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Interviewee: Magnus Aasheim
Interviewer: Bob Brown
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Bob Brown: We're visiting with Magnus Aasheim at his home in Plentywood. Magnus served in the legislature from when?

Magnus Aasheim: Nineteen fifty-nine, for four terms.

BB: Nineteen fifty-nine to nineteen sixty-six, I guess, and he also was a delegate for the state Constitutional Convention.

MA: Yes sir.

BB: And was also active, I believe, in the Farmers Union.

MA: I wasn't as active as I shouldn't have been. I supported the Farmers Union.

BB: Tell me a little bit about what got you interested in politics.

MA: Well, I taught school for 13 years. Then I went into farming in Sheridan County. Right away I got dragged into politics. I became the chairman of the Democratic Party. That was the beginning.

BB: About when would that have been?

MA: Oh, about 1956. Okay, I got started in being a chairman and then there was a vacancy for the representative. So whether I got the idea or someone else idea, I don't recall. Understand now, in the middle of the '50s, this was a predominantly a Democratic county. I went into it feeling quite confident I would have very little difficulty. I went in and I won quite handily the first year. So I went into the legislature. You don't want to hear about that do you?

BB: I do.

MA: I didn't spend much money campaigning, I think 100 dollars. That's all I spent. Times were different, weren't they?

BB: It's amazing now.

MA: Well I didn't do much advertising. I did some campaigning. I won handily. We're 500 miles from Helena. So I had to leave someone up on the farm and my wife and my kids were going to

high school. One of them was on the basketball team. I hated to leave, but I had to go. I didn't come back here for any games. I stayed right in Helena. I wanted to come back, but I didn't go. A fellow had to be there. Do you want me to talk about that first session at the legislature?

BB: Yes, please.

MA: I was a greenhorn, pure and simple greenhorn. I got in there and the Republicans—we had won—the Republicans the year before, and we won. The Democratic Party had won.

BB: So a majority of Democrats.

MA: Yes, in both the House and the Senate. So we were faced with raising money. There was a foursome in Billings. They're very aggressive antagonists. They gave us a bad time. They said we couldn't even get paid the first time because there wasn't any money. Someone else said, "Oh, yes we can stop you. You've got to pay the legislators for it because they have a constitutional right to be paid."

So they had to be paid. So that was settled. We had a Republican governor, Aronson. Well, speaking critically, he was as rough as a rock. He was well-received by the public. I sort of gave him a bad time and I should not have. I was learning from the opposition that giving the opposition a bad time was the thing to do. It's a very bad situation. They were really antagonistic. They had a very influential state chairman.

BB: The Republicans did?

MA: Oh yes.

BB: Who was that?

MA: A fellow from Poplar. I forget what his name was. He was on the radio every day—

BB: Mel Engels?

MA: Well, I don't think so. That sounds familiar but I don't think it was. Anyway, he was on the radio every day giving us a bad time. We had to raise money. So we taxed everything there was. You know by now that you don't do that in politics. If we had just raised the income tax one percent and taken care of it, that would have been simpler. We didn't do that. We taxed everything we could from baby boots to a bottle of beer.

One lobbyist said to me, "Criminy, you're now going to tax the poor man's drink." So it went. I think it was that year—no, that was the next year—we were floundering to find sources of money. We just kept on picking up a tax here and there, which is not the way to go. We were

agreeing and that's the simple thing I can say so far. I didn't introduce but one bill in that first session. It wasn't something that I particularly wanted to do.

The livestock people said, "We need a diagnostic center for livestock." So they came over and said, "We want you to introduce this bill." So I did, and it went through. You wouldn't guess how easily it went. Even the Republicans said, "We needed that." So they set up a diagnostic lever (?) and that was the only thing I did except vote.

BB: Now Magnus, you mentioned that you said some things that were critical of Aaronson. You said you were critical of him. What happened there?

MA: He was a little bit crude. He had a Norwegian brogue. Like we said, he had a talk and he said, "I drove through Montana. I jumped off the train at such-and-such place and I started my story." His personality appeals to the people. We should have been more careful in our criticism. It seemed like criticism was a way of life in the real legislature.

BB: What did you say about him?

MA: Oh, I don't remember.

BB: You just remember that you were critical of him.

MA: Yes. I didn't make it a big deal, but I don't recall. We didn't feel he was governor material. He was a rank and file individual, mud in his boots anywhere, and at that time wearing overalls.

BB: He was sort of a common man kind of a guy.

MA: A very common man, yes. Individually, fine, and you liked him. You kind of wondered if he was capable of being a governor.

BB: Now Ted Schwinden was a state legislator at that first session in '59 too wasn't he? Ted Schwinden went on to become governor.

MA: I can't remember. I can't remember if Ted Schwinden was in the legislature then. He probably was. If I had a book I would tell you.

BB: I think he was in '59 and '61.

MA: Okay, yes.

BB: So you remained in the legislature. You were re-elected in 1960.

MA: I was re-elected three terms.

BB: Now Magnus, do you remember a bill in the '59 session that would have created public utility districts?

MA: Oh, I can remember the fight at that time.

BB: Tell me about that.

MA: I don't think I know enough about it to remember. There was such a controversy there between the Democrats and the Republicans on public utility districts. I can't remember too much except there was a controversy. Right now, I don't remember if we were for public utility or not.

BB: You know, you mentioned that there was this conflict between Democrats and Republicans. So it was a philosophical thing. You became the Democratic chairman in 1956. What was it about the Democratic Party philosophy that attracted you? Why did you become a Democrat?

MA: That's a very good question. I'll tell you why I became a Democrat. It's a long story.

BB: Good, tell us.

MA: Okay. I was born on a farm. I got my grade school education at a country school. I went to a high school in Medicine Lake in Antelope. In 1926 I graduated from high school. I got a job in Reserve working in a hardware store delivering gasoline for the community oil company. The community oil company was a cooperative effort. We were greatly unviewed with the cooperative effort. I had no political feelings at that time. I'll tell you what, the Republicans had a meeting in the hardware store. There were about seven of us there. I came and Mr. Holje was a Republican. They nominated me and a fellow out on the reservation to be the delegate to the convention in Plentywood. Well I didn't want to vote for myself so I voted for the opposition. He won by one vote. I always make fun of that. I came from a near tragedy at that time.

BB: If one vote had gone the other way, you might have been a Republican?

MA: I don't know.

BB: Magnus, you probably wouldn't have much of a recollection of this. You'd just have been a teenager, but there was a battle royal for governor in 1924. Governor Joe Dixon was a progressive Republican and that was probably when you were still a high school student. Do you have any recollection of Dixon or any of that era?

MA: No; at that time I wasn't interested in politics. I was still in high school. You asked me why I came to be a Democrat. Well, how old are you?

BB: Fifty-seven.

MA: Oh, you're a kid. You didn't hit the Depression.

BB: No.

MA: There's this book, *A Red Flag Taylor*—

BB: Yes, and of course I want to know about that too.

MA: Later on, later on. Anyway, I got to some total of 75 dollars a month working for Montana. I wasn't complaining. I was tickled pink to have a job. I had worked for a farmer for 2.50 an hour—2.50 dollars a day. I just accepted hard times. Then there was this fight between the Taylor group and the "mainstreeters" as they called them. I wasn't involved in that even. I was just a young fellow.

BB: The Taylor group represented who?

MA: Troy Taylor. It depends on who's in power. If the Republicans were in power, he'd be a Republican. If the farmer labor were in power, he'd be a farmer labor. He wound up being a farmer labor.

BB: Describe Charlie Taylor then. He was a radical?

MA: You know, that takes a book to describe him. I want to tell you why I became a Democrat. Anyway, I got this job in Reserve of 75 dollars a month. I had free room but I had to pay three dollars for food. So I spent most of it for something, a dime here, a dime there. By the end of the month it was all gone. Anyway, I worked there for a year and a half. I thought, "Oh, gee, this is no future." This is in '29. My brother was in Dillon. I wanted to go to Dillon and get a job as a teacher. So I went to Dillon and in '31 I graduated and got my diploma from Dillon. It wasn't easy to get a job, but I got a job in Antelope for 125 dollars a month.

BB: A teaching job?

MA: Yes and coaching.

BB: At the high school?

MA: Coaching grades in high school. Teaching and coaching high school.

BB: What did you teach?

MA: General, everything. I taught everything to be taught to the seventh and eighth graders. Okay, so times were tough and the farmers couldn't pay their taxes. My salary went from 125 to 100 dollars. The next year it went down to 90 dollars. The superintendent was starting out at 2,000 dollars. He went down to 1,400 dollars for a year's work. We both said, "Let's quit." I needed to get my degrees. I'm going to go to school and get my degree. I had 400 dollars. I saved 400 dollars. So I went to Missoula in the summer and started my work for my degree. Three summers and a regular year, I got my degree. At 90 dollars a month, I might as well go to school and spend my time going to school. I did. This was back in 1934.

BB: Did you know Mike Mansfield at the University of Montana then?

MA: I saw him. He was a teacher.

BB: Yes. I think he was a graduate student and maybe a teacher then when you were there in 1932 or 1934.

MA: Yes. I didn't have a class with him, but I knew who he was. He wasn't necessarily my idol at the time. I knew about him. Anyway, so I taught school.

BB: You came back here to teach school?

MA: Antelope.

BB: You came back to Antelope.

MA: For three years, yes. Then I got a degree and went to Belfry. I taught two years in Belfry High School. I think I got 140 dollars. I was offered a job in south of Missoula, that big town down there in the Bitterroot Valley.

BB: Hamilton?

MA: Yes, Hamilton. He said, "I'll give you 90 dollars." With 90 dollars I can't eat and live on. He said, "We have beautiful scenery." I said, "I can't eat it." So I took the job at Belfry for 140 dollars. I was there for two years. Then I built me a service at Cooke City. It was an idea of teachers to spend the summer up there at Cooke City and teach in the wintertime. Lo and behold, a vacancy occurred at Outlook. They gave me the job.

Let me tell you a story. This happened in the daytime but it was night before I got through. On my way back to Cooke City, it was dark. I drove between Forsyth and Miles City and I got sleepy. So I turned off the road and took a nap. When I woke up, I thought, "Now, which way do I go?" I didn't know whether to go this way or that way. I used to watch the North Star when I was a kid. I said, "I'll find the north star." So I went out and found the Dipper and the North Star.

It set me off back to Cooke City. Anyway, getting back to...I got my job at Outlook and it was tough being a superintendent in northeastern Montana. There were nine teachers. We had a gymnasium and great basketball fans at Outlook. We got a new gymnasium and we had...If you had a big family, we gave them special rates, you know, just to get them to come to school. All right, I think I wound up at Outlook at 1,800 dollars a year. I went to Froid for a year. A vacancy happened at Scobey. So I thought, "Gee, that's a pretty good place." So I threw my coat in the car and drove up to Scobey.

I met Mr. Karls, the chairman of the board. He said, "Here's the contract. I hope that you can teach us how to beat that Outlook basketball team." So I got the job. I got 3,000 dollars a year. Anyway, I hired two teachers. It was much easier to get teachers up there than at Outlook or Froid. Outlook is in the boondocks just like Reserve. People weren't very interested in coming unless they needed a job. So anyway, my father-in-law was going out of the livestock business. I said, "Wait a while," to my wife. I introduced my wife. That's Thelma.

BB: Yes, I did get to meet her.

MA: So I said, (unintelligible). He said, "Why don't you come down on the farm?" Well that's a pretty tough change. I thought about it awhile. Scobey, we had two young kids two and three years old. We lived upstairs in an apartment. I thought and said, "Gee, wait a minute." I had three jobs in the teaching profession. It was too easy to get that Scobey job. Before, I did labor to get a job. Here's my contract. He gave me a contract.

Anyway, so things were changing. Maybe it wasn't so good to be a teacher. We're moving from pillar to post all the time, always changing. We don't have a community, a community we can call our own. That kind of settled it right there. There must be better things, so we took over the farm. It was a radical change. I had been in a suit and a tie for 13 years. We didn't think about going to school without a tie on.

BB: About when would this have been, 1940 or so?

MA: It was 1945 I finished. It was '44.

BB: So it was during the war?

MA: I got the job at Outlook in '37. I was up there for seven years. It was during the war, yes. We were rationed. I had to take another coaching job because we lost our coach here.

BB: These years when you were a teacher were the years that influenced you to become a Democrat?

MA: No, not very much so. What I could see the hard times people were having to pay their taxes, yes, I think that was the thing. I'll tell you the struggle between the Democrats and the

Republicans. I didn't get involved in that when I was teaching. I had a job. I didn't realize how much a man should have being a superintendent. I liked my teaching work. I did like being with kids. Anyway, there were people who couldn't pay their taxes, people who had kids.

At this time, there was this fight between the Taylor group and the other side. If you want me to talk about [Charles] Taylor, I can tell you more then. I didn't even know Taylor. I knew who he was on the street, but I never talked to him. I wasn't really concerned about him. Anyway, the times were tough for everybody. So then I moved to Froid for a year and times were tough down there. I got this job and then that's where I became a Democrat. I got in the fight between the laboring man, the farmer, and the people who had...It was kind of a tragic situation.

Taylor was a really bright man. He had it in that the laboring man—the farmers—were being used. The other side, the people who were service men—the mainstreeters they called them—they were taking advantage of them. The event of it became pretty rough at that time. I went back to farming. It wasn't all that. I became a Farmers Union member because you'd get your stuff cheaper at the Farmers Union stores. The crowd, they were always supporting me. They always supported me. I supported them. I didn't like this fight between the rural and the urban. It was pretty bitter.

The tragedy is that it's still hanging over. It's still in there. Here's the thing: I would say that pretty near half of the people were influenced by Charlie Taylor because he was for them. Here they were. Suppose you had a family, four or five kids, and that was common. They didn't have clothing. They had to go to the doctor. They didn't have food. There's something wrong with the system. Taylor says we've got to change it. I came from Norwegian parentage. My line of the Norwegians, Scandinavians, they were pretty conservative.

They had to work for what they got. I still felt that we had to work. You weren't supposed to get a hand out. You were supposed to work for a living. I had that in the background in my mind all the time. I always had sympathy for these people. Big families, maybe they had a garden. What did they do? I went to a convention in South Dakota. I don't know what the purpose was, but I had to sit next to a stockman. He was a rank Republican. I said, "Well, we've got to help people out." "Oh, we don't [need] all these subsidies." I said, "Well now listen, suppose you were in Chicago and you had five or six kids to take care of. You didn't have anything. You didn't even have bread and butter on the table. How are you going to take care of those people? Are you going to let them starve? I would take one of the families to my farm."

Anyway, the more I saw this, I could see the poverty and how people were suffering and I felt we needed to do something. So in the election of '32, in '28 the Republicans won, but in '30 the Communists started taking a hold a little bit. Of course the main streets were worried. Is our union of Republicans and Democrats...The Democrats who had the common ground and in '32...We had several Communist people on.

BB: That were elected to office here in Sheridan County?

MA: I don't think they ever got elected. One person, I think, the surveyor got elected.

BB: There were several candidates who ran as Communists?

MA: Oh yes.

BB: Now Magnus, were they associated with Charlie Taylor?

MA: Well they listened to him. He was their savior.

BB: Okay so he was kind of the leader of that group?

MA: Oh definitely. You see, because we had this Communist leading here in Sheridan County, and we had many Communists wonder why it was that way in Sheridan County. One of them said, "We wondered if it wasn't the nature of the people to be that way." I said, "Wait a minute. In Sheridan County we had a lot of Scandinavians and I'm one. I don't like that statement." I challenged that statement and I think I said, "Listen, when you have hard times and a man like Charlie Taylor, editing a paper—"

BB: What was his paper? Was that the *Producer's News*?

MA: Yes it started in 1917 [April 1918.]. It kind of was subsidized by the Nonpartisan League in the early part of the 20th century. Gradually, the Nonpartisan League that built up institutions that production should be controlled by the people. They still have a bank because of that.

BB: The Bank of North Dakota?

MA: Yes. I think they had a flour mill there. I think they still have a flour mill. You see, we have strong Scandinavian population here. Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes, and a lot of Germans and Irish; we have a lot of Germans. They want to be on their own. They didn't like this. The Nonpartisan League got a little bit liberal. Then the later party came in. You know Charlie Taylor in 1922 or '24 [1923] he ran on the Republican ticket as a senator and won. He won.

BB: So Charlie Taylor was a Republican state senator?

MA: Yes. You can imagine what fun he had with Anaconda Copper.

BB: Oh, I bet.

MA: He would call it fun anyway. Anaconda Copper didn't enjoy him very much. Anyway, think about the things. He called people selling groceries, selling lumber. They were mainstreeters. He used the *Producer's News* for advertising because it's the most popular paper. He did write a

pretty good paper. He covered world events and everything. Anyway, he made it very clear that if you don't advertise, it will make it bad for you. He did. He was very crude.

BB: Did you ever meet him?

MA: No, I just saw him. I never met him.

BB: Did you ever hear him speak?

MA: No, I didn't. At the time, I wasn't interested in politics. It just grew on me. Poscoe, the manager of the City Café, they got (unintelligible). Taylor wouldn't advertise with them. Taylor said, "The food you give is full of cockroaches." Well, that wasn't enough. Somebody (unintelligible) came by and said, "Listen, do you want a free meal? Listen, I want you to do this. I've got a dead mouse here. I want you to take that over to the City Café and drop it in the soup." They went to drop it in and said, "Hey, we've got a mouse in the soup."

BB: Taylor put this guy up to this?

MA: Yes. He gave him a free meal probably. Of course Poscoe knew what was up. He came out of the kitchen and put him...Poscoe was a pretty popular manager. Down the street came Laird. His name is L.S Olsen. He was lying on the street (unintelligible) Laird S. Olsen. He was somebody. That was front page stuff.

BB: In that day and age that would really be shocking wouldn't it?

MA: This is worse. Polk got to be editor of the opposing paper. They kind of fought back and forth. This is in the paper: "Polk left North Dakota and went to Missoula. We're even. No less than four high school girls and got them pregnant." That was front page stuff.

BB: And it wasn't true?

MA: No. I don't know. It was a rumor.

BB: It wasn't for sure true?

MA: Maybe part of it. Polk was that kind of a guy. He got by publicizing it. Can you imagine?

BB: Now what became of Taylor?

MA: Okay, he had issues or stories from (unintelligible) Moscow what to do. Well, Taylor had a mind of his own. He sometimes ignored. He carried a Communist card. He carried it. There's no question about. He started disagreeing with them. So about 1932, a new man came on. He didn't last one year.

BB: He came on where, at the *Producer's News*?

MA: Yes he ran the *Producer's News*. Well, Charlie Taylor went to South Dakota to organize another organization. He stayed there a while. The *Producer's News* was going into a place where they couldn't even pay for their newsprint. So Charlie came back. In 1937, they couldn't even pay for the newsprint and he retired. The *Producer's News* closed. He got a job up in Seattle and worked for (unintelligible).

BB: *Seattle Post Intelligence, Seattle P.I.*

MA: Yes, there you go. He tried to institute a separately, the liberal party, but he didn't get very far in Seattle country. So he died in '67, somewhere in there. He stands out as a very powerful man and kind of egotistical. In one issue of the paper, he said, "We have a poll in Sheridan County and it was voted that Charlie Taylor was the most eminent man in Sheridan County."

BB: That's what he published in his own paper?

MA: Oh yes. He was brazen.

BB: Now what happened, then Mags? It sounds like the mainstreeters, whether they were Democrats or Republicans, got together in opposition to Taylor and his group. Is that what happened?

MA: Oh yes.

BB: They eventually prevailed? So what then became the Democratic Party that you led, what was that? Was that the remnants of the old Taylor group?

MA: It was really easy for me to get re-elected. Ed Smith beat me. I didn't campaign properly either.

BB: When you were elected Democratic Party chairman in 19—

MA: That's here in the county.

BB: I got you, here in this county you were the...What was the Democratic Party then? When the Democratic Party got together with the Republicans, did it then fall away from the Republicans? Did it absorb the Taylor people?

MA: I think it's more word-of-mouth. We've got to get together with you guys rather than anything. It wasn't anything formal. They just kind of got together and they had another party too. There was a Liberty Party or something. I forget who organized that. That party didn't get

very far. The Republican / Democratic ticket won. I think there was one Communist elected. I think he was a surveyor. You see in about 1924, Rodney Salsburg [Salisbury] was a rabid...I'd say he was a rabid liberal and a follower of Taylor.

BB: He was the sheriff?

MA: Yes, he became a sheriff. Polk took after him for padding his bill.

BB: Who took after him?

MA: Polk, the editor of the paper. That didn't matter. Heck, the Red group was so strong that criticisms kind of rolled off their back. You just figured it was all politics. Then we had a robbery at the courthouse. It was very-well planned. They took 100,000 dollars of material. The insurance company refused to pay, but they did eventually. They figured it was the Taylor group that had done it. It's questionable. They could never prove anything.

BB: In your opinion, the Taylor group was right about some things?

MA: Well, it's their way disagreeing didn't set well with the public. It was kind of only humorous there in their criticism. You kind of felt it was a little bit more than necessary. We got the reputation of being Communists. When I went to Dillon they'd say, "So you're from Sheridan County. You're from the Communist country." I was far from a Communist. It didn't bother me to be called it.

I always say about these people who come up...We had people interview me and other people and say, "Why?" I said, "For the simple reason that times were darn tough and we had a man who was there championing them. That's the whole simple answer." He was their champion. The [Farmers] Holiday Association, part of their organization, the farmers who would go to the banks to borrow money to run their farm, a tractor or a cow, a horse, and they couldn't pay. So they put them up for auction. We can't lose our equipment. The farmers got together at the Holiday Association, "Don't you guys (unintelligible).

A cow for sale didn't bid more than 25 cents. The tractor, we'll give you 50 cents." The banks, of course, couldn't...that didn't help any payments. Ed Ferguson was the auctioneer. I think he became Republican. Anyway, he had the auction sale. Do you want some more coffee? There were about five people at one of those auctions there. The federal government says, "You're obstructing justice." They served some time in the jail. Ferguson, his daughter still works at (unintelligible). That didn't hold water.

BB: Now who was Ferguson?

MA: He was an auctioneer. He conducted the sales. People would pay ten cents for a cow and he'd yell, "Sold!"

BB: So the banks then didn't do much auctioning of things off when they knew that would happen?

MA: Yes. Well the Farm Labor group, the dropped a Nonpartisan League. I don't remember the Nonpartisan League. I remember [Arthur C.] Townley. He was the head of the Nonpartisan League. I remember he flew into Medicine Lake way back in about '21. I had never seen an airplane before. We were down at Medicine Lake and, "Here he comes." So I saw my first airplane. Townley spoke. He lost his power. He lost out. He was a good, quite a leader.

BB: So you developed these feelings about how we need to do something to take care of the poor people and that helped to—

MA: Yes, I would say so.

BB: —become a Democrat. What was your thought about what should be done?

MA: I don't know if I had a thought. You see here, people put their money in the bank, their hard-earned money. The banks were broke. That was one thing. I never lost any money to the bank. In fact, a banker even borrowed 200 dollars from me one time. He said, "I need some money." We'd take our produce to town, butter or eggs, or cream. It was a tough go. I was working on the farm and we bought two quarters of land for 6,500 dollars. No, we didn't pay that much.

We put the crop in and didn't harvest a kernel. We couldn't pay for the land. We had to give it up. That was in '37. Thirty-one was a bad year. The thing was, if you raise a crop, you couldn't get anything for it. There were dry years that people couldn't feed their cattle. They didn't have hay. They had to cut thistles and feed them thistles. They'd ship some in, but that was too expensive. So they lost their cattle herds. They lost their milk. They lost their cows. Times were so tough, but the government started paying I think 75 cents per can. Those things—you go to the doctor and they charge you a dollar.

That's the fee, one dollar. You bring a pound of butter to town, you'd get ten cents for it. Ten cents for a dozen eggs. We made enough to keep going. We had in the '30s, we had pigs. We had chickens. We had cattle. So we had meat. I never went hungry in all my life. I always had something to eat. I could see other people weren't getting that. I thought, "Well gee, there has to be a change."

BB: What was your idea for what the change should be?

MA: I don't think I knew. I don't think I knew. We had to get some more income for the laboring man. We had to get more income for the man who had produce to sell. It just seemed like (unintelligible). It was a tough go. It was just a tough go.

BB: Mags, did you support Franklin Roosevelt in the New Deal and some of his programs to help with these things?

MA: Absolutely. I don't know what would have happened if we hadn't gotten him in. Even before Roosevelt, I didn't tell you about the feeling on Main Street. It was so intense that they had parades and they'd break a window once in a while, the store window. It got so bad that the storekeeper would have a gun handy. One fellow organized the top of the library—a man with a special gun in case it got rough. The city dance said, "We'll turn the hoses on if they get too bad."

BB: That was here in Plentywood?

MA: Oh yes, sure.

BB: That would have been in the '30s?

MA: Yes. Thirty-seven was a very poor crop year. They had nothing. Thirty-one was bad. In '35 you had something, but you didn't get any land for it. You didn't get anything for it. Now let's see, so why did I turn Democrat? Well there was only one way to go. If you were going into politics you had to be a Democrat. I had no problem going in. I made one big mistake. There were four guys down in Billings. They just gave us a bad time, just a continually bad time. I said, "Republicans, I'm so very sorry for seeing Republicans. There are good Republicans too that have the heat on the floor." I made that statement. Republicans shouldn't do that. We were mad. (unintelligible).

BB: This is in '59?

MA: Yes.

BB: You got to the legislature and you felt that these four Republicans who knew the rules, apparently pretty well, deliberately tied things in knots and that they were unfair in their maneuvering?

MA: Yes.

BB: So that made you feel especially strong about being a Democrat?

MA: Definitely.

BB: So then in 1961, you came back in the minority. What were your thoughts about that? How did the Republicans behave when they were in the majority?

MA: Well, I think that was the year they were trying to take the—

BB: Nutter was governor.

MA: Yes they were trying to take the Hail Insurance Board for some money. They wanted to take that couple million dollars. I raised my [hand], “How do you defend the farmer?” So I raised quite a...I got publicity from raising cane. [Francis] Bardanouve, do you know Bardanouve?

BB: Yes, I do.

MA: He said, “You read the Ten Commandments to the people.” So I read the Ten Commandments. I came to, “Thou shall not steal.” They didn’t take it. It was a fight. That was the big fight in supporting the school. How are you going to support the school? It’s still fighting that way.

BB: What do you remember about Nutter?

MA: He was an aggressive individual. I would say he was a man on the ball. I never had any criticism except for the fact that he was the opposite party. Otherwise, as a man, I think he was a pretty good fellow. A lot of people thought so too.

BB: Did you ever meet him?

MA: Oh yes. I was a little greenhorn. I didn’t want to meet people. I went to his funeral. It made me mad.

BB: Now do you remember Jerome Anderson? I think he was the Majority Leader in ’61.

MA: Not in ’61 he wasn’t. He wasn’t the majority leader then.

BB: I think so. Hawks was the Speaker and Anderson was the Majority Leader. I think McDonald was the—

MA: Yes in ’61 the Republicans were in charge.

BB: Yes that’s right.

MA: How could Anderson be in there?

BB: Jerome Anderson.

MA: Oh, Jerry Anderson. I thought you were talking about Forrest. Okay, what about him?

BB: I just wanted to know if you had any impressions or recollections of him.

MA: Well, he was a good leader. There's no doubt about it. Man to man, I'd say he was one of the better ones. You want to be careful about saying anything good about the opposition. I change my mind.

BB: Now I thought I remembered that Ted Schwinden was...He might have been the minority leader in '61.

MA: Yes I think he was.

BB: Okay you do remember that?

MA: Oh yes. I don't know. See, Tom Judge sat right next to me. I could never figure out why Ted could beat him.

BB: Why do you say that?

MA: Well when Ted got home, he made a public statement, "Taxes are good."

BB: Ted Schwinden went home after the '61 session and told the people that?

MA: Before he ran for governor. I don't know. He had a way about him the people liked.

BB: You thought that Judge, perhaps, had a brighter future than Schwinden?

MA: No, we knew Judge was a politician. We knew he was striving for the family. He was up on the floor and doing a good job. He and I got along good. We do. They got a bill introduced, the cats had to be housed. I think Tom Judge approved one of the signers. We said, "Tom Judge was supporting the cat house." He got by all right anyway. His mother was a good politician too. He had the way about him that people liked. He wasn't offensive except once. I was on the ad-hoc committee to try to eliminate some branch of the university system. We were talking about the [School of] mines. Was it necessary to have the mines? There were about 30 of us on that committee. He went to Whitehall and made a speech.

BB: Who did?

MA: Tom Judge as governor. He said, "They will not close the mines across my dead body." Well, here he appointed us to...We had no intention of closing the mines. I don't think we had any intention of closing any of them.

BB: This ad-hoc committee you were a member of was after you had been in the legislature, right? Or was it while you were a legislator?

MA: I was in the legislature, but the last session.

BB: So it had to have been before Tom Judge was governor, then.

MA: No he was governor. He appointed me on that ad-hoc committee.

BB: He didn't become governor until '72.

MA: Didn't he?

BB: Nope. You left the legislature in '66, right?

MA: No, it would be '67 wouldn't it?

BB: That could be, okay, yes.

MA: He was not governor in '67, no. It was a Republican governor then. So I was not in the legislature then. Or was I running for the legislature then, and got beat?

BB: Anyway, he promised not to close the mine.

MA: Yes, across his dead body.

BB: Mags, speaking of mining, you know the Anaconda Company had a lot of influence in the politics of this state, or at least that's what we read back in the '30s and '40s and '50s and '60s. What did you notice about that when you first arrived in the legislature?

MA: You know, they had a good man there. I forget his name now.

BB: Billy Ray?

MA: No.

BB: Lloyd Crippen?

MA: No, he wasn't active. I knew the name—

BB: Al Wilkinson?

MA: No. He was one of the top—

BB: Denny Shea?

MA: No. Top one. Anyway, I can always hear him, "Well you folks are invited down to a dinner tonight in honor of such-and-such a birthday." The Anaconda Company was putting it on.

BB: Was he a legislator, this person?

MA: No he was just a lobbyist. He was a good lobbyist. He was a good fellow. He was a nice fellow and everything. All lobbyists were pretty good that way. He said, "Oh come over we're going to have a party tonight." I, for one, "Sure I'll go to your party, but I'll vote like I damn please." You know, one thing that bothered me a lot, there was a bill that a rank and file cattleman could not test a cow for pregnancy. It was a rank and file bill of the veterinarians.

I said, "Well that thing doesn't have a chance. Nobody is going to do that. What the heck is that for?" They had a lobbyist. What the heck was his name? He said, "That's insane for anybody to go out and test the pregnancy of cows." One of the big ranchers down the southeastern part, a big rancher, I said, "Listen we can't vote for that thing. That isn't any good." "Oh yes, we have to." I said, "What? You want that bill?"

The rank and file wouldn't have any business messing with that end of a cow. So I found out the veterinary...I'll tell you what happened. We had a meeting of veterinarians. They said, "Let's get a bill in the legislature to make it illegal for any Tom, Dick, and Harry to pregnancy test a cow." Oh a rank and file veterinarian said, "They'll never go through. Let's spend 3,500 dollars on a lobbyist and try." So they did. The lobbyist—

BB: He got the bill passed for them?

MA: What?

BB: The lobbyist got it passed for them?

MA: Yes for 3,500 dollars.

BB: Do you remember ever having someone from the Montana Power Company or the Anaconda Company talk to you about a bill or anything like that?

MA: No. I think they realized that I was bound beyond hope.

BB: Did you ever work with lobbyists for the Farmers Union or the AFL-CIO?

MA: Oh, they were always talking to me. *The People's Voice*—

BB: Harry Billings?

MA: Harry Billings, yes. We were just like that. Sometimes he was wrong, but most of the time we did.

BB: Who were some of the labor lobbyists?

MA: The labor lobbyists? To tell you the truth, I can't tell you.

BB: Farmers Union?

MA: Oh yes definitely, sure.

BB: Who was representing the Farmers Union then?

MA: Well you never know. A fellow from the triangle area was.

BB: Clyde Jarvis?

MA: Yes, he was in there. I remember him. He was pretty strong. I don't remember him as a lobbyist.

BB: Did Harry Billings write editorials and things that would have supported the Farmers Union point of view?

MA: Oh yes. He was definitely a liberal. The Republicans were sneaking to read the paper. They didn't want to be seen reading that paper. That's logical. They should see what they had to say. It was kind of humorous.

BB: Did you ever...Go ahead.

MA: The members from the REA, there were so many people who would talk to me. All those people, they fell over. I was for them. They wouldn't pressure me. One gal, she was Republican, and the Republicans wanted something sounding with the cattlemen ones. She came over to me and she wanted to tell me how she was a Norwegian extraction. I was so disgusted with it, having them coming around trying to...I didn't vote for their issue.

BB: She tried to persuade you by telling you that she was your fellow Norwegian?

MA: Yes that's the whole thing. That was it.

BB: Mags, did you ever meet Governor Babcock?

MA: Oh yes.

BB: What were your impressions of Babcock?

MA: Well politics were going pretty strong. Our criticisms were pretty serious. He was quite conservative. I think his wife was more liberal than he was. Babcock and I just didn't agree.

BB: You remember the race for governor between Babcock and Roland Renne?

MA: Oh you bet.

BB: What do you remember about that?

MA: Renne didn't know how to run a campaign.

BB: He was the Montana State University president out of Bozeman.

MA: Yes. Was it Babcock he ran against?

BB: Yes.

MA: Yes. He was a progressive individual. He was pretty careful with his money. He was pretty careful about how he spent his money. It was under his administration they built that dome at Bozeman. The one criticism I have is it should have been bigger so they could play football in it.

BB: Now Mags, you went on, then, after you left the legislature and you were elected to the Constitutional Convention in 1972, which is a significant honor. Only 100 people in the history of Montana after the 1889 constitution have had that experience. Do you have any impressions or any thoughts about your involvement with the Constitutional Convention?

MA: Yes, my impression was this: the members of the Constitutional Convention felt the legislature was a non-entity. They had no time for the legislature. They thought they were just hopeless. Another thing, the Constitutional Convention would have nothing to do with lobbyist. I said, "Wait a minute. After all, an industry is entitled to have someone to tell us what is good or bad. If we can't sift the good from the bad, we don't belong here." So I felt very antagonistic, not very, but I felt that was a very poor policy.

BB: Were the lobbyists told that they—the industry people—

MA: Yes they were barred. They didn't come in there at all. No lobbyists were allowed.

BB: So were they in Helena? Did you talk to people that maybe work for the railroad or the school teachers or the banks or the auto dealers, or were they around at all?

MA: The only one I remember was a practicing attorney, when he realized we were changing, he said, "What the hell are you guys doing that for? Now we're going to have to learn a whole bunch of new laws."

BB: You had committees like the legislature. You served on a committee didn't you?

MA: Yes legislative.

BB: So did people come before your committee to testify?

MA: Oh yes.

BB: But they weren't lobbyists?

MA: Not very much. There wasn't much of that.

BB: Were there any members of the Constitutional Convention that stand out in your memory?

MA: Oh yes. The gal from Great Falls, [Arlyne] Reichert?

BB: Reichert.

MA: She wanted the unicameral. I said, "Sure, let's try it. Listen, let's put it in there on a six-year trial basis." So she went for that. It didn't go. The people weren't about that. Then of course we had a man from Billings. He's (unintelligible) for office.

BB: Bob Kelleher?

MA: Yes. He was in my committee. He hardly ever came to committee. He was going up to Canada to try to see how the parliamentary system worked. He was determined that we have the parliamentary system. People aren't ready for a change.

BB: Bob Kelleher even ran for president, I think, by trying to bring about parliament nationally.

MA: Yes. Where does he get his money?

BB: I think he's pretty much retired as a lawyer now.

MA: I kind of gave him a boost for the parliamentary system too. I said, "Let's try it out." It of course didn't go. So he kind of appreciated the fact that I helped him out. You don't change people.

BB: Do you think the constitution was a good change from the old constitution?

MA: Well, I went there with one thing in mind. I felt levying taxes on property was too political. If you were a friend of the assessor, your property wasn't worth less money. The laws in Montana, they help the counties that show the lower assessed valuations. The valuations were down. Some counties were liberally keeping their tax levies down. So I said, "We have to make the assessments on a statewide level." I never had so much bashing in all my life as when that thing passed.

BB: Now what passed?

MA: The assessment of properties on a state level.

BB: So when the county assessors became employees of the state government. That was your proposal?

MA: Yes, I was with it. I worked on it. The only thing I ever caught hell for. I said, "Listen, if it's so bad, we had in the constitution that we should meet every year. This is a big business. We should meet every year."

BB: The legislature should meet every year?

MA: Yes. That was the first thing that people kicked out.

BB: That's right. They got rid of it two years later.

MA: People in the whole don't like the legislature.

BB: I think that's true.

MA: I said, "Listen, you eliminate our proposition. The legislature meet every year, you vote that out. If this is so bad, why don't we vote this out? It must be a pretty good thing because it stays in."

BB: The fact that the assessors worked for the state.

MA: Yes.

BB: Any other memories of the Constitutional Convention?

MA: Oh yes, well, I ran for the speakership. I didn't want it pretty bad. I figured [Leo] Graybill—he manipulated one section of that (unintelligible). I say he was a good man and did a good job. He and I walked downtown and talked things over. I had no qualms. I had no great desire to be speaker. It was a hell of a job. I felt he was more qualified and he did a good job. They did not believe that lobbyists had any business in the legislature. They certainly do. We have to allow

them. Why shouldn't they? Just the rank and file, those who had been in the legislature, didn't feel that way. They felt a legislature was a non-entity. It wasn't necessary. I said, "Well after all, that's the representative of its people. There are disagreements. There are differences of desires, needs, and everything. There's got to be differences. It's going to be hard to settle them." Congress is just not the rank and file. Congress is just a non-entity. My representative is okay.

BB: Yes that's how a lot of people think.

MA: The overall picture of the legislature and the Congress, the legislature makes the laws. We allowed wolves to come back to eat our livestock.

BB: Does that seem strange to you that we would allow wolves to come back?

MA: Absolutely. I couldn't figure it out. There's that group of—

BB: Environmentalists. Were there a lot of environmentalists at the Constitutional Convention?

MA: I didn't notice them.

[Brief interruption]

BB: So anyway, we were just finishing our conversation about the Constitutional Convention.

MA: I think the members of the Constitutional Convention, they had a very respectable position. I don't know the problems of the changes.

BB: Did you support the constitution when it went up?

MA: Oh yes I supported it. I really didn't think it would pass. I think Graybill was responsible for getting it through because he was lenient toward gambling. I think that's what made it possible.

BB: It got a big vote out of Butte and Anaconda perhaps because it didn't prohibit gambling. Looking back, what do you think? Do you think it's been a good document?

MA: I think I'd like to have seen the legislature...I think they should have met every year. I was very happy to see that the assessors got the statewide job. I was kind of surprised. The only thing that I said was meeting every year. I was concerned about that. I felt that would be good.

BB: Why were you surprised that it passed?

MA: People don't like change.

BB: Okay. And it was a big change, of course. Mags, I told you on the telephone I'd probably as you, you said you wanted me to ask you about Senator Mansfield.

MA: Do you see my picture up there?

BB: Oh yes, I do. Share with me your thoughts about Mansfield.

MA: Well I would say Mansfield was a diamond in the rough. Maureen polished it.

BB: The picture of course is a picture of the statue of Mike and Maureen Mansfield here on your wall.

MA: Yes and I made that. That's at the University of Montana. When I told him I wanted to make a statue, he said, "Well I want you to put Maureen as being part of me." She was entitled to it. I think she told him, he was a young man and he worked in the mines. I wonder how many fist fights he got into. I never asked him that.

BB: Did you have personal visits with him? Did you meet personally?

MA: Oh sure, yes. I said, "What do you want on this statue? What shall we say on it?" We figured out something; what to say below the statue. So it went fine. He wanted Maureen with him on the statue. He wanted that. I never heard Mike Mansfield say a derogatory thing about anybody. The McCarthy era, they tried to make a comment about him. That was a close call. He had a terrific ability. Here he was, the longest leader of the Senate. He opposed JFK [President John F. Kennedy]. He opposed Lyndon Johnson about the war, and Nixon. He just fought with them personally. We can't send any more people. We can't lose any more people. Then he goes out on the Senate floor and says, "We've got to do this and we've got to keep on." You know that takes a pretty strong man to do that. I'm the Majority Floor Leader. I'm the head man. I've got to do what the people are saying.

BB: Did you agree with him on the Vietnam War?

MA: Yes, I certainly did. I hate that we had the most ridiculous war of all.

BB: And you felt that was a factor in your defeat for the legislature, is that right?

MA: Yes, oh definitely. There was a landslide for the Republican Party. I didn't go out and tell them what I had done in the legislature. That was a mistake.

BB: That was in 1966.

MA: Yes.

BB: You felt that because you were known to oppose the Vietnam War that it probably contributed to your defeat in 1966?

MA: No, because I was a Democrat. Democrats were the ones responsible for the war. Nixon followed up and took care of it. It was Democrats that started that war and kept it going for a long time. Lyndon Johnson was one of our better presidents, but he made...it's got to be my way or no way.

BB: Mags, we've got just a couple of minutes left. Is there anything you'd like to say in conclusion?

MA: What are you going to do with this work now?

BB: This will be part of the state's archives at the Mansfield Library.

MA: Oh I see. In Helena?

BB: In Missoula, at the University.

MA: Oh, in Billings they have a Mansfield Center. I've got my picture down there too. This statue is at the university. They gave it a beautiful spot. I said, "The reason I want this statue at the university is because I want these young men and women to go by and see Mansfield." I'm not so sure they make a difference.

BB: Mags, thank you so much for the interview. I appreciate your public service very much.

MA: Listen, did you read about Taylor?

BB: I read a little bit about him. Of course we talked about him today.

MA: If I loan you this, would you send it back to me?

BB: Oh absolutely. You bet I would.

MA: I think you should have it. You take it. It's very interesting.

BB: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]