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Oral History Number: 031-001
Interviewee: James G. Patton
Interviewer: Don Spritzer
Date of Interview: April 20, 1978

James Patton: This is James G. Patton, I am dictating this record on April 20, 1978. The record is for Mr. Donald E. Spritzer of [restricted address] Missoula, Montana. I am answering the questions contained in Mr. Spritzer's letter of April 10, 1978.

Question: When did you first become affiliated with the National Farmers Union?

JP: I first affiliated with the Farmers Union in the Colorado Division at a local in Nucla, Colorado, where my father, Ernest E. Patton, was a member. I had nothing to do with the Farmers Union after that boyhood experience until 1932, when I established, in behalf of the Colorado Farmers Union, the Farmers Union Mutual Life Association. In 1934 I was elected secretary. I was appointed by the board of directors as secretary of the Colorado Farmers Union. I was then elected to the National Farmers Union board in Oklahoma City in November 1937. I served as a member of the board and chairman of the Organization Committee until November 1940. At that time, I was elected president of the National Farmers Union to succeed Mr. John Vesecky of Kansas. I served as president of the National Farmers Union from 1940 until March of 1966 when I retired without standing against any opposition in that whole period of almost 26 years. I served for 26 years as president of National Farmers Union.

Question number 2: When did you first become acquainted with Senator Murray, James E. Murray?

JP: I first became acquainted with Senator Murray when he came to Washington. I do not have in my mind the exact date when he came.

Question number 3: To what extent was Murray's Full Employment Bill written by members of your National Farmers Union? That's part one of the question.

JP: Russell Smith, Ben Stong, Paul Sifton, were members of my staff and worked with professional economists in drafting the bill. The important economists who gave a great deal of attention to the Full Employment Bill were Mr. Bertram Gross, who was on the staff of Senator Murray's labor committee. The other prominent economists who were interested in the Full Employment Bill were: Dr. Mordaci Ezekiel, Dr. Louis Bean—Dr. Ezekiel and Dr. Bean were staff members of the Department of Agriculture. Dr. Ezekiel later was a staff member of the War Labor Board or the War Production Board, rather. In addition to Dr. Bean, Dr. Gross, and Dr. Ezekiel, the most important people probably were Dr. Leon Keyserling, who was the administrative assistant, a prominent lawyer, and economist for Senator [Robert] Wagner of New York; Gerhard Colm of the National Planning Association had served a number of different offices in government had played a major role in the drafting. Henry A. Wallace, former

Secretary of Agriculture and vice president, took a great deal of interest in this, as did several other important people including the director of War Mobilization Board, Fred M. Vinson, later chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. Farmers Union helped very much in organizing the drive for the Employment Bill, or Act, of 1946. Walter Reuther and a number of leaders in the CIO were also active in pushing the employment bill. Mr. Al Hayes, then president of the Machinist Union, was active, as was James Kerry, the president of the International Electrical Union. There were a number of labor leaders whose names escape my mind at the present time. Alvin Hanson, who was professor of economics and at Harvard, and Kenneth Galbraith, who is professor of economics and later was ambassador to India, played a role in this whole matter. Senator Murray and Congressman Wright Patman were among the strongest proponents of the original bill.

Question number 3, 2nd section: How much did your group work with Senator Murray's staff in drafting the bill?

JP: We had almost daily relationships with Senator Murray's office, staff, and with the Labor Committee's staff, and with the staff of Senator Wagner of New York.

Question number 4: As you know, the final version of the 1946 Employment Act was very different from the original bill. What was Senator Murray's opinion of the law as it finally emerged?

JP: Senator James E. Murray, one of the original sponsors of the Full Employment Bill of 1945, issued a pamphlet entitled, "The Employment Act, Past and Future: A Tenth Anniversary Symposium," edited by Gerhard Colm. The National Planning Association of Washington, D.C., issued the pamphlet "Ten Years Under the Employment Act," edited by Gerhard Colm. Senator James E. Murray made the first statement in the symposium. Among other things Senator Murray said the following:

"On January 22, 1945, I introduced a revised version of the draft bill included in the Senate Military Affairs subcommittee report—The Full Employment Bill of 1945.

"On July 30, 1945, testifying for the Senate Banking and Currency Committee at the opening of hearings on S380, the original Full Employment Bill of 1945, I made the following statement: 'The Full Employment Bill does not in any way undertake to regiment our economy. I am sure that no one will deny that if government responsibility under this measure will mean a stabilizing of high business volume by means of general measures which support the market system and do not dictate how men can—shall earn their living or how business shall be managed, it will be a blessing to our economy. Looking back in the give and take of the legislative process, the word "full" was cut from its name and other changes were made, but the Employment Act of 1946, as President Truman said when he signed the law, was a commitment by the government of the people, a commitment to take any and all measures necessary for a healthy economy, one that provides opportunities for those able, willing, and

seeking to work. We shall try to honor that commitment. Looking back on the first decade under the Employment Act few will dispute that government responsibility under the act has, in fact, produced stabilization of high business volume by means of general measures that support the market system and do not dictate how men shall make their living or how business shall be managed.'

He continues: 'Even in this more limited respect the implementation has been inconsistent as witness the unwillingness to deal with deflation in the farm sector of our economy. This apparently stems from a decision in arriving at national policy that a decline in farm income would be consistent with the national economic interest. It is ironic that under the impetus of the Employment Act many business managers have increasingly adopted precisely the kind of forward investment in sales planning based upon projections of total national production in which this administration seeks to avoid in its annual economic report.

'Preoccupation with avoiding deflation or inflation has resulted in relegating economic growth and full employment to a position of secondary objectives. A natural outgrowth of this orientation will be to increase the burden of responsibility of the Federal Reserve System to the point where its ability to effectively carry out its primary responsibility to see that adequate credit at reasonable cost is provided business and agriculture may become weakened. Price stability may also give false assurances of economic stability while imbalances are developing.'

Murray continued in closing his remarks by saying: "I would like to see the joint committee on the economic report strengthened by providing that the Speaker and the President of the Senate shall transmit to the appropriate legislative committees of the House and Senate the recommendations of the Joint Committee in the annual report."

That ends the quotations by Senator Murray.

In my personal conversations with Senator Murray I found that he was very unhappy with some of the activities of the President and the President's Council of Economic Advisors. He was also unhappy with the performance of the joint House-Senate Committee, joint committee, on the economic report. He felt very strongly that the Joint Committee on the Economic Report should be more than a debating society among professional economists. He felt that much more attention should be given to public hearings and that, finally, the Joint Committee on Economic Report should make specific suggestions to specific committees of Congress to take actions that would end the—that would provide necessary capital investments, private or public, to keep the economy moving at a strong rate.

Senator Murray and I talked frequently about the possibility of introducing legislation to strengthen the Employment Act of 1946, but this was during the Eisenhower period and we did not get involved in it. As far as my personal opinion is concerned, I was disappointed in the final law of 1946 because I had hoped that the outcome would be that the President's Council of Economic Advisors would come up with a solid economic report and projections and

recommendations as to what steps could be taken by the executive and legislative branches of government to assure full employment in the period ahead. Among other things, the Council of Economic Advisors were supposed to meet with non-governmental groups, business, labor, and agriculture especially, to get their ideas of what things needed to be done to provide a full employment economy. Except for a short period of time when Leon Keyserling was chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors in the Truman administration, this was not done. Furthermore, the Joint Committee on the Economic Report became a debating society between Congressman Patman on one hand and Senator Paul Douglas on the other. It turned into a debating society between professional economists on the committee and professional economists on the outside.

There was very little heard from the people's organizations, such as labor, business, and agriculture, and when they did have a chance to testify they were limited to such a short amount of time that it really didn't make any difference. I had hoped that the Joint Committee on the Economic Report would assign specific tasks to different committees of the Congress for their action to maintain full employment. Finally, I felt that the bill as it was revised gave far too little attention to the long-range and short-range planning and projections and too much attention to just avoiding a depression. It was somewhat a case of too little too late.

Question number 5: Did you and the National Farmers Union participate at all in drafting Murray's Missouri Valley Authority legislation? In your opinion, why did none of the Valley Authority bills of the 1940s become law?

JP: My answer to the first part of that question is as follows: Benton J. Stong, who had been the editor-in-chief of the Scripps-Howard paper in Knoxville, Tennessee, and had carried on the fight against the private power companies in the Tennessee Valley and the fight for the Tennessee Valley Authority, became my administrative assistant in the Farmers Union and the editor of our paper. Soon after Ben Stong came to the Farmers Union, he began a program of education on Valley Authorities and the Tennessee Valley Authority by arranging to take substantial groups to the Tennessee Valley to visit. We started agitation for Valley Authority bills. Later, President Roosevelt, before he died, came out for 12 valley authority bills when the war—as one of the goals after the war. We put a great deal of our emphasis on developing the Missouri Valley Authority because it was in Farmers Union territory. The headwaters of the Missouri River were in Montana, of course, and we had a strong congressional delegation from Montana. Senator Murray was very favorable to the idea of a Missouri Valley Authority legislation and we worked—Ben Stong and our staff—worked with him in drafting the Missouri Valley Authority and we did a great deal of educational work with our people in the states of Montana, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa. We felt that the Valley Authority idea was more than providing dams and check dams, that it was a way of starting regional governments composed of governments within the confines of the river valley, that it was a way to do economic planning on a multi-state basis, on the basis of the interests of the people living in a great river valley. These were our original concepts.

The Farmers Union was moving along very well with Valley Authorities during the period when the Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of Interior and the Corps of Army Engineers were having all-out struggles and fights between themselves and were getting nowhere. We were making progress in selling the people of the Missouri Valley on the idea of a Valley Authority—a Missouri Valley Authority. At the height of our progress in selling the idea of the Missouri Valley Authority the—General [Lewis] Pick of the Corps of Army Engineers, and engineer [William] Sloan of the Bureau of Reclamation, got their heads together and made what amounted to the Pick-Sloan Agreement, which I dubbed a shotgun wedding. They agreed to develop jointly the dams and electricity and irrigation in the Valley Authority. In other words, the Army Engineers agreed to do things in addition to flood control by bringing electricity into dams that were built and by also giving attention to irrigation. On the other hand, the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to cooperate with the Army Engineers on their flood control plans.

The second part of my answer to your question, "In your opinion why did no valley authority bills of the 1940's become law?"

JP: President Truman was a friend of General Pick of the Corps of Army Engineers. This was so because the Army Engineers had done what in President Truman's mind was a very good job of building levees along the Missouri to cut down flooding. He was very much sold on General Pick and when he became president, he began to hold up on President Roosevelt's idea of developing the 12 Valley Authorities and paid more attention to General Pick. The Secretary of Interior listened to Mr. Sloan, his director of the Bureau of Reclamation, and President Truman listened to both of them because they had come up with a compromise plan that did not need a great deal of new legislation—some of the legislation was already approved. In my opinion this was a tragic decision, but it was almost irreversible. I feel that Senator Murray was genuine all the way through and honest all the way through in his support for the Missouri Valley Authority but we couldn't get the senators like [John] Overton at the lower end of the Mississippi River from Louisiana, and those who were the chief pork barrel operators in the House and Senate to go along with another Valley Authority. As a matter of fact, it was nip and tuck as to whether or not the Tennessee Valley Authority would be continued at one point.

Question number 6: Do you recall any other important legislation which your group worked on with Senator Murray? Was the National Farmers Union involved at all in Senator Murray's fight for National Health Insurance?

JP: My answer is that the National Farmers Union started out very early with other leaders in the fight for national health security. We formed a national association, led by Kingsley Roberts, to secure a national health security bill.

But this was supported by certain cooperative groups, like the Cooperative Health Group in the Pacific Northwest at Seattle, by the Dallas group and by the Farmers Union groups in Oklahoma—The Cooperative Hospital at Elk City, Oklahoma, was sponsored by the National Farmers Union. The National Farmers Union was also responsible for getting Mrs. Roosevelt to

ask the Justice Department to bring suit against the American Medical Association. That suit was won by the antagonists of the American Medical Association and the court held that the American Medical Association's activities constituted monopoly action. Senator Murray, who was our very close friend in the Farmers Union and a very staunch supporter of the Montana Farmers Union, was very much interested in National Health Insurance, as was Senator Wagner, and Congressman [John] Dingell of Michigan. The Farmers Union, along with the cooperative health organizations and others, including the doctors who belonged to the association set up by Kingsley Roberts, fought very hard for the establishment of a National Health Insurance system.

A Doctor Clem of Missouri was a medical doctor and a very conservative man. He accused Senator Murray—he accused those who were for National Health Insurance or the Murray-Wagner-Dingell bill, of being leftists. I don't recall that he ever called anyone a Communist for being for that bill. I feel that we would have won the fight for National Health Insurance if it had not been for the fact that the Korean War came along and much of the power that we had developed had to be put into other matters. Senator Murray and a number of the senators and some congressmen made a very good fight. The fight has continued right down to the present day. The labor movement, most of the labor movement, the Farmers Union, cooperative health groups, and various types of associations who believed in some form of national health security controlled as to fees and costs by the federal government are still fighting the battle. The Kennedy-Corman bill is some advance over the old Murray-Wagner-Dingell bill, but not a great deal.

Question: Did you ever do any campaigning with Senator Murray?

JP: The answer is that I never campaigned in the same party with Senator Murray except on one or two speaking occasions where he and I were speakers. I always supported him in Montana.

Question: How effective was he as a public speaker?

JP: I thought he was an excellent public speaker, especially a stump speaker where he got right out among the people whom he loved and talked from his heart.

Question: Was he generally skilled at conducting committee hearings?

JP: Senator Murray always had some very good key staff people and he depended on them to keep him well informed. So he conducted very excellent committee meetings.

Question: Did you ever see him become angry or lose his temper during hearings?

JP: No, I never did. As a matter of fact, he was a very polite and considerate to people and I don't recall hearing him at any time abuse a witness or lose his temper.

Question: Was the senator generally in good health when you met with him? Did he smoke?

JP: I don't recall ever having the senator appear to be in ill health or poor health. He was subject to colds, but I don't recall that he was ever ill, or at least not sick enough that he couldn't conduct business very capably. I don't recall whether he smoked or not. It seems to me that he smoked cigars.

Question nine: In his later years the senator slowed down considerably and many associates have said that his son Charles virtually ran the office. Do you feel this was true?

JP: I do not. Senator Murray had some excellent staff people. On the Senate Interior Committee he had Benton J. Stong, who was one of the finest staff people in the United States Senate. Stong later served under Senator [Clinton] Anderson after Senator Murray was no longer in the Senate. And he is now the administrative assistant to Senator [John] Melcher of Montana.

Question: What were your impressions of Charles Murray?

JP: I barely knew Mr. Charles Murray. He was always very polite and courteous to me. I dealt almost entirely with Senator Murray's administrative assistants and with his staff on various bills. I knew very little about the day-to-day internal operations of his office.

Question: Did Senator Murray ever speak to you about the Communist charges used against him by his election opponent in 1954, Wesley D'Ewart?

JP: The Senator and I discussed it in a joking manner. That was about the time the Cold War had—

[Break in audio]

JP: The answer is that he and I discussed the matter two or three times but I did not think that he took it seriously and certainly I did not. The Montana Farmers Union people did not because we had been through that kind of stuff many times; first by Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota, later by Senator [Joseph] McCarthy and some Nebraska senators. It was during that general period that Senator Joseph McCarthy was rising up and using his strength to try and exploit the Cold War in every possible way. Those of us who were in the liberal front and working hard on progressive liberal ideas didn't pay any attention to it.

Senator Murray was the last person in the world that any of us could think of as a Communist. In the first place, our image of him was that he was a hard rock miner who had acquired some wealth and that he was very independent but always for the working man whether he worked in the mines or in the mills or on the farms of America. Many of us loved Senator Murray very much and D'Ewart's dirty use of trying to smear the senator just made us more angry and caused us to work harder for the senator's election.

Comments of the period—the general period during which Senator Murray was in the United States Senate are as follows:

It was one of the great stimulating periods of this century. President Roosevelt had challenged the whole country in saying that we had "nothing to fear but fear itself." Later he had challenged us to build one hundred thousand airplanes in one year. He'd thrown out all sorts of challenges to us, which had been met. So we were determined that war mobilization and reconversion should mean just that—that we would mobilize for the war but when the war was over that we would mobilize for peace. So there were all sorts of ideas developing. During the New Deal days we had developed the idea of a war against poverty, given to us originally by Upton Sinclair of California in his declaration against poverty in his program in California when he ran for governor, called EPIC: End Poverty in California. A great many people felt that if we could do all that we did during World War II in terms of production and economics and employment, then we had to find some way of doing in peacetime the same kind of energetic, enthusiastic planning and working to have a full employment society with elimination of poverty and a society or economy of abundance.

Senator Murray and Wright Patman and such people as Paul Douglas and Wayne Morse and Lee Metcalf, senator from Montana, and Senator [Hubert] Humphrey from Minnesota, and a number of other outstanding men grew up in this period. Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey and many of the men who played a major role both in helping to wage a fight for peace were very active in many of these fights.

The tragedy of Lyndon Johnson was that he inherited the Vietnam War and that he persisted in continuing in that war long after he should have gotten the country out of it. The tragedy of Hubert Humphrey was that the so-called liberals like Senator [Eugene] McCarthy of Minnesota, whom Senator Humphrey had helped get elected, whom all of us helped elect to the Senate from Minnesota, would turn against Senator Humphrey. And his failure to support Senator Humphrey when he ran against Senator Nixon has done my generation a huge disservice which we will be a long time overcoming, if we ever overcome that black period in American history in which Nixon was President of the United States. What we need is more people dedicated to the working people of America, such as Senator Murray was, and Senator Humphrey, and Lee Metcalf, and Wright Patman of the Congress, and many others whom I won't take the time to mention.

[End of Interview]