Bob Brown: Okay, we’re running. We’re interviewing Representative Carle O’Neil. Carle served in the Montana House of Representatives in the 1949 session. We’re interviewing him at his home here in Columbia Falls. Carle, what was the legislature like? What are your impressions of what the legislature was like as you entered in the 1949? Maybe I should ask you what motivated you to run and how old were you?

Carle O’Neil: I was 29 years old. I had just finished getting my master’s degree at the University. My topic for my thesis had been budget making expenditure control in a state system of Montana. So I was really interested in following up on that. While I had been researching for that, I had spent time at the capitol and I guess I was kind of struck with the aura of power there. I thought, “Oh, it would be fun to be in this House of Representatives.” You see that picture up there?

Bob Brown: Yes. That’s the picture that hangs in the front of the House chamber painted by Charles Russell on your wall here in your living room.

Carle O’Neil: So without talking to any politicians or anything, I just put my name in as a candidate. The local Democrats were shocked. “Well, who is this?” As I say, I was 29 and I looked young. So my first impression then of the legislature, I guess, was what a friendly, sociable place it was. I had no idea what to expect in that regard. Most everybody there was older than I. They were established figures. There was one young man there. He was 24, from Miles City. His name was Keith Trout, I think. He represented the labor viewpoint. So he was younger than I. Another thing that struck me was how many social things they did almost every day. There was some group there to entertain, a school group or something like that.

Bob Brown: A school choral group that would maybe come in and sing before the House of Representatives or something?

Carle O’Neil: Yes. Then another impression was that most of the power people stayed at the Placer Hotel. So the lobby of the Placer Hotel at night was a kind of very informal forum. You would kind of drift around through here and you’d see Gurnie Moss from Whitefish talking with somebody, Senator Gurnie Moss.

Bob Brown: I met him when I was just a young man. I first entered politics as I know you know in the election in 1970 and Gurnie lived, I think, until the early 1970s. He had been the editor and publisher of the Whitefish Pilot. I visited with him. I had one lengthy visit with him one day and
very much enjoyed it. He was kind of an intellectual gentleman from Missouri, I think. He was also, when you were a legislator, a pretty influential legislator, wasn’t he?

CO: Yes, he was. He didn’t take me under his wing, but he was kind to me. I felt no partisanship between us. At any rate, he and people of his generation spent a lot of time together in the Placer Hotel lobby at night, talking.

BB: It was kind of a melting pot and exchanging place for ideas and that sort of thing?

CO: Yes, especially legislators talking about bills. One thing I want to tell you that’s maybe a bit shocking, but one thing that really struck me was, that up the gulch a little ways from the Placer Hotel, there was a brothel. I don’t remember the name of it. It was somebody’s rooms. I learned that quite a few legislators hung out there and that was kind of a discussion place. I never went there. I was too—

BB: Dorothy’s Rooms perhaps?

CO: I think it was Dorothy’s Rooms. I never had nerve enough to go there. Besides I didn’t want to go there. I was always wondering what those guys do there all evening. There are some initial thoughts. Then I was impressed, too, with how seriously the leaders took the business. Leo Graybill, I was a Democrat—Leo Graybill was the head of the party.

BB: He was the Speaker of the House?

CO: He was the Speaker of the House. He was very serious about the work and how he made committee appointments and how he involved people in the issues at hand, how he attempted to influence their votes.

BB: Did Leo Graybill, the Speaker of the House, did you have caucuses in which you discussed issues?

CO: Yes, we had occasional caucuses. Initially we had a caucus or two to discuss committee assignments. Then we had occasional caucuses, but not really. He would come to you individually.

BB: Oh, he came to you individually. I see. So you had an opportunity occasionally to visit with the Speaker and he was interested in making sure you were on board on issues and that you would vote.

CO: He was. He wouldn’t put a lot of pressure on you. I remember one bill which would authorize school districts, I think it was, to bus children to Catholic schools on public buses. The school bus that went to Flathead County High School could also take children to St. Matthew’s. I thought that was—I didn’t see anything wrong with that. Leo came to me and said, “Now you
know, this gets into an issue of church and state. You can vote any way you want to, but I just want you to know that this can lead to an issue of church and state.” So I still voted to allow the bill. But I felt the leadership of Leo Graybill there. It wasn’t extreme pressure it was just, “You ought to think about that, Carle.”

BB: Did the Flathead County legislators work together as a group?

CO: No, we didn’t really. There were three of us. There was Ory Armstrong, who was a Republican.

BB: He later became Speaker of the House of Representatives, didn’t he, in the 50s?

CO: I don’t know.

BB: I think he may have.

CO: He may have. Then there was Ernest Burns from Whitefish.

BB: He was a railroad employee, I think. Just briefly tell us about those two.

CO: Well, Ernest Burns and I sat next to each other in the legislature because we were both Democrats. I never knew just where Ernest Burns was coming from. He was always friendly, but I never felt that we really related. I think he didn’t trust me because I came from a business background. I never felt that he really trusted me. We never conferred much on legislation. I don’t recall ever discussing a piece of legislation with him. I always felt that he had his opinion and it was formulated some place else than in my presence. With Ory Armstrong, I felt friendlier with him really than with Ernie. Ory told me once that after the session people asked him, “How did Carle O’Neil do over there?” He said, “Oh, he did fine. He’s a little young, but he did fine.”

BB: Carle, how was it that you happened to run as a Democrat? I know your family and I guess your nephew Jerry serves in the state Senate now as a Republican. My guess would have been that for the most part, the O’Neils are Republicans.

CO: Very much so.

BB: How did it happen that you ran as a Democrat?

CO: Well, I was young. I was idealistic. I had majored in history and political science in my undergraduate school. I just had a more liberal view, I guess, than—it wasn’t rebellion against my father. I just felt that—and also at that time, the Democrats were for pro-tariffs. I believed in that. Also, I didn’t think it would do any harm to run as a Democrat because I’d probably pick up some of the Republican votes.
BB: Well, that’s probably a shrewd way of looking at it too. So you’ve mentioned Leo Graybill, who was a prominent attorney from Great Falls and whose son, I believe, served as the chair of the constitutional convention in 1972. So that family has been active in politics for some time. I believe that Leo Graybill, with whom you’ve served with, but it could have been his son, also ran for Congress for Montana. So they’ve had an impact in the politics of our state. He stands out in your mind from what you’ve said is an important legislator, were there other important legislators? Were there other colorful legislators? Were there other individuals in the legislature in the House or Senate that made a particular impression on you?

CO: Leo Graybill really stands at the top for me. I saw him as a thoughtful politician. He was definitely a politician, but also I would qualify him as a statesman. I think he would put state above party where that makes sense. So I thought a lot of him. Others, I think Loble.

BB: Probably Lester Loble? [It was Henry Loble, who was the majority leader in 1949.] Lobles in the legislature were from Lewis and Clark County from Helena.

CO: Yes, I think he was a—

BB: They were attorneys I think?

CO: Yes, he was an attorney and he had some leadership role. I was quite impressed with him. I thought he handled himself quite well. Other than that, my best friend turned out in the legislature to be an archconservative from Scobey, Montana. His name was Neil Taylor.

BB: Neil Taylor?

CO: Yes, he was not a statesman. He wasn’t even—well he was sort of a politician. But he wasn’t out to make a big name for himself. He was just there doing his job, sort of. We ended up on a subcommittee together. And we had to travel around together. We just developed a great relationship, which continued after that session was over. I liked him.

BB: I think his son was a professor of mine at the Montana State in Bozeman.

CO: I didn’t know he had a son.

BB: Maybe it could have even been a nephew. He was up from Scobey Country and his name was Taylor and I vaguely remember—he might even have been related to Red Flag Taylor, the Communist back in the thirties. You say this fellow was a conservative, but there was a lot of division up in that part of the state. My guess is that my professor’s father or uncle was probably Neil Taylor. My guess would be that would be the case. That’s interesting. Now, we hear a lot about the great influence of the Anaconda Company during the period in which you served in the legislature. Do you have any thoughts or observations on that?
CO: Well, the first thought that comes to my mind is that there were several representatives from Butte who sat in the row right in front of me. I forget how many there were. There was one woman and then there was a young attorney who was there. I don’t think the Anaconda Company was as prominent, perhaps, as it had been or perhaps would be. This young attorney and I were once talking about the influence of the Anaconda Company. He said, “Well I’m an attorney. I work for the Anaconda Company. They don’t tell me what to do. I vote the way my conscience tells me to. But I happen to believe the same way that the Anaconda Company does.”

So I thought that was interesting. I think as an employee of the Anaconda Company, of course he would vote the way they wanted to. There was an interesting woman there from Butte too. She owned a bar. She was a lot of fun. She represented the interest of bar owners. Those days, slot machines were a big issue. Of course, she was gung-ho for slot machines in a very charming way. She would present this stuff. That was fun. The Butte group seemed to be rather close knit. They had a little kind of fraternity there. They talked easily back and forth.

I never knew exactly how much the Anaconda Company had their finger on them. I don’t think an Anaconda lobbyist ever approached me directly. They had a lobbyist there. I knew he was a lobbyist. He was a young man. He may have even have been an attorney. He was artist. He would draw a legislator aside and draw a portrait, a pencil-sketched portrait. It was kind of an ‘in’ for him. It was a nice gift. I remember at the end of the session, I went by him one day and he was sitting there sketching somebody. I said, “I wish I was a Republican and an Anaconda advocate so I could get my portrait done.” A couple of days later he came to me and said, “I’ll do your portrait.”

BB: Do you still have that?

CO: I have it some place. It wasn’t anything I framed. He not only did a portrait but he did a caricature.

BB: Do you remember who that was?

CO: I have no idea; I’m sorry.

BB: You mentioned the gambling issue. Now it runs in my mind that there was a Supreme Court decision of some kind or another that made it possible for, or maybe it was even a law the legislature, that made it possible for fraternal organizations, non-profit organizations to have legalized gambling. So many taverns would declare a part of their building, the nine order of something or other, and that’s where they would put their slot machines. So this existed in Montana, slot machines existed in Montana that way with my memory serves, for three or four years until maybe the legislature repealed the law or the Supreme Court acted in a different way or something. Do you remember anything about that?
CO: Well, now that you mentioned it, I had forgotten it. I do recall that there was something like that. The bowling alley had the Kegger’s Club.

BB: Yes.

CO: The Elks Lodge had slot machines. The VFW had slot machines. I don’t remember about the American Legion. Yes, there were slot machines.

BB: Was that a controversy in the legislature?

CO: Yes, it was. Gambling as such was a controversy. I don’t remember about the clubs. I was opposed to gambling. Another thing, may I digress for a minute?

BB: Sure.

CO: Another thing about veterans, an issue that came up was a cash bonus for Montana citizens who had been in World War II. It was quite a powerful issue because, of course, the veterans groups supported this, or at least what I called professional veterans who supported this. I didn’t make any speeches in the House of Representatives, but I did make a speech against a cash bonus for veterans.

I remember I started out by saying, “I’m one of these heroes of World War II that you seek to honor with a veterans bonus. But I’m voting against it. My reason for voting against it is that while we were overseas doing what we had to do, what in a way we were privileged to do, our parents were home. Our families were home. They were living on rations and they were paying their taxes. They were worrying night after night about what was happening to us. I don’t see wisdom in taxing them now to give us a cash bonus. Do everything possible, everything possible, for veterans that need it, who suffered, who were injured. Take care of them by all means, but do not vote for the bonus.” After that, Ory Armstrong congratulated me on that. I think he thought that too. And he was a veteran, a supporter of veterans. I always felt that was right.

BB: That was certainly a courageous decision. My guess is the bill passed.

CO: Oh of course it did. When I got home, some veterans were rather rude to me. And I understood that.

BB: You know Carle, during that session it runs in my mind that what we came to call for many years, the school foundation program was first legislated into effect in, and I believe it happened in the 1949 legislature. And Gurney Moss, who we mentioned earlier in our conversation, was characterized by some, at least around here, as the father of the School Foundation Program. It may have had several fathers. Do you remember anything about that?
The idea that there needed to be some coordinated method for funding the public schools at the state level that tried to bring some kind of coherence and equality to school funding.

CO: Sorry, I don’t remember it in much detail. I do remember that at that time, there was considerable controversy about whether the federal government should subsidize education in the states. One time while we were running for the legislature, Gurney Moss and I debated that in Whitefish in the school auditorium one evening. There was quite a crowd there. His position was that federal money should not be accepted for state education. My position was that it should.

BB: His position was based on the idea that he didn’t want the federal government to have a controlling influence and he felt that control would go with the money?

CO: Yes.

BB: Your position was?

CO: I didn’t think it would be that bad.

BB: You felt that the benefit would be greater than the downside?

CO: Yes.

BB: What committee did you serve on?

CO: The most important committee I served on was Appropriations.

BB: Because of your background?

CO: Yes.

BB: Your graduate degree was what, in economics?

CO: No history and political science.

BB: Your undergraduate was, and then your master’s degree was in?

CO: The same thing.

BB: Same thing, I see.

CO: When they were making committee assignments, they asked me what I would like. I said, “I’d especially like to be on the Appropriations Committee.” He said, “Well I don’t think I can get
you chairman.” I said, “I expect that.” He did appoint me. Then I was on a subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee that helped the state institutions. By a fluke, I think there were four of us. By fluke, the other Democrat committee wasn’t able to serve and I became chairman of the subcommittee on institutions. It was no big deal, but it was fun. I got along well with the two Republicans, one of whom was B.F Taylor. We went out and visited some of the institutions. It really had an affect on my life what I saw. That was a very interesting assignment. I was grateful to be on it.

BB: Did you go and visit the institutions?

CO: Yes, we went to the orphan’s home in Twin Bridges which no longer exists. We went to Boulder.

BB: Any memories of those visits that stand out in your mind?

CO: Yes. And we went to Warm Springs. I suppose that’s the most vivid memory.

BB: Warm Springs was and is the state mental institution.

CO: Correct, and at that time it was a huge place and very overcrowded. I was just shocked when we walked into some of these huge day rooms they called them, where people just sat, some of them in their own filth. Oh my, I hadn’t really been aware of mental health before that. I was really concerned about that. Then the next place would be the orphan’s home Twin Bridges. There again, I was awed by what I saw.

All these children in the care of the state and I said to myself, “Someday I think I’ll get into this kind of business.” I want to be some kind of service at that. In the administrator of whom I was mostly impressed was in Boulder, which was the home for, they called them mentally retarded then, feeble minded. That administrator was a doctor, a medical doctor. They had lunch for us and I was just impressed with what I saw was his commitment to the care of these people. I think his salary was something like $10,000 a year. So those are my impressions.

BB: Do you remember his name?

CO: I’m sorry, I don’t.

BB: We mentioned to you too earlier that you served during the administration of Governor John Bonner.

CO: I did.

BB: There were other statewide elected officials I believe during that period of time, Austin Middleton, I believe was a public service commissioner. Arnold Olsen was Attorney General, if I
remember correctly at that time. Do you have any recollections or impressions of any of those gentlemen? We’ll start with Governor Bonner.

CO: Well, Governor Bonner—he was friendly, outwardly friendly. He always seemed busy and detached. He was pretty friendly, but he was rushing off. He really let the party down. And he really let the state down and got in trouble himself some place.

BB: What’s your recollection of that because I remember something about some kind of an incident, the governor’s conference or something or other? How do you remember this incident?

CO: Well, I only know of it through the newspapers, of course. But he was arrested at a brothel some place down there and I think he was drunk. He tried to resist arrest or something like that.

BB: While he was attending the governor’s conference?

CO: Yes.

BB: The national governor’s conference and it was down in New Orleans or Mobile, Alabama.

CO: Yes, I think it was Alabama someplace. I was really disappointed about that. It kind of showed the level of his commitment, his principles.

BB: Now this incident occurred after the legislative session which you served. Did it surprise you, I mean knowing the governor as you did?

CO: Yes it surprised me.

BB: You wouldn’t have imagined that he would have engaged in activities like that?

CO: Oh no, I wouldn’t have imagined it. After I heard about it I thought, “Oh, okay I guess that’s him.”

BB: Did you ever visit or meet him in person when he was governor?

CO: No.

BB: Just had an impression of him in the hallway maybe or—

CO: Yes. He had a very attractive secretary. We had a relationship. We did a lot of things together like go dancing at the Montana Club and that sort of thing. But I don’t think she ever spoke to the governor about me. Another public figure at the state level though that I did have
a fond relationship with was Mary Condon. She was superintendent of public instruction. She was an Irish gal with a great wit. She was just a natural politician. She could come up with answers and justifications for positions that I—it just used to fascinate me. She was a very sharp gal. I always felt that it was too bad that she left the state after her term was up.

BB: She was defeated by Harriet Miller in a kind of an upset election, I think in 1952 perhaps in the Eisenhower landslide. She ended up going back to Washington, D.C., and gosh, I think she worked for Senator Metcalf for a while. Maybe she went back there when he was a member of the House of Representatives. She was back there for many years. Her married name was Gereau and Mary Condon Gereau was a fairly influential figure in the mix of things back in Washington, D.C., for a number of years. I don’t know if she’s still living or not. [An influential education lobbyist in Washington, who ended her career working for Sen. John Melcher, she died in 2006.]

CO: Well, we lived in Alexandria, Virginia, for four years: 1983 to 1987. One day I had a reason to call Senator Melcher.

BB: Melcher, I think that is right. Maybe she left Metcalf and went to Melcher.

CO: Yes, and I said, “My name is Carle O’Neil. I’d like to talk to somebody about something.” The person on the phone said, Carle O’Neil?” I heard somebody in the background say, “Carle O’Neil? I want to talk to him.” It was Mary Condon.

BB: She remembered?

CO: Yes, she remembered. So it turned out that she lived with her husband, I think he was Sergeant at Arms in the Senate.

BB: That could be.

CO: They lived in the apartments right across from the street from us in Alexandria.

BB: Gosh right across the street, literally?

CO: Yes, literally. So Mary and I had lunch together and talked over old times. She was still just as sharp on this stuff as she ever was.

BB: I’ve heard good things about her. Now, Arnold Olsen was the young attorney general then, I think too. Any recollections of him? He, of course, later went on and served ten years in congress.
CO: Oh, my recollections of him are more negative than positive. He didn’t relate to me at all. He just looked past me, which is okay, except you’re sensitive to that sort of thing. I just never quite trusted Arnold Olsen. We were in the same party but I didn’t trust him.

BB: Is there a basis for that? Was it just an intuition?

CO: No, just an intuition.

BB: When you first ran for the legislature, are there any incidents or stories that stand out in your mind in terms of your campaign? Here you’re this young 29-year-old. You’re starting out in politics and running for public office for the first time. Some folks may think, “Gee we would assume Carle from his family background he would be a Republican.” Did you do a lot of public speaking? Did you go door to door? Did you debate your opponents?

CO: I didn’t debate my opponents and I didn’t go door to door. I was asked to speak to various groups. I was speaking to the Business and Professional Woman in Kalispell and had that debate with Gurnie Moss and I spoke up in Whitefish. There was a man in Kalispell by the name of—

BB: What did he do?

CO: He ran the Flathead Commercial Company.

BB: McLeod?

CO: No, Tom Elliot. Tom Elliot was a well-to-do businessman in Kalispell. He was well thought of. He had been my Sunday school superintendent and my Sunday school class teacher. He was a fine man. He was a Democrat, which was unusual for a businessman in Kalispell. He just seemed delighted that I was running. He spoke on the radio for me and spoke at various groups about me. I was so touched by this. He was just a fine man.

BB: That’s interesting. That was a memory that stands out from your campaign for public office.

CO: Yes, he didn’t take me under his wing, he just was a supporter.

BB: Now it runs in my mind too, but I may have the election year mixed up, but wasn’t there a—no that might have occurred earlier. I was thinking that there was a real tough Democratic primary between Leif Erickson and Burton K. Wheeler. I think that was in 1946.

CO: I don’t think that was this year.

BB: Yes, that wasn’t the year that you were running.
CO: Leif Erickson, somehow he was to drop in and say hello once in a while. I had warm feelings for him. I would see him at the legislature. Later I was working for my dad in Kalispell and Leif stopped in several times just to say hello.

BB: He was very friendly.

CO: Yes, he was very friendly. His son Bart, I guess, lives in Whitefish.

BB: Actually Bart is no down in Missoula. He’s a federal magistrate. He’s a federal judge. He was the district judge in Flathead County for, I think briefly. He practiced law as you know, for many years in Whitefish. That was a big schism in the Democratic Party in Montana that resulted from his challenge of Burton K. Wheeler, who had been a U.S Senator for a long time. I think that happened in 1946.

CO: Yes.

BB: So did you run for re-election then?

CO: I did. I have to say my heart was not in it, I don’t think I’ve ever said that to anybody before. My legislative experience had been interesting. I felt that I was—I had served honorably and voted my conscience. I sponsored some worthwhile things. But I found it—I didn’t like some things where there was controversy, even acrimony. So I thought, “If I’m not re-elected, it’s okay.” And it turned out that it was a Republican sweep.

BB: In 1950?

CO: Yes. There were some good people in Kalispell. Cal Robinson ran for county attorney. He was defeated. Gordon Rommell ran for state senator. He was defeated. All Democrats were defeated except Dick Walsh. He was re-elected.

BB: As county sheriff.

CO: Sheriff, yes.

BB: Do you remember who the three Republicans who replaced you and Ernest Burns in the House of Representatives were? Would that have been about the time of maybe Cliff Haines?

CO: I don’t know.

BB: Clifford Haines or maybe Bob Sykes?

CO: That’s a possibility. I think Ory Armstrong—
BB: Ory would have been re-elected of course.

CO: I don’t remember the other two. It was a nasty campaign. It was terrible.

BB: Was your record attacked?

CO: Oh, yes. Oh yes and in my mind this is important. One day in the House, somebody came to me—I have no idea now who it was and said, “Here’s a letter that you want to send to Congress.” What it said in effect was that the rain that falls in the mountains belongs to the people. The use of the rain for the generation of power should be for the welfare of the people. I signed this thing. I thought, “Sure, I believe in that. The rain that falls in the mountain is owned by the people. They should profit from its use.”

This was not a formal memorial, never appeared before the House. It was just a group of people who sent this thing off to Congress. That’s all I ever heard about it. Then one day after the session, just before the next election, I was working for my dad in the lumber yard in Kalispell. I got a phone call from the assistant editor of The Inter Lake who accusingly said to me, he said to me, “You once signed a letter to the United States Congress saying that the rain in the mountains belonged to all the people, didn’t you?” It took me by great surprise. I don’t know how I responded.

BB: You must have remembered it, though.

CO: Oh, I surely did. His attitude was just, “I’ve got you nailed.” It really took me by surprise. So then his editor, a man by the name of Victor Morgan, who had been sent in here as editor for a time from some other place, really ran with this thing. They had a front-page editorial, as I remember, which said in effect that if I were re-elected, Flathead Lake would be raised and Kalispell could be flooded. It was way out.

Of course, I had a good response to that. I said, “I have an island in Flathead Lake that my father gave me for Christmas one year. Do you think I’m going to let them submerge that island?” This Victor Morgan was really aggressive and it was so bad in Kalispell. His name was Frolicker, Steve Frolicker. Did you know him?

BB: I don’t think so.

CO: He was a reporter for The Missoulian. Of course he hated The Inter Lake. He hated this Victor Morgan. He came to me and he said, “I looked it up down at the courthouse. Victor Morgan isn’t even registered to vote in this county. So, of course I used that, you know. It was awful. The night before the election, The Inter Lake got out a special edition and delivered it door-to-door just before midnight all throughout the town, maybe throughout Whitefish too. I don’t know. It was a powerful thing against Democrats. That was nasty. That kind of nastiness would boil things up. That’s one thing I didn’t miss about going back.
BB: Why was *The Inter Lake* so partisanly involved?

CO: Here’s what I think happened, you asked about lobbyists. I think that Montana Power was alert to that letter and that sort of feeling and so on, and I think that they saw that and so then they moved, in a lobbyist way, kind of behind the scenes and of course Victor Morgan was Republican and he was responsive to this pressure, if that’s what it was, from Montana Power. He stopped this young guy.

He’s a radical. There was a lobbyist for the Montana Retail Lumberman Dealers Association whom I knew because I was working in retail lumber. Somebody told me that some of the lumberman knew my father, asked this lobbyist, “How did that young Carle O’Neil do there?” The lobbyist said, “Oh, he’s a radical.” I was deeply hurt by that. I was not a radical. I really wasn’t. I don’t think I was a radical. Remember in this era, Communism was highly suspect.

BB: So the idea that all the water belongs to all the people sounded kind of like a left wing concept?

CO: Yes, and it could be that you didn’t like Montana Power. Well, I didn’t really like some of the things that Montana Power—I didn’t like their grasp on things. Nobody bothered to ask me what I did think. I thought the water that fell in the mountains could probably be best developed and marketed privately, but still the people should be the winners on its value. So that was dirty— my thought.

BB: Did you see any association between the Montana Power Company and the Anaconda Company?

CO: Oh well I always assumed there was, but I wasn’t aware of any direct—.

BB: I think for a while, at least, they had the same board of directors. The Montana Power Company was created by the Anaconda Company a century or more ago to produce the electrical power necessary for the Anaconda Company. So there was certainly a relationship. That probably would have still existed pretty strongly in the 1940s and ‘50s when you were involved.

CO: Oh, yes, I’m sure. But no lobbyist from Montana Power or Anaconda Company ever approached me. As a matter of fact, I don’t remember any lobbyist ever approaching me, except this guy from the Lumber Dealers Association.

BB: Who was that?

CO: I don’t know his name.
BB: Was he from around here?

CO: He lived in Helena.

BB: Do you remember organized labor, the AFL/CIO, any significance in regard to them?

CO: I don’t. The only thing I remember about them is Ernie Burns and then this Keith Trout, who came from Miles City.

BB: How about the Farmers Union?

CO: I felt their presence in the campaign preceding the election. They invited me to speak to them once. I remember going to a meeting down on the west end of Kalispell and speaking at them. They were known as radical. I was a little uncomfortable at their meeting because I’d heard some of them were Communists. And I didn’t know how to talk to Communists. Of course, I wanted to make a good impression on them. I didn’t know how to do it. My impression there is that Farmers Union was suspect as Communist.

BB: This would have been kind of at the beginning of the Red Scare Era, maybe not even at the beginning of it, but the so called “McCarthy Era” that extended from the late Forties into the middle Fifties or late Fifties even?

CO: I don’t know just when it began, but I do know there was a lot of feeling about Communists and Socialists at this time.

BB: That was—could have been used—well apparently it was as a political issue? If you could tar someone as questionably a Socialist or a Communist, you could really damage them politically.

CO: Oh yes, and that’s the implication The Inter Lake gave me. An indictment, but they let it flow and Cal Robinson was (unintelligible) on them.

BB: Do you remember any folks named Siderius involved in the Farmer’s Union?

CO: I do.

BB: Because they continued to be in politics here. In fact, George Siderius was elected to the House of Representatives in 1954.

CO: I remember that.

BB: I served in the House of Representatives in Montana when he was in the state Senate. Any recollections of him?
CO: Well, the first thing that comes to the mind is I knew where they lived down south of Kalispell. I knew their farm. They went to Presbyterian Church and I knew them vaguely there. Then one day I had a phone call from them. I was still unmarried and was living with my parents. He said, “I’d like to come and talk to you.” So he came and I saw him at my parents’ home in Kalispell. He said, “I’m thinking of running for the legislature. What would you think of that? What advice would you give me?” So I don’t know beyond that, but we chatted and I guess I probably encouraged him to run. I think he ran successfully.

BB: Yes, he did. He was in the House in, I think, from ’54 to ’58 and then in the Senate from about ’58 to about ’74. He was there for quite a while.

CO: Yes, so he must have been well thought of.

BB: Yes, I think he was. Do you remember, the other legislators that I mused in several cases that made mention of the watering holes, as they were called. They were hospitality rooms. You mentioned the lobby of the Placer as a kind of a big melting pot and meeting place, that sort of thing. As I understand it, the railroads, maybe as an association, I know the Anaconda Company and I’m not sure who else, but there might have been at some time earlier several of these hospitality rooms existed. Legislators could go there and have roast beef sandwiches and whiskey and beer and that sort of thing. Do you remember anything about those?

CO: I was vaguely aware that they existed. But I was never invited to them. The one I remember was not a hospitality room. It was the Montana Club. I loved that place. It had class. You went there at your own expense. I do recall being invited to a dinner sponsored by somebody. I don’t know now who it was. I attended a dinner. So far as hospitality rooms, no, I never went to them.

BB: Do you remember an old fellow who was the bartender at the Montana Club by the name of Julian Anderson?

CO: No.

BB: I guess he was of African American of descent and he was the bartender there for some incredible amount of time, like from 1914 to 1974 or something like that. I don’t know. It must have been ’64 because I think I would have remembered him in ’74. He was a legendary bartender.

CO: No, I remember some good times there with Val Wordell, who was the governor’s secretary. We went there and danced and had a few drinks and that sort of thing.

BB: There was a young fellow, in my memory here, by the name of Blake Wordell, who probably was related in some way or another to Val, who I think served maybe at the cabinet level in
Governor Judge’s administration. He might also have been a county commissioner in Lewis and Clark County briefly too. That’s from the Helena area, so there could be that connection.

CO: Oh that could be. I didn’t know she had a brother.

BB: He would have been a fair amount younger. He might have been, I think he’d be in his fifties now. I’ve lost track. There could be a connection there. Anything you remember about any other specific piece of legislation in the 1949 session? We talked a little bit about gambling. We talked a little bit about education. You mentioned you sponsored some bills.

CO: I sponsored one bill where I was asked to introduce one bill. Gordon Rommell asked—

BB: Gordon Rommell (?) was a prominent attorney in Kalispell for many years.

CO: Yes, a prominent attorney and Democrat.

BB: And Democrat.

CO: I don’t know who drafted this bill. It was probably the Parks Service, the National Parks Service. At any rate, the bill enabled the trade of some state land at the border of Glacier National Park for some federal land. So I did introduce that bill. I think I may have gotten Ory Armstrong to co-sign on that. I’ve kind of forgotten about it. At any rate, the bill passed with no problem. It was really not controversial. It just enabled this transfer and increased the size of Glacier Park. It didn’t harm the state any. So that was a bill that—

BB: So it expanded the size of Glacier Park on the west side of the park?

CO: I think so.

BB: That’s why you introduced the bill because it was on the Flathead County side of the park?

CO: Yes.

BB: So where would the area—along the north fork of the Flathead River? Is that where it would have been? It would have been south of Highway 2 maybe.

CO: No, I think it would have been—

BB: In the Essex area.

CO: I think it would have been—I never went to see it really. I think it would have been probably west and north of West Glacier, in that area somewhere. It was quite a few acres. It runs in my mind that it was like 1,200 acres. I’m not sure.
Governor Bonner signed it into law.

Yes, the summer then the head ranger took me fishing up at Kintla Lake to thank me for my sponsorship of the bill. When they had the dedication, they didn’t invite me to that. They had Ory Armstrong go speak, which was okay. Those are funny details, aren’t they?

BB: Anything else in your experience as a legislator or any other impression maybe about Montana politics during that period of time that you’d like to visit about? It’s kind of an open ended question.

I mentioned the Placer Hotel and the older people, better established people stayed at the Placer Hotel.

BB: Now what do you mean by “better established people”?

Oh, I mean like Gurnie Moss.

BB: The more senior legislators and that. Gurnie, of course, had served in the House of Representatives back in the twenties, I think, at the time of Governor Joe Dixon clear through the thirties, off and on. He had been defeated a time or two. When you served with him, he had been in the Senate. I think he had been the—it runs in my mind that he had been the minority leader for the Republicans in the House of Representatives in the twenties or thirties a time or two and he might even have been the Republican floor leader in the Senate at the time you were there or about the time you were there. He was a pretty prominent Republican politician from Flathead County and actually in Helena for close to a quarter of a century.

Oh very, yes. I respected him. I didn’t agree on things, but he was a decent, honorable man. He was working not for a career, but for the state. I always felt that way about him. People like him, they had an income. They didn’t have to live on a seven-dollars-per-diem that we got when I was there. So they stayed at the Placer Hotel, which was more expensive. I stayed at the Y.M.C.A where I got a room, I think, for a dollar a night. I’m not sure about that, but the Y.M.C.A doesn’t have rooms anymore.

They did then. I had a good feeling really about life in Montana. I felt that there were good people in the legislature who wanted to do the right thing. They might not agree on what the right thing was, but we were striving to do the right thing for a great state that we all cared about. I also was rather surprised at how much fun legislators had. There were always parties and all these entertainments and so on. It took me by surprise. It was okay. I needed to relax.

BB: So the parties were what, like birthday parties? I’ve heard that there used to be the occasional birthday parties for legislators?
CO: That might be, or just like dating, like Val and I dated. Other people were out social at night. There was a place west of town that was the Night Owl.

BB: The Night Owl probably.

CO: That was a hang out for legislators too. What I’m trying to say was there was an element less than serious and some of it slightly corrupt, like going to Dorothy’s Rooms. That sort of bothered me, my Presbyterian conscience and my idealism about what statesmanship involved. But overall comes the stronger feeling that there were people there who cared.

BB: Carle, you mentioned that it stood out in your memory apparently that you went to one dinner. Why did that stand out in your memory?

CO: I don’t know.

BB: Was it hosted by a corporation or something or other?

CO: It was hosted by somebody.

BB: The Montana Power Company or the Anaconda Company?

CO: That I can’t say. I’m not sure. It was probably—I just don’t know.

BB: Like a sit down dinner around the table and legislation was discussed and other legislators were there too?

CO: I don’t know if there was any legislation discussed.

BB: Were other legislators present?

CO: Yes, I remember my friend Neil Taylor was there. That’s the only hosted thing that I ever went to.

BB: That would be as close as you can remember that you were ever lobbied.

CO: Right.

BB: Now you mentioned that Gurnie Moss stayed at the Placer Hotel. Did Ory Armstrong stay there?

CO: I’m sure he did.

BB: And so do you think that was a place where more Republicans than Democrats stayed?
CO: That I don’t know.

BB: Do you know any other people who stayed there? Did you visit them there, have dinner with them there, or anything like that?

CO: I don’t recall having dinner there. It was an evening hangout. You might just drift in or drift down from the room if you lived there and talk. There was one other young legislator there. He was a Democrat and he was very serious. He was very devoted to his work. John—I’ve never seen him since then and I’ve always respected and admired him and wondered what happened.

BB: What county was he from?

CO: Some eastern county, mid-eastern county. I don’t even remember that. I’d have to go to the library and look it up. I should do that. We would discuss bills kind of by the hour. I don’t remember whether he’s still here or not. I’m the only one that stayed at the Y.M.C.A. I wonder if John did. He was a very serious, committed statesman.

BB: You had no contact with him in recent years?

CO: Not after the session (unintelligible).

BB: So you don’t know if he was re-elected or anything like that?

CO: I think he was re-elected, but I’m not sure about that. He was a good person.

BB: It might be interesting for me to contact him if he was young. He might still be somebody who—

CO: I think he may have been two or three years older than me. I’ll look his name up if you’d like. I’ll have to go to the library and check back to you.

BB: I might have some old copper books. I don’t know if they go back that far. Do you remember the copper books? Maybe they didn’t have them when you were there. Well, the Anaconda Company used to publish a copper colored book that had a picture and the vital statistics on each legislator for each legislative session and give them out at the beginning of the session. They would be in alphabetical order. If you were there, your picture would be in it and your date of birth and if you were a veteran or not, whether you were a Lutheran or Presbyterian or Catholic, wife and three children, serves on the such-and-such committee. The such-and-such committee first elected in nineteen whatever it was and so on.

CO: I kind of vaguely remember that. In the records of the laws that were passed, what do you call it?
BB: The Montana Code Annotated or the Revised Code of Montana?

CO: No just the journal. His name would be there.

BB: Oh yes. Sure it would be, yes.

CO: I’ll look it up. I have looked it up a couple of times years past, but then I have forgotten.

BB: Now Carle there was someone else who was a legislator at that time that became a pretty eminent figure in state politics shortly after you left state politics. That was J. Hugo Aaronson. Do you remember him at all?

CO: Well, I think he was in the legislature when I was. I remember him as a big man, a friendly man. I think he had an accent. I think he spoke like “this.” He seemed to be well liked. I don’t think we ever spoke face to face. That’s all I know about him. I know he died out here at the Veterans Home. I do volunteer work out there. So I think (unintelligible).

BB: Let me mention a couple of more names that may have come after you, but I’m not sure. Does the name Al Wilkinson ring a bell?

CO: No.

BB: Does the name Denny Shea ring a bell?

CO: No.

BB: Billy Ray?

CO: No.

BB: Boo McGillivray?

CO: Yes.

BB: What do you remember about him?

CO: I think he was in the Senate when I was in the House.

BB: From Lake County.

CO: Is that where he was from?
BB: That’s where he served in the state Senate from. He was also a lobbyist for many years. The names I just mentioned were prominent Montana Power and Anaconda Company lobbyists. I think Anaconda Company lobbyists actually.

CO: Oh, okay maybe that’s where I heard where he’s from.

BB: He represented, I think, Montana Power Company for a while, but he also served in the state Senate from Lake County. I think it was prior to when you were there, but it might not have been. He was a pretty prominent lobbyist in the—

CO: Somehow I know the name.

BB: Yes, that’s kind of a memorable name. He was famous for the baking powder biscuits story. When I came to the legislature, he was pretty elderly and he served on the State Historical Society Board. He once told me the baking powder biscuits story. I’ll tell it if you’re—

CO: Yes.

BB: Okay I’ll tell you right now I guess. He came to Montana from Baraboo, Wisconsin so that’s how he got the nickname “Boo.” I don’t know what his real name was. He was just a teenager and he was interested in being a cowboy. So he got a job as a cowboy with no experience at a ranch up here near Havre and the Little Rockies, somewhere up probably east of Havre. So he was involved in a roundup at a time of year when it was cold and snowy and that sort of thing. I don’t know whether it would have been early in the spring or late in the fall, or whenever it was.

He was up in the mountains, inexperienced, 17 or 18 years old, and he got lost. He was frightened and he was cold. He was hungry and he had been up there for two or three days. He came across this little dugout that obviously had been inhabited. He went inside and struck a match and maybe lit a candle or something. Anyway, he got to kind of see inside and there was a stove there. He found a skillet and he found some flour and he found some baking powder in a can on the shelf.

He put all that stuff together and put some water in it. He got a fire going in the stove. He made himself some sort of crude, crunchy, not very good— they didn’t rise very well. He said baking powder biscuits, but they were something to get in his stomach, you know. It really tasted good to him and he was finishing up with those when this man, who lived in the dugout, came into the dugout. He was an Indian man. He told Boo to relax, sit down, and that everything was fine.

Obviously he was hungry and needed something to eat, he need a place to find shelter. So they struck up a conversation and it turned out that this old guy was from the Dakotas. His family had been killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre. He had been a hermit in the Montana

Carle O’Neil Interview, OH 396-006, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
mountains most of the time since then. He came there as a young man and just kind of subsisted up there in the mountains.

He told Boo, “It’s been kind of a lonely life. I came here a long time ago and I just kind of lived up here in this lonely and solitary life by myself.” When the Wounded Knee Massacre occurred, of course it was in the winter. The ground was frozen so they couldn’t bury the dead. So they cremated them. He said, “In fact, that’s my dad’s ashes in that Calumet baking soda can, or baking powder can, on the shelf.” Boo had just eaten them in his baking powder biscuits. He told that story to a lot of guys over the years.

When I was a young legislator I had a friend named Bill Kirkpatrick who had been a lobbyist and then he’d been away to New York for a while. Then he returned to Montana again but he was interested in history and he liked to talk to me. I enjoyed him very much. He said, “Well gosh a guy you should meet is Boo McGillivray. He was a lobbyist here for many years. Have him tell you the baking powder biscuit story.” So I found him and sat down with him in the Senate cloak room and he knew immediately when I mentioned the baking powder biscuit story and he told me the story I just told you.

CO: Wow, that’s a great story.

BB: Anything else you can think of?

CO: Oh, you know you get ego involved in something like this and you have to be careful.

BB: No, say what’s on your mind.

CO: Oh no, no. My mind is still lingering on this business of ethics and the dedication of a lot of good people. I also remember who was having an affair, like there was one guy there who was in the House. His secretary from home was there. They were staying together in Helena during the session. I happened into a place to eat breakfast one morning and there they were eating breakfast. They were kind of shocked to have—it was out of the way place. So there was—it was humanity. All elements of humanity and human behavior were there. I still think that.

BB: Do you remember a legislator by the name of Frank Hazelbaker?

CO: Yes. I remember the name Hazelbaker.

BB: He was in the House of Representatives some time I— well, he might not have been...

CO: Ahead of me. Didn’t he become—
BB: He was Speaker of the House and he was the Public Service Commissioner and that sort of thing. I think you’re right. I think he was there earlier in the forties and then he was there again later in the sixties.

CO: Wasn’t he warden of the prison?

BB: I don’t think so, but I don’t know for sure. Middleton was.

CO: Oh, Middleton. Incidentally, I don’t know what your relationship with students would be at the university, but the first warden at the Montana State Prison was a fascinating figure.

BB: Frank Conley?

CO: Yes. I once thought of trying to do a biography of him. It would require going to Helena for a couple of months just to do research, and probably in Missoula. History really needs to record that man’s career.

BB: I’ll tell you, have you got the biography of Joe Dixon?

CO: Yes.

BB: There are numerous references to Conley in that book.

CO: Yes and I’ve read those. I did write a short story on him that’s been published. It was mainly truthful, but the ending is fictional. Anyway, there was something that if a student was looking for a research project, I would sure encourage somebody who was interested in biography and politics and so on. He was an influential man in the Republican Party in this state.

BB: Yes, in fact I visited the—when I was running for governor, I visited the penitentiary in Deer Lodge and was given a tour. The tour included taking you up to Conley Lodge because the prison lodge was Conley’s ranch. Convicts worked on his ranch. He had this little pond up in the mountains on the edge of his ranch and this beautiful little lodge. A fellow that was conducting the tour said, “Warden Conley entertained prominent politicians up there on a more or less regular basis. They could do a little fishing in his trout pond. They would have a good meal. They would drink some whiskey or have a beer. They would have a very relaxed weekend in a beautiful place.” So he wasn’t just an ordinary rancher or prison warden. He was one of the most influential people in state politics.

CO: Yes, and he’s the only prison warden that I know of who ended up well to do. He built the town of Deer Lodge with prison labor. They made the water system and sewer system. So he was quite a person.

Carle O’Neil Interview, OH 396-006, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: Yes, he was. In fact, I understand it that prison labor was important even in highway construction projects in the state?

CO: Yes, he built part of the east shore of Flathead Lake.

BB: East shore, Flathead Lake.

CO: Yes, Blue Bay. And brought 75 prisoners and two guards. It’s amazing.

BB: When was that, the Twenties?

CO: Oh, it would have to be. I presume it was the Twenties. I’ve kind of forgotten. I’d have to look.

BB: Before we conclude our interview, I know there’s a person I’ve long been interested in from here in this area that you might know or I bet your dad knew, John E. Erickson who was governor in the twenties and into the thirties.

CO: He lived a block from us in Kalispell.

BB: Where about did he live?

CO: On First Avenue West.

BB: I see.

CO: I think lived in the 600 block. We lived in the 500 block.

BB: Yes, Lois Himsl told me that she remembered vaguely the Erickson family.

CO: Yes, the Himsls lived in the same block.

BB: The Rolands right, Roland?

CO: Yes.

BB: You knew her.

CO: Oh yes. She had rubber tire roller skates.

BB: Do you remember anything about Governor Erickson?

CO: No, I think he was before my time.
BB: Yes he was. He left office in 1932 and he was a U.S Senator until 1934. I think he may have retired in Helena and not in Kalispell. He was a district judge in Kalispell prior to his election to governor. He was governor through the twenties, most of the twenties and into the thirties. He defeated Dixon in 1924, but certainly your dad would know him.

CO: Oh yes. I don’t think he had a real strong record, did he?

BB: Well, historians haven’t been real kind to him. Dixon was a flamboyant independent. He got in trouble with the powers that be in the state for trying to tax the Anaconda Company on its gross proceeds or net proceeds or something or other. Anyway, he determined a way to tax them where they had to pay taxes. They couldn’t get out of it by some kind of work keeping sleight of hand as they had been doing before. His tax measure finally succeeded by initiative. He couldn’t get it through the legislature. Then he was defeated by Erickson in the general election. Erickson was generally regarded as the candidate that the Anaconda Company backed to defeat Dixon. He remained, you know, kind of a not very memorable governor. But he was elected three times.

CO: Oh, you mean Erickson?

BB: Yes. He was a prominent citizen in Kalispell when your dad would have been a young businessman. Well one of my interviews this afternoon is going to be with Matt Himsl.

CO: Oh well, that should be good. That should be a good one.

BB: He was the Republican county chairman through the 1950s for most of that period of time. I’ve heard him mention Vic Morgan before. You mentioned Vic Morgan in our conversation.

CO: They would have been friends I think.

BB: He knew him at least. I’ve heard him mention him. I think I heard him mention one time that there was some kind of a thing down at the Daily Inter Lake. This might have been Jim Murphy too. I’ve heard Jim Murphy mention Dick Morgan as well. There were some Republican elders that were invited down the Inter Lake by Morgan at night and it was some kind of an early meeting and they had to get something together for some big news story. With Morgan it was usually kind of exciting and kind of conspiratorial.

CO: That fits.

BB: Well look, I think we’re about ready to conclude our interview. Anything you want to say to just kind of wrap it up?
CO: I don’t think so. I’ve really enjoyed our get together and I’m surprised that you even thought of asking me to do this. It’s been fun. I wish you well and I think you’ve been a great citizen.

BB: Great, thanks Carle. Thanks so much.

[End of Interview]