if they can pick up a few votes. And that’s how it works. And there was always the danger, particularly with Butte, that on some key issue that the Republican majority would give Butte a plum of some kind that in return for that. That a substantial number of the Butte legislators might go along on a policy issue that would then upset Democrats.

BB: And would those policy issues be in any issue area?

DK: They were most likely, I think, to revolve around environmental issues, sometimes taxation issues.

BB: And of course the fact that the Anaconda Company and the Montana Power Company were headquartered in Butte probably was involved in some of these things. Would that be correct?

DK: Oh, yes, absolutely.

BB: Do you remember any particular piece of legislation when you were minority leader that stands out in your memory?
DK: Not entirely sure about that. One thing that I do remember was being somewhat surprised—in a naïve way—at some point about the determination with which the Butte delegation protected the special treatment that was given those trucks, the tax treatment that was given those trucks in the open pit mine. They were somehow in a class all by themselves in terms of industrial property. And of course the Anaconda Company had acquired that status for them, and they were bound and determined to protect it. And protect it they did.

BB: And I’m thinking since most property tax accrues to the local government where the property’s sited that the Anaconda Company—by virtue of keeping its own property taxes down on those trucks—was keeping Silver Bow County, I would presume, from that revenue.

DK: I expect so.

BB: And so here you’ve got the legislative delegation elected by the people in that area protecting the company instead of the revenue for the county. Of course, they could have been looking at it from the standpoint that the company was sick at that time and that they needed to do everything to keep it in existence. Perhaps that was their line of thinking. And in light of the fact that I think the Anaconda Company sold to ARCO in about 1982 or ‘83 might support that. I don’t know. So then you were reelected in 1982?

DK: Yes.

BB: And then you went on to be speaker? And was there a contest in the Democratic caucus?

DK: The contest was in the race for minority leader after the 1980 election.

BB: Who was that with?

DK: That was with Red Menahan from Anaconda.

BB: Who was sort of a part of the Butte group.

DK: That’s right. So Red and I ran against each other for minority leader. It was a very, very sharply contested, hotly contested race to the extent that those races are. They’re all behind the scenes of course, but we struggled hard for every vote, and I ended up winning by one vote.

BB: Wow. Then did he end up whip?

DK: Yes, I immediately nominated him as the whip. I felt that it was crucial that we have all the solidarity we could in our caucus. And frankly, I knew that Red would make an excellent whip, and he did.

BB: And so then you went on to become speaker in ‘83. Who was the majority leader?
DK: John Vincent was the majority leader.

BB: And incidentally, who were the Republican leaders in ’81? Was Bob Marks speaker in ’81? When you were minority leader?

DK: Yes, and now Jack Ramirez.

BB: Well, he was defeated for governor in ’80 so I don’t think he was...

DK: Okay, so he wasn’t.

BB: I don’t think he probably was in the ’81 session, but he probably was back in ’83. I think he came back perhaps as floor leader then.

DK: Right, he did. So I’m trying to remember who Bob’s majority leader was and I just can’t quite get there. [Harrison Fagg of Billings.]

BB: So, you’re speaker of the House of Representatives. Some people, I think, have—probably a consensus of people would agree that in Montana, the speaker’s the most important member because the speaker, in addition to having the presiding obligations, also appoints all of the standing committees and all of the conference committees by himself or herself. Where in the Senate, there’s a Committee on Committees that shares that power with the president of the Senate. So you’re a relatively young man, haven’t been in the legislature that long, and you’re the Speaker of the House. That must have been, you must have felt that as a heady kind of a responsibility. What were your impressions? What do you remember about it?

DK: Well, it certainly did strike me as a major responsibility, and it was, again it was somewhat of a challenge because the Democratic Party was diverse. We needed to make sure that the different factions were well represented in leadership. I think we did.

BB: You had a narrow majority too, again. I would think relatively narrow.

DK: Yes, and we had some members who were very hard to keep with the program. In fact, Tom Conroy of course eventually became a Republican. He was a Democrat at that time and always in danger of bolting.

BB: I remember, a rancher from down near Hardin.

DK: Yes.

BB: Any particular piece of legislation that stands out?
DK: One that I can remember that had some environmental importance was a bill that would have given coal slurry pipelines the power of eminent domain. Coal politics was a pretty big deal throughout all of that time, and we had a hard-fought battle over that bill. And that was—the bill was eventually defeated, but not without a lot of struggle.

BB: And there again you would have probably had to keep a weather eye on the Butte delegation.

DK: That’s right.

BB: In fact it runs in my mind that might have died in the Senate. Do you remember for sure?

DK: I don’t remember for sure. I thought that it died on a close vote on the floor of the House, but my—

BB: Well, I was involved in that to some extent, perhaps because I saw that philosophically somewhat as you did, but also because Whitefish, my hometown, is a railroad town. And so the railroads would want to haul the coal rather than have it go through the slurry line. And then you wouldn’t particularly want to foul up a whole huge amount of water in well, though maybe it wasn’t that significant; I don’t know. But anyway, that was an easy one for me to oppose, and so I don’t remember whether I helped kill it on the House side or whether it was on the Senate or not. But I remember that too.

DK: Well, and of course it was one of the rare cases where the environmentalists made common cause with the railroads. That didn’t happen very often (laughs).

BB: Now then, there’s a part of the legislative process—of course, there’s a horde of lobbyists and their various kinds. They represent economic interests and they represent organizations that have various causes that are before the legislature. Are there any environmental or any kind of lobbyists, environmental or business or any people like that that stand out in your memory? Maybe a story or two about any of them that you can think of?

DK: I’m not that great of a storyteller, as you know, Bob, so I may fail you on that score. I certainly remember John Lahr.

BB: L-A-H-R?

DK: Yes and I remember John with considerable fondness in spite of the fact that we almost never agreed about any of the issues that were most important to him and his company.

BB: Now just for purposes of the transcript of our interview here, who did he represent?

DK: He represented the Montana Power Company.
BB: Okay, and of course he’d been there for a long time. And if I remember correctly, the Montana Power Company—well I know I remember correctly—had several lobbyists there, and they had some of them who were primarily assigned, I suppose, to Republicans and some to Democrats. So Lahr was the, maybe not the only one, but certainly the most prominent Montana Power Company lobbyist who dealt with the Democrats. So, I’ve interviewed other people as a part of this same project who are Democrats and have the same fondness for Lahr that you have. What was his technique?

DK: Well, he was intelligent, for one thing. You never doubted that John was on top of whatever he was talking about. He had sort of an understated way with dealing with people. He never overwhelmed you; he always just kind of small-talked his way into whatever it was until you’d hardly even realized that you were talking policy because you thought you were talking about your relatives. And then all at once you find that you’re talking policy before you even knew it.

BB: But there’s an art to small talk too because you know if someone attempted small talk to me about the statistics of baseball, I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what they were talking about. But if someone understood me well enough to know the kinds of things that I might be really personally quite interested in, that would be an avenue to go in terms of small talk. So he must have had some intuition or maybe did some background...

DK: Oh, I’m sure he did.

BB: ...to kind of know what to talk to Dan Kemmis about. That would kind of cause Dan to relax.

DK: Yes, I’m sure that’s true. And, there again, if I had a sharper memory for details, I’d have one. But I have just the more general feeling that in any given conversation that I felt pretty good about John Lahr. And I didn’t want to oppose him.

BB: Well you know that’s particularly interesting to me because you’ve mentioned that your political philosophy was importantly influenced by the rural electrification system, the REA, which brought electrical power to your farm when you were a young person and so you have this very good feeling toward the REA. Well, of course they were in a duel to the death with the Montana Power Company in the ‘50s and ‘60s and clear up into the ‘70s over this territorial integrity business. So you couldn’t have had a good impression of the Montana Power Company when you came to the legislature.

DK: No, I did not.

BB: And so of all the corporate lobbyists, you’d think that Lahr’s task would be the greatest, probably, in terms of dealing with you.
DK: Oh yes, it was. There’s no doubt about it. And I think part of John’s effectiveness was the fact that he knew better than to try to get my support on things that I was never going to support. He was not going to waste his time doing that. And he would even somehow convey that he respected whatever my position was on those things and maybe even if he were not being paid by the company, he might have felt the same way that I did.

BB: You know that’s interesting and that observation hasn’t come up in any other interview. But what it does is trigger the thought in my mind that John Lahr was married to the daughter of General LeRoy Anderson, who was a Democratic congressman from Eastern Montana and who had deep populist farmer connections, probably Farmers’ Union connections. And I don’t know where Lahr was brought up, I don’t know whether he had those same kinds of connections or not, but certainly he would have had a close association with Anderson and his philosophy. And so maybe there was some connection between you and Lahr that way. Maybe he kind of spoke the same language in a way that neither one of you completely understood at the time.

DK: That could be.

BB: That might be part of the explanation, too. So the Anaconda Company had lobbyists that also specialized with Democrats and Republicans. Any recollections?

DK: You know Bob, you could, I’m sure, quickly refresh my memory about who they were.

BB: Well, Denny Shea is the name that jumps into my mind.

DK: Yes, but I don’t have clear recollections of him.

BB: Lloyd Crippen mostly specialized with Republicans.

DK: Right and I knew that, but I didn’t know him well.

BB: How about lobbyists for the AFL/CIO: Jim Murry?

DK: Yes, Jim, of course, was an important figure in Democratic politics at that time. And when I was in leadership, I would not infrequently have breakfast with Jim and just make sure that I understood what he was thinking about things. I was very close with Chet Blaylock, who was the Democratic leader in the Senate, and Chet and I used to have breakfast together at least once a week and sometimes Jim would join us there.

BB: Chet, just to again make sure I understand here because I’ve never had an opportunity to interview him—he passed away as you know some years ago—Chet Blaylock was a member of the state Senate from Laurel who served as minority leader, I think, for most of the early ‘80s in the Senate and maybe even three sessions. And so you would have developed a close working
relationship with him during that period. How about on the environmental side? Was there a particular spokesman, someone that stands out as a particular leader of environmental issues?

DK: Well, there were, of course, various people there. One of the memorable leaders was Phil Tawney, who at one point was the executive director of the Montana Environmental Information Center. He went on to become the executive director of the Montana Democratic Party, but Phil was one of the environmental leaders that I very much enjoyed working with. And another couple of leaders sort of from the volunteer side were Len and Sandy Sargent from down in Corwin Springs.

BB: I want to just intrude on our interview here to tell a brief story about them. You remember Pete Story?

DK: Yes.

BB: Who, of course, was a state senator from Livingston and lived down in that same area with Len and Sandy Sargent down in the Paradise Valley. The Sargents had what was called the Cinnabar Foundation, which was an environmental sort of, I suppose, a kind of think tank or something. But they were social friends of the Storys, the Sargents and Storys were. They both had ranches and that sort of thing in the area and so they knew each other socially. Sandy Sargent came to the legislature—this story was told to me by Pete Story, the senator from there, the Republican senator—and lobbied him on some environmental issues. Pete wasn’t helpful.

DK: Well, he never would have been.

BB: But she thought, “Well, I know him personally and I can maybe kind of explain this in a way that he might understand it.” So she presented two or three bills, you know, hoped that he’d be able to help her with and he wasn’t able to. He said he just couldn’t. So she returned the next session and she had a couple more ideas, took him out to dinner, and again just hit a stone wall. So memory serves, the third time this happens, she had another bill in mind, and she did the best she could, and he told her, “No, I’m sorry, Sandy.” And she said, “Well Pete,” she said, “you just seem to be so negative.” She said, “I’ve been here now, this is the third different legislative session, and discussed several bills with you, and you’ve just been against every one of them. I’m beginning to wonder if there’s anything you’re for.”

DK: (Laughs.)

BB: And he said, “Well, there is, as a matter of fact, Sandy, there is something I’m for.” And she said, “What are you for?” And he said, “I’m for the death penalty.” (Laughs).

DK: (Laughs.)
BB: He was fond of telling that story. I don’t know if that’s true or not.

DK: That probably is not the point, but I can just see Pete telling that story. He would enjoy telling that (laughs).

BB: Well, do you think….is there anything more that you want to say?

DK: You know, the only thing that has occurred to me that we haven’t talked about about that legislative part of my career is the importance Francis Bardanouve played, and I might just say a word or two about that.

BB: Please.

DK: By the time that I was elected, well partly because I was elected, Francis became what they called the dean of the House. I beat Tom Haines who was the dean, who had served the longest of any member of the House. With Tom gone, Francis became the dean of the House. He was and had for some time been the chair of the appropriations committee when the Democrats controlled the House. And Francis had established a little tradition of his own. Because he was the dean of the Democrats, in any case, he was given the place of honor right up on the aisle in the front row of the House. And I don’t know at what point, but at some point he had established the tradition of looking over the crop of Democratic freshmen and picking one and asking that that person be his seatmate and sit beside him during his freshman year. And for whatever reason, Francis decided in the ’75 session to ask me to sit beside him. So I got that experience of spending my freshman year at Francis Bardanouve’s elbow. And Francis clearly saw that as a mentoring role that he was playing, but it was never anything like a heavy-handed role. He never offered advice or very, very rarely offered advice unless you asked for it. He understood that just being there next to him and having a chance to chat with him and watch the way he operated might be of some value. Well, it was of inestimable value to this newcomer and something that I felt deeply honored by and in ways that I probably never will fully understand was shaped by that experience of being there with him.

BB: This is a difficult question, I think, but could you describe his approach?

DK: Well...

BB: What was it that—he has come up frequently in these interviews that I’ve conducted. Both Democrats and Republicans frequently mention him. How would you—so he made a profound impression on many, many, many of us over the years. Could you try to describe, if you can, how he approached his job? What was it that—why do we remember him so vividly?

DK: Well, there’s so many parts to it, of course, as you well know, so I’ll just pick out two or three that matter the most to me. One of them was the way he was with people and I mean particularly the way he treated whoever happened to come by his desk and want to talk with
him. And what struck me about that was just this absolute humility that he brought to those
counters and his capacity to listen carefully and thoughtfully and responsively to people.

BB: Very unpretentious, very generous with his time. And he, I know, had a reverence for
education, but he didn’t have the opportunity to have much formal education himself. Some
people like that are resentful of those who have education. But in Francis’ case, I think he had a
powerful enough intellect that he was secure enough to not let that trouble him. That was your
impression too?

DK: Oh, I think so. And of course with my Harvard education, Francis naturally sort of had a way
of recognizing that and probably saying he would have loved to have had that opportunity. And
so he would make me feel good about my own background, but he did that in a way that just
reinforced my understanding that there are all kinds of ways to get an education and that he
was pretty darn well-educated himself.

BB: What do you think, as you think back, that the period in which you served in the legislature
will be most remembered for?

DK: What will I be most remembered—?

BB: No.

DK: Oh, what will the legislature, those—

BB: —during that period, what would you think?

DK: Well, I came to the legislature when we were just adopting the coal tax and—

BB: The ’75 session was a momentous session.

DK: It was. And momentous in a lot of ways, but that was one of the biggest ways: The fact that
we adopted that coal tax at that point, the highest in the nation. We then immediately turned
around and put half of the proceeds into a trust fund. That, of course, has been an important
part of Montana tax and fiscal policy ever since. A lot of the environmental legislation that was
adopted there in the ’70s I think is a big part of the legacy. I think, in a sense, that what we did
then was to struggle with sort of fulfilling the promise of the 1972 Constitution and working out
some of the kinks that came with that Constitution. But it was a tremendously exciting time to
be a part of the legislature.

BB: I think that ’75 session probably more than...Well, I think in my experience that’d probably
be the single one, more than the rest and more than the ones in the early ’80s, when you were
involved again, I would think. We did some fine tuning of what we did in 1975 as late as
probably well into the ’80s. Right?
DK: Right.

BB: Anything else that you’d like to talk about?

DK: No, that ought to do it.

BB: Okay, well appreciate the interview and appreciate your public service, Dan.

DK: Thank you, Bob. Same here.

[End of Interview]