

Maureen and Mike

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Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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Oral History Number: 402-001

Interviewee: Henry C. (Loble) Keenan

Interviewer: N / A

Date of Interview: March 2003

Henry (Loble) Keenan: Dear Dean, I previously sent you a handwritten letter concerning Mike Mansfield. However, I am blind and my handwriting is often unintelligible, and I fear that was the case in the letter that I wrote you. Therefore, I decided to put my thoughts about Mike Mansfield on this tape. I'll start with the time I first met Mike. At that time, I was a freshman at the University of Montana, in 1935. I stayed there in the University of Montana for that year, my freshman year, and then transferred to Stanford in California to finish my education. However, while I was one year in the University of Montana I came to know Mike Mansfield. I very much admired him. He had high principles, high morals, and an incisive, brilliant mind. His ideas of government and the function of Congress coincided with my own ideas. I admired him very much. One day, we were talking together and he asked me if I would be interested in forming a club which would support him in his proposed plan to run for Congress. The club was to be made up of students in Montana of about my age. I was very happy to do that and I proceeded to organize that club and told Mike about it. He asked me if I would gather that club together in a classroom at the University of Montana and he would talk to them about his proposed run for Congress and what his ideas were. So that is what we did and he gave a very wonderful talk to this student club. Everyone there was deeply impressed with Mike and his personality and all the fine principles which he had. Then he ran for Congress and was elected. Later on, he was elected to the Senate. I didn't have much contact with him when I was going to Stanford.

When I completed my education and came back and went to law school at the University of Montana, I started to practice law in Helena, Montana. Which I did for about 43 years and thereafter, for about seven years, I was a district judge in Helena. During the practice, I was hired on as attorney for the Montana Aeronautics Commission. I should add that I was a wartime pilot in World War II. So we conceived the idea in the Montana Aeronautics Commission that we would like to do something that would improve airline service in the state of Montana. I was more or less appointed to follow through on that. I contacted Frontier Airlines, which was operating in the state at that time, and we put together a plan for airline service which would cover the whole state in a kind of a circular direction around the state. Stopping and picking up passengers and dropping them off at about six or seven cities in the state. Then, having conceived the plan, it was necessary to get permission from the Federal Aviation Agency to approve it. So the first thing I thought of it was to go back to Washington, D.C., and talk to Mike Mansfield, who was at that time the Majority Leader. I presented my plan to him and he thought it was a good idea, and it was a good idea.

We had a hearing before the FAA and they decided that our plan should be put in effect in the state of Montana, so that there would be airline service available to practically everyone in

Montana. Frontier Airlines operated that for several years, as I recall. Unfortunately, Frontier Airlines didn't get as many passengers as was hoped. Many of the people of Montana were accustomed to driving their cars and they didn't use the service as much as we had hoped they would, even though we made many endeavors to try to do that. So finally, it became obvious that it was going to fail and it was abandoned, but the point I'm making here is that Mike Mansfield, when he was Majority Leader in the Senate, went to all of that trouble with me and tried to his utmost to do a good thing for the people of Montana. That's the way Mike Mansfield was. He was always working for the state of Montana and for its citizens.

After that, I visited Mike when I went to Washington, D.C., many times and I continued to try to get good airline service in the state. There were many cases before the FAA where we were able to make presentation so that the existing airlines, other than Frontier, which were as I recall, Northwest and Western, could furnish better service to Montana. There were a number of hearings on this and I always talked to Mike and he always helped me as much as he could, because he was very loyal to the people in the state. We had pretty good success with that. That worked out pretty well. Later on, of course, they deregulated the airline industry and after that it was up to the airline whether they wanted to serve Montana or not. Mike certainly was very helpful.

Another time, which I recall, was when some people in and around the Helena area mostly, received leases from the federal government for property upon which they could build houses, and some cases very nice houses, and cabins on the leased land. Unfortunately, there was a phrase in that lease which said that the government could terminate these leases at any time it wished to do so. To my astonishment and the astonishment of everyone else, we received a letter from the person who was in charge of that particular thing in Washington, D.C. I think he may have been an employee of the Department of the Interior. Now this man, of course, said that the people who had built these houses and cabins at great expense lost their leases and had to destroy the houses. They were required to declare the property. This was a pretty cold-blooded thing to do, but nevertheless, that's exactly what they proposed to do. So again, I went back to see Mike about that, in the interest of the people who had built houses and cabins on Canyon Ferry Lake. Before I went to see Mike, I talk to the employee of the Department of Interior who had written the letter. He was very cold and hostile to me. As I got up to leave and he had denied even considering retracting his letter. I told him I was going to see Senator Mike Mansfield, who was the Majority Leader, who was the Senator from Montana and ask if he could help. I noticed that he flinched a little when I said that and he was more polite for the rest of the session, but he still didn't reverse his decision.

I went to see Mike in the Senate and told him what had happened. This, of course, was a terrible thing to happen to those people, they would lose hundreds of thousands of dollars and Mike was impressed with the unfairness of such a thing. He was in his office in the Senate and he said, "Just a minute, Henry, I'm gonna make some telephone calls." And so he did and as I recall he only had to make one. He called the individual at the Department of Interior about it and told him that he thought that was highly unfair to cause such a loss to the people in

Montana. That individual reversed his action and Mike hung up the phone and he said, "Henry, that's taken care of. There won't be any more problem with it." And there never was and never has been since.

I continued to visit Mike from time to time over many, many different things. When I went back there, he had told me that any time I wanted to talk with him I should go to his office and they would send a messenger to the Senate floor and he would come right in to talk to me. And that's the way it always worked. He was extraordinarily receptive to the needs of the people of Montana whom I represented. He told me that I should always do that when I came back and he would be readily available to talk to me about such things. Many times I sat in his office and while I was there he received telephone calls from important people in government, in the Congress and so forth. I was deeply impressed by the importance of the people with whom he talked and the important affairs of state they discussed. I found that highly interesting, as I think anybody would. That's about all I can tell you about Mike without going into all the various things he did for the state, but he was devoted to the interests of the state of Montana, as well as to the interests of the government in Washington, D.C. He had very high principles, very high moral ethics, and he was very intelligent. He understood the world and how it worked. I just can't say enough in praise of Mike Mansfield, whom I knew so well over so many years.

To conclude this tape, I want to say to you that I admire the way the law school is being handled. I think it has been a fine law school. After graduating from Stanford, [I] took my law school at the University of Montana in Missoula, and my two sons, Bruce and Lester, also took their legal courses there at the State University in Missoula. They went on to be very successful. Bruce is the chief water judge and Lester has an executive position with a corporation in North Dakota known generally as MDU, which has become quite a good-sized corporation with, I believe about 9,000 employees scattered all over the United States. So he has an important job and they both had important jobs. They both got their legal education at the law school there in Missoula and I have, as I said, a very high regard for that law school. I hope this is intelligible and that it will more fully explain the scribblings that I wrote on that letter, which I really couldn't do because of my blindness. I want to thank you for writing me about Mike and I feel better that I've done my best to tell you about Mike Mansfield.

Goodbye and good luck,

Judge Henry Loble Keenan

[End of Reminiscence]