

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 396-028
Interviewee: Leslie Joe Eskildsen
Interviewer: Bob Brown
Date of Interview: July 8, 2005
Project: Bob Brown Oral History Collection

Bob Brown: We're interviewing Leslie Joe Eskildsen. Representative Eskildsen was a member of the House of Representatives for ten years, first elected in 1954 as a Democrat and served until the election of 1964. He also served later on as a delegate to the Montana Constitutional Convention. Joe, tell us a little bit about what got you involved in politics to begin with.

Leslie Eskildsen: When I came home from the service, I was on a mine sweeper. I was like all the rest of the young people. I wanted a job. I wanted to get at it. The rest of them went to school, but I just went on to the farm. In a few years, I kind of got interested in politics when we watched the way our county was run. We decided the old duffers had run their course. So we started running for office. I got elected. I went to Helena. I got sworn in 1955 and the session started. In a bit, it was brought to the attention of the legislature that there was a real problem. In Deer Lodge at the...

BB: State penitentiary?

LE: The penitentiary at Deer Lodge. So there was a committee appointed to go over there and do an interview job and an investigation. It turned out that committee was of three people, Pat...

BB: Was he a legislator?

LE: Pat Gilfeather, myself, and another representative. I can't remember his name. Anyway, we went to Deer Lodge and we started to interview the various people. We found out that Deer Lodge was run by a controller. His job was to make all the decisions. You had the administration. They didn't do anything. They just went through the controller. The guards went through the controller. The inmates went through the controller. He turned out to be a person who was looking for trouble. He could irritate you in no time flat.

BB: This wasn't the warden, this was a different guy?

LE: Yes this was a different guy. The warden had to go through him too. Anyway, we interviewed him.

BB: Do you remember what this guy's name was?

LE: I can't think of it. It seems like it was Wright, [Business Manager Elmer Erickson] but I'm not sure. This was 50 years ago. Anyway, as we interviewed him, when we got through interviewing him, we pretty well came to the conclusion that we had a person that just had a way of making you angry. So then we interviewed all the guards- or many of them. His name always came up. They were never satisfied with him. Then we interviewed the inmates. They were the same way. They were the ones that were really disturbed with him. One of the disturbances was that when somebody was eligible for parole, they'd request a hearing.

Maybe he would give them one. Maybe he wouldn't. It would be another year before they'd get addressed again. Sometimes he did accept one. He'd interview them and then turn them down and never say anything. It was the way he handled it that irritated them. We found out that the inmates considered themselves different. One was a criminal and one's an inmate. We wanted to know what the difference was. They said that a criminal was their job. They get up in the morning and they're going to be a criminal.

They're going to be in and out of prison all the time. They liked somebody like this controller because with enough money, you could do about anything. This hit a chord with us. Then we said the inmate, he's the guy that comes up for parole and they turn him down. If he gets out, he's never going to come back probably. Anyway, that was our experience. We went back to Helena and we gave our report to the governor, who was Hugo Aaronson at the time. Hugo was the type of guy that didn't get excited. We gave our report and we told him we thought he should can that guy, move him out to avoid a riot. Hugo, for whatever reason- we said, "Time of the essence." As it turned out, nothing was done and we did have a riot.

BB: That riot occurred in '59 didn't it?

LE: Was that when it was?

BB: Yes you were in the legislature then. I remember the warden's name was Ellsworth. Does that sound right? [Warden was Floyd Powell. Ed 'Bus' Ellsworth was hired in 1962.]

LE: I don't have the slightest idea anymore.

BB: Because the reforms didn't take place, your feeling is that it kind of led to the riot in '59.

LE: Yes. You couldn't blame Hugo for it because that was quite a change to can somebody.

BB: What should have happened Joe?

LE: They should have gotten rid of that guy.

BB: That would have been the main thing. He was still there when the riot occurred?

LE: Yes.

BB: There was a guy name [Deputy Warden Ted] Rothe too. He was maybe the deputy warden. They were both killed.

[Rothe was murdered by inmates Jerry Myles and Lee Smart. After they were cornered in a tower, Myles killed Smart, then himself.]

LE: I can't remember. It turned out to be bloody.

BB: I was at the high school trip to the penitentiary a few years after that occurred. I remember the fellow who was giving us the tour of the prison showed us a bazooka hole- the two main ring-lingers, a guy named Smart I think. I can't remember what the other guy's name was. They were holed up in a tower, kind of a high place there, a Bastille of a prison. The national guardsmen there came and hit them with a bazooka. That's how they got them, I guess.

LE: I can't remember who the inmates who were killed but there were a couple of them killed. Anyway, that's the story at Deer Lodge.

BB: Now you ran for the legislature as a Democrat. That was during the period when Franklin D. Roosevelt had been president when you were a kid. Truman of course was president right after the war. Presumably those men were models to you? Why were you a Democrat?

LE: I'm a Democrat because the county was run by Republicans. I thought they took advantage of everything- all the hiring and firing.

BB: And that it was time for a change?

LE: Yes.

BB: So your reasons weren't so deeply philosophical, although you generally voted for Democratic candidates for president, that type of thing?

LE: Oh absolutely. At that time, the Democrats were for reservoirs, or dams. The power company was opposed. This made the discussion go.

BB: Of course it's somewhat different now.

LE: Oh it's completely reversed. We couldn't build dams or reservoirs because of the Montana Power Company and the power they had. Today, they couldn't build a reservoir if they wanted to because of the environmental movement. So this whole thing happened. And at that time- and I still believe that water is more important than gas. Fifty years from now you can still be making gas or something to burn. Making water might be kind of difficult. As the population increases, it's going to get more difficult.

BB: Joe, were there a couple of legislators, Democrats, Republicans that kind of stand out in your mind in the '50s and early '60s when you were a legislator?

LE: Well Melcher was in there. Melcher was a real tidy guy. He kept everything where it was supposed to be.

BB: He had a very clean, neat desk?

LE: Yes, there you are. Virginia brought the daughter. We had a little daughter, Loy. Virginia brought Loy up there. She wanted to sit on my lap. So I let her. While she was sitting there, all of a sudden she scooted off and ran over to Melcher's desk. He's sitting on the end seat. She started throwing papers around. I got over there to have her stop. He said, "Leave her go. It's the most fun I've had since I've been here."

I have a story about Toni Rosell. We served on the State Administration Committee. She had a couple of bills in there pertaining to judges. So this day, I heard the bill come up. But on second reading, she made the motion to approve it and so forth. She was giving the speech and the attorney started to get on her. Another one would get her and they hammered her right down. All she could do was sit there and take it until they were all through. Then she could close. So I went to see Toni and I said, "Next time you're bringing that other judges bill up, as soon as the first attorney starts to get talking, I'll get up and get permission to ask you a question. Then you go and you have all the time you want to answer that. Then when the next one gets up, we'll do the same thing. You do it until they get tired. It won't take very long because they lose popularity fast, attorneys." Anyway, I found out that there were two different people in the legislature. One was attorneys and the other was legislators of the hoi polloi. So once she did that, she passed her bill. So we became friends. I always worked on State Administrations with her.

BB: I had one of these same interviews with her yesterday in Billings. I had a good visit with her. Do you remember Francis Bardanouve?

LE: Oh of course. He came in one session after I had been there. It took him one session to find out what was going on. The next session he was there, they came in for the same boiler that they'd put in for the year before, he remembered. When they came in for another 25 typewriters, he remembered. So bureaucrats right away found that they met their match. He was probably- Republicans and Democrats could call conservatives liberal, but he was probably the most conservative that there ever was...

BB: In terms of money?

LE: Oh yes. He was always on the Appropriations Committee. By the way, I made up my mind after I had been there a session or two that if you was ever going to accomplish anything, you had to be on the Appropriations Committee and at state administration. If you weren't, the bureaucrats would just ignore you.

BB: Do you remember Ted Schwinden was a legislator then?

LE: Yes, we were great friends.

BB: Would you have predicted that Ted would have gone on to be governor?

LE: Not particularly.

BB: How would you describe him as a legislator?

LE: Oh he was capable. He was an educated person. He could handle himself. I got out of high school and that was about it, so I wasn't all that great. Ted and Bardanouve- of course he read a lot. So he was well acquainted.

BB: Now Joe, you're unique too in the respect that you served in the legislature with Melcher, who went on to become a U.S senator and you served with Tim Babcock, who went on to become governor, Tom Judge who went on to become governor, Ted Schwinden, and I think in about the '59 session Babcock and Schwinden were there. I guess Judge didn't come in until a couple of years later. How would you compare those three as legislators? All of them became governor.

LE: They all had their way of doing things. I had my way of doing things too. I did it through the appropriations. They did it through the pool they had. They were powerful individuals.

BB: Was Babcock a legislator who would, if he had never been elected governor, be memorable?

LE: I would have never forgotten those guys. There were a lot of them in the legislature that I don't have the slightest idea about. Some of the committees I was on, I don't remember any of the people who were on it.

BB: What was it about Babcock that would have been memorable?

LE: I got a little story there that goes to the national guards. It was Malta's turn to get a new army. In second place was Glasgow. There were going to be two. So one day they were bringing this up in the Senate. Somebody came over and told me, "You know that McElwain omitted Malta and put Deer Lodge in?"

BB: Who did?

LE: McElwain.

BB: Joe McElwain was a state representative from Deer Lodge.

LE: Yes.

BB: He later went on to be president of the Montana Power Company.

LE: Oh yes. So you can see the caliber of the guys that I'm confronted with. Anyway, they decided that they would just omit Malta out and put Deer Lodge in. When I found that out, I was sitting in my seat thinking. Bardanouve comes by and he said, "What are you going to do about that, Joe?" I said, "I don't know. Let's go to the governor's office." So we went down there and on the way I thought, "Well I don't know what to do." So I said, "Francis, before we go in, get yourself all emotional."

So we rushed in that office and I said, "Ma'am, there's a big flood taking place in Phillips County. I need to get a hold of the adjutant general immediately." She grabbed the phone and I said, "I got you. I want you up at the House chambers in 15 minutes." He was hiding so I couldn't find him. You couldn't do anything unless I could find him. So I got him at my desk and I said, "This is the way it's going to be. If you take Malta out of this as long as my butt points down, you'll never get another army in Montana, as long as I'm on appropriations. You aren't going to do it to me." About 30 minutes later, he came back and he said, "There will be three armies: one in Malta, one in Glasgow, and one in Deer Lodge." So you wanted to know if I knew Tim Babcock, sure I did. I respected him.

BB: Now how was Tim involved in that?

LE: Nutter got killed. Tim became governor. He was the governor. They're all in cahoots together. They all knew what they were doing. The adjutant governor sure talked to the governor.

BB: Did you ever meet Governor Babcock personally as a legislator, do you remember that?

LE: Oh yes I liked his wife. Betty was in the Constitutional Convention.

BB: How about Tom Judge?

LE: Oh I liked Tom. He appointed me to the veteran's affairs division. I served on that for 15 years.

BB: How was he as- you described Schwinden as a very smart and capable legislator. I imagine he presented himself well.

LE: Oh always.

BB: How would you describe Tom Judge?

LE: Tom was ambitious and he was aggressive. He was younger so he had a little tougher road to hoe. He managed to get elected.

BB: Would you have predicted that he would have gone on to greater things?

LE: I don't know if I did or not. I'm sure he had the ability to go on. He was in the political position to go on.

BB: Let me mention a couple of other names to you. These men never went on beyond the legislature as far as I know. Dale McGarvey?

LE: Oh yes. He's from Flathead. He was a dedicated person that was for reservoirs, dams. That area was important.

BB: When I started this project, one of the things that I was especially interested in was a better understanding of the power and influence of the Anaconda Company. The Anaconda Company proudly cast a larger shadow in the state in the '30s and '40s than they did when you got there. You were there when they still were a pretty important force to be reckoned with.

LE: If they wanted it, they got it. If they didn't want it, they didn't get it.

BB: How did they do that?

LE: They did it real easy. First, they gathered up the Republican Party. They gathered up the Republican Party and a delegation out of Butte and Anaconda. They generated enough votes. They never won by much, but they always won by one or two votes. That's the way it was.

BB: Did you ever have any contact with anybody from the Anaconda Company?

LE: I knew them all as lobbyists. I can't name them right now.

BB: Al Wilkinson? Ken Shea?

LE: Oh yes Shea. I can't remember many more. Even then, there were a lot of lobbyists around Helena.

BB: What did they want? You said that when they wanted things, they got them. What was their position generally?

LE: Usually they didn't want the strength of the unions. They didn't want to pay more taxes than they needed to. That is natural. They threw in with the Montana Power Company.

BB: You saw them as working pretty closely together.

LE: They were in the same bed until the Anaconda Company went to the Montana Power Company to get a rate reduction. When the Power Company wouldn't give it to them, that's when they split.

BB: When did that happen, when you were there?

LE: I think I was gone then.

BB: I see. Do you remember a legislator from Butte by the name of Mervin Dempsey?

LE: Yes I remember the name. I knew Ray Wayrynen better. We were friends.

BB: Would he have been typical of the Butte legislators?

LE: Pretty much as I recall. They all stuck together.

BB: They generally supported the position of the Anaconda Company?

LE: And the power company. That's where Montana Power lived was in Butte. They would have been crazy not to.

BB: Do you remember a legislator named Jake Frank?

LE: I can't place him.

BB: Fred Broeder?

LE: Broeder I remember. Was he from Helena?

BB: No he was from the Flathead.

LE: Oh okay. I can't tell you if he's a Democrat or a Republican.

BB: John MacDonald?

LE: Yes I knew him real well. He was the Speaker of the House. That was my first experience was the election of John MacDonald.

BB: Tell me about that.

LE: I was new and I went there. I was impressed with John. His opponent was Fred Barrett from Chester. I supported John and I suppose that's one reason I ended up on the Administration Committee. I think I was chairman of that in my first session. I was chairman of it off and on when we were in the majority.

BB: Gene Mahoney? He was Speaker when you were there.

LE: Yes. I ran into Gene Mahoney one time over in Kuna, Hawaii- no, the other little island. I haven't got the right one.

BB: Maui?

LE: Yes, Maui. He was sitting in a little shack there drinking a beer.

BB: Now when you were there, the Anaconda Company and I think other interests in Montana had what they called "watering holes."

LE: Oh always.

BB: What do you remember about those? Those were gone by the time I got there.

LE: They were good hosts and you didn't have to talk to them if you didn't want to. They didn't make you talk about what they wanted. You were there to enjoy yourself. They'd take us over to Butte to eat over at the- was it Dorothy's or Mary's?

BB: Lydia's.

LE: They'd put on a feed for everybody. They brought the whole Senate and House, the whole shebang if you wanted to go. Everybody went because this was quite an occasion to all be together.

BB: The watering holes were a gathering place that occurred at the end of the day during the legislative sessions?

LE: Not during the sessions. It was always at the end.

BB: Yes the end of the legislative day. There were more than one, but more than one of them were in the Placer Hotel?

LE: That's where they usually held them then. That's where they were. Then Jorgenson's, that's where a lot of people went.

BB: Jorgenson's was a bar/restaurant near the capitol building, and a little newer.

LE: Then there was a town organization, a banker's club?

BB: Montana Club.

LE: That's where the other parties were held.

BB: So do you have a recollection of the Anaconda Company watering hole?

LE: Can I remember going to it?

BB: Yes.

LE: Not really.

BB: Can you describe what it was like?

LE: It was just a lot of people in there with all kinds of (unintelligible) and booze.

BB: It was just a hospitality room with comfortable furniture, large room at the Placer Hotel?

LE: When I look back on it, they didn't try to change your mind there. They did it just because of their friendliness. They always spoke to you and they were always friendly. If you wanted to talk to them about something, you could ask them.

BB: So from our conversation Joe, I don't get the impression that you have a bad feeling toward them. You felt independent of them. You don't have a feeling of anger of anything toward them as you look back.

LE: No, I thought that they ran rough shod every once in a while. That was politics. The Montana Power Company, as I look back now, it was quite a company. They paid their administrators. They paid their help real well. They always paid a dividend. We had a fair electrical rate. When you look at all of that and what they preferred was not to get charged more taxes and so forth- the big fight in taxes was that they were appraised at a certain value for taxation purposes. They were appraised at another value for income. The higher appraisal they had for everything, was the more income they got. The two never matched. That's where the decision should come in. So as a Democrat that was bad.

BB: So Democrats generally favored changing the tax laws in a way that you felt would be fairer as far as the other concern. Of course they fought that.

LE: That was where the fight was. I suppose they were satisfied with what little fight the session jelled.

BB: In your experience there, they generally won?

LE: Oh, they always won.

BB: You were there sometimes when the Democrats were in the majority?

LE: Oh yes.

BB: They won anyway.

LE: Oh yes. You always had enough from Anaconda and Butte to do it. That's where their bread and butter were.

BB: You generally, when you were there, you felt that you generally aligned yourself with the folks who weren't part of that voting block?

LE: Yes that's right.

BB: I've asked you a little bit about these governors that you served with in the legislature. You also served in the House when Don Nutter was a member of the state Senate. Then of course when Nutter was governor in '61 you were there. Do you have any impressions of him?

LE: I didn't agree with Don. The reason I didn't agree with him was because he was very conservative. We actually...like the Department of Labor, cut their budget down to where it hardly paid the guy's wages. You had to bum stamps, bum rides. You learned this after the session was over. Nutter was trying to hold the cost of government down. He was dedicated to do that. So there was, in my opinion, it took several years to overcome that, to get back where the people were paid and so forth.

BB: You felt that Nutter maybe overdid that?

LE: Yes he did.

BB: Did you support taxes then to try to raise more money for government?

LE: I'm glad you asked that because there were two departments in Montana: agriculture and state lands.

BB: I think Lowell Purdy was the Commissioner of Agriculture at that time? Yes.

LE: He was from Malta. I knew Lowell well. Then the Commissioner of State Lands was there. Anyway, they came to me on the subcommittee. On the subcommittee on appropriations, I was the chairman. We handled all the boards, bureaus, University system of the state of Montana. So when these two gentlemen came to me, they were getting 7,000 dollars a year to be the head of those departments. Things have changed. They wanted more money. I said, "Well gentlemen, tell me what you want. Tell me what you think you should get." So we settled on 3,000 dollars apiece raise. So they were now getting 10,000 dollars. The same thing happened to the courts.

BB: The judges wanted more money?

LE: They wanted more money. I agreed that they were entitled to some more money. So we gave them some more money. Then when we came to the campaign, who do you think showed up on the roster up there, with 2,500 people listening to him talk about me. I was a taxer and a spender.

BB: Who said this about you?

LE: That's what Purdy and [state lands commissioner Mons] Teigen said. They got up there and said I was a taxer and a spender after I had done that for them.

BB: After you had stuck out your neck to get a raise for them. That happened right here in Malta?

LE: Right here in Malta. We had two big jamborees here. The Democrats had one with about 2,500 and so did the Republicans. Anyway, I handled their budget again the next year. So what I wrote in, I just wrote in 10,000 dollars for what they were going to get. Man, they came down there and they were wild. I said, "Fellows, you said I was a taxpayer and a spender. I'm going to cut down."

BB: You wrote them 10,000 dollars- that was the raise wasn't it?

LE: They were getting 7,000 dollars. We gave them a raise to 10,000 dollars. So when they came the second year to get- they wanted more than that; 10,000 dollars.

BB: Oh they wanted more than that?

LE: Oh absolutely, they wanted another raise. I said, "I'm a taxpayer and a spender. You're not going to get it." I want to know why they did that to me. I said, "You didn't have to say anything." That was a terrible thing to do to me. That's politics.

BB: Yes that's politics. It's an interesting story.

LE: That's the same way it was politics when I handled their budget too.

BB: So did you ever meet Nutter?

LE: Other than when he would come to the sessions and stuff, I don't know if I ever did or not. I don't know if I talked to him or not. I probably have. I talked to everybody.

BB: Did you know Arnold Olsen?

LE: Oh yes, real well. He was his own worst enemy. He got beat. He came here and I said- now this is the beginning of my political career. I said, "Arnold, don't say anything about..." I think he was running with Hugo.

BB: Probably for governor in '56.

LE: I said, "Just leave him alone. Just tell them what you're going to do. Don't even mention it." He got up there and just ripped right into Hugo. That crowd wasn't fit for that. I know that he lost them right there.

BB: Hugo was personally popular.

LE: Oh yes he was popular.

BB: What was the basis for his popularity?

LE: He was just Hugo. He just did his thing.

BB: He was personable?

LE: Yes and he was easy to talk to. He was a happy-go-lucky guy. He didn't pretend to be the head of any class or anything. He just ran the show.

BB: So you continued in the legislature for ten years. Then were you defeated in '64 or did you not run again?

LE: No, I was elected in '64 but I was defeated the next session.

BB: Defeated in '66. Was there an issue?

LE: Yes Johnson, President Johnson got into trouble. The Republicans put on a real move. This is a Republican county here, pretty strong. That's what had happened.

BB: So you just kind of went down in a landslide where the Republicans had a good year.

LE: Yes they finally took me out.

BB: So there wasn't any particular issue, state issue, anything like that?

LE: No. That wasn't a problem.

BB: Who was your opponent in that election?

LE: Lou Perry.

BB: Okay I remember him. I served with him. So you were out of elective office for a few years. Were you active in any organization, farm organization, Grain Growers, Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, anything?

LE: No I was too busy for that. I was involved in the veteran's movement.

BB: Yes and you mentioned that Governor Judge appointed you?

LE: Yes and so did Anderson. It would have been 16 years, but when Schwinden was governor, (unintelligible) and he appointed a lady. That time, there were three members from VFW, one from the [American] Legion. This lady, she replaced the Legion. I became kind of concerned about that because I wanted the Legion to have somebody on the committee. So I went to the governor and I told him, "If you'll appoint the gentleman from Chester, a Legion person, he was a leader, I'll resign so we'll have a Legion member on this committee." So he agreed to it and that's what happened. So I only served 15 years instead of 16.

BB: I want to ask you too, about your involvement in the constitutional convention and some of your experiences there. I also want to ask you about Senator Mansfield and Metcalf.

LE: Yes don't forget them.

BB: Okay, let's do that now. What are your recollections of Senator Mansfield?

LE: I had the opportunity to visit with him many times throughout the year. The first time I met him was in Helena. There was a big Democrat rally and we went into a showhouse I think.

BB: Probably the old Marlow Theater?

LE: I think that's right. Senator Mansfield stood at the entrance and met every person as we went in and shook our hands. He got our names too. When the whole thing was over, he'd come and stood in the same spot. He shook everybody's hand and gave everybody's name on the way out.

BB: Isn't that amazing?

LE: It's unbelievable. He never forgot a name. In my case, he'd ask how Virginia was and how my mother was. He never forgot anything.

BB: It was really astounding. I had a similar experience with him too. You could meet him even years later and he'd remember.

LE: Oh yes. He never forgot. I dealt with Metcalf quite a little bit.

BB: Anything else on Mansfield before we switch?

LE: He had a principle about him that there wasn't any back stabbing. There weren't any character assassinations. He was proud of the Senate. While he was majority leader of the Senate, everyone was treated just like everyone else. There was no special

treatment. He saw to it that if they were trying to get something to go, he'd help them. He'd make it so it could work.

BB: You had visits with him personally?

LE: Oh absolutely.

BB: Did you ever discuss an issue or anything with him that affected your area back in Washington D.C or anything like that?

LE: I did. As it happened, I was kind of the leading Democrat here. I was expected to find a few jobs. By the time I found out that somebody was leaving, the Republicans already knew it. They already had the place filled before I found out that it was happening. So one time back in Washington D.C., talking to Mansfield, I told him that I wasn't having a very good time. He said, "Do you got somebody that you wanted to give jobs to?" I said, "Yes there are two guys who work for the BLM." He said, "Fine. When do you want to do this?" I said, "Now is fine." Getting around in Washington wasn't the easiest thing for me. He said, "Stanley," he got the heads of all the...

BB: Who is Stanley?

LE: Kimmitt.

BB: Oh he was the secretary of the Senate later on.

LE: Bobby Baker was first, then Kimmitt, see. Kimmitt got the head of all the various- the Forest Service, the BLM, you just keep naming them. He went down there and there was one chair there. He said, "There's your chair. Here are the people that you're going to talk to." They were the heads of all of the departments. So I told him, "These were the two guys I'm trying to get on. They're going to be filled with Republicans. I want them hired." They said, "Fine." So I went home and went to Mansfield. Mansfield said, "When you get home, you put their names in. if they don't get hired, you tell the guy that's running the outfit to call so-and-so in Billings." I came home and I went to the local guy. He laughed at me. I picked up his phone and I called the person in Billings. The next day, this guy was on his way to Billings. The day after, these two guys are hired.

BB: Who was president at the time, do you remember? Would it have been during Johnson's term? Was this while you were a legislator?

LE: I was a legislator. Metcalf was the one that did it for me too.

BB: If it was before 1960, Eisenhower was president. Afterwards it would have been Kennedy or Johnson I imagine.

LE: It could have been. I can't remember.

BB: You would think that Mansfield would have had more influence in a Democratic administration back there. You've mentioned that the jobs were going to be filled by Republicans here locally.

LE: This is a Republican county. So in order to get a job, you had to do something. The Democrats took it over for a number of years. I'll say one thing for you Republicans, you never quit. They never quit. Today, there isn't a Democrat elected in this county.

BB: Here in Phillips County.

LE: That's because of the hard work. They never quit.

BB: Mansfield, working with Stanley Kimmitt helped to get you in touch with some important bureaucrats back in Washington D.C., that made it possible for you to hire a couple of local Democrats to the BLM here in this area. He was obviously the guy that made it happen. How about Metcalf?

LE: He got a job for me for a lady on the Bend Refuge. Metcalf did it. Metcalf also, for my sister who worked for the ASCS office in Choteau. At that time many years ago women weren't supposed to be in charge of anything. She was in charge of the ASCS office there in Choteau. Some of the redneck farmers decided to get rid of her. I got ahold of Metcalf. Between Metcalf and my sister, she retained her job. That was because of the good old boys clearly.

BB: Did you ever have a chance to have a conversation with Metcalf?

LE: Oh yes I talked to him. In fact, we lived in his house in one session.

BB: His house there in Helena?

LE: Yes.

BB: That was probably the house in which he died.

LE: It could be.

BB: He died in his house in Helena just a couple blocks down the hill from the capitol.

LE: Yes, I used to walk to the capitol.

BB: So you knew him quite well obviously.

LE: Oh, yes, real well.

BB: He was your landlord.

LE: That's right.

BB: How would you describe him?

LE: He was a dedicated senator. When he took on something, he never quit. He was capable. To me, he was very personable.

BB: He was personable?

LE: Yes, he was the guy that you liked, you know.

BB: He had a reputation for having a temper. Did you ever see any of that?

LE: No, I didn't. But I wasn't probably one to irritate him.

BB: Then of course Donna Metcalf, his wife, you knew her too.

LE: Yes, some, but not so much.

BB: How did it happen that you rented his house?

LE: Oh, that goes to the telephone company. The telephone company said, "We've got just the right house for you." They'd got it from Metcalf, see.

BB: The telephone company?

LE: Yes they had a set of lobbyists who were just as smooth as the power company. I was well acquainted with them.

BB: So you were coming to Helena, I suppose you had been there before?

LE: Yes a session before.

BB: So you needed a house. So was Al Riegle(?) their lobbyist then?

LE: You're right. Yes that's who it was.

BB: So you got in touch with Al Riegle and he said, "Do you need a house Joe?" And you said, "Yes what do you got?"

LE: He called me and said, "I've got a house for you." He took the initiative. He liked to hunt ducks and stuff. So we'd take him out on the place and he'd hunt ducks. I wouldn't need a duck if you'd give me the thing.

BB: He had befriended you as lobbyists sometimes do.

LE: Yes. Most of those lobbyists were very personable.

BB: So Metcalf—Riegle knew that Metcalf's house was for rent. Do you suppose Metcalf talked to Riegle about that?

LE: I imagine Riegle approached him. In fact, they've done this for 100 years. They knew every house that was available.

BB: So you didn't deal directly with Metcalf. You dealt through Riegle.

LE: That's right. Every time we went back to Washington D.C., we went to whoever was there-- Mansfield and Metcalf-- whether it was Anderson or whether it was Murray or Williams.

BB: What can you tell me about Senator Jim Murray?

LE: I think when the first time I went to Washington, I met Jim. I couldn't have met him too many times. I'm really sorry that I didn't get my picture taken with him.

BB: You were an admirer of his?

LE: Yes I appreciated the fact that he was a United States senator.

BB: You were first elected in '54 and he had a tough re-election campaign. A congressman by the name of Wes D'Ewart ran against him in '54. He had a battle on his hands. That was his last term in office. You were probably bringing your own campaign. Do you remember anything about that campaign between D'Ewart and Murray?

LE: Not really. I wasn't personally involved in it. He was a Democrat, so I would have been in support of him.

BB: What do you remember about General LeRoy Anderson, Congressman Anderson?

LE: He made a mistake because he moved in-- he was going to be something else. Instead of running for Congress, he ran for something else.

BB: Yes, he and Lee Metcalf ran against each other in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate to take over for Murray in 1960.

LE: That's the reason I'd forgotten about that. I know that Anderson ended up back on the farm.

BB: Yes that's right. It sounds like-- you don't remember it-- perhaps you were more favorable to Metcalf than Anderson in that primary?

LE: Oh I'm sure I was. That's a long time ago.

BB: What do you remember about Congressman Orvin Fjare?

LE: I was going to ask you-- when we named Battin and Smiley, there was a Smiley that was elected to Congress.

BB: He ran. He didn't quite make it. He ran against Arnold Olsen. He was a legislator from Bozeman. Dick Smiley was...

LE: He didn't get elected.

BB: He didn't quite make it. He ran against Arnold Olsen and it was close. That would have been in the western district.

LE: I was more impressed with Smiley and Battin. Battin went on to be a Congressman as I recall and then now he's a judge.

BB: You served in the legislature with Battin.

LE: Yes and he was a-- they were the kind of people that you liked to know. In other words, they weren't back-biting or anything. They were just good, ordinary people.

BB: That's how you felt about Battin?

LE: Oh yes.

BB: Did you visit with him when you were in Washington D.C., after he was in Congress?

LE: Oh yes. I'm sure that if we look at my wall there, we'll find his picture.

BB: So you had generally a good opinion of him?

LE: Yes. The only picture that I didn't get was Murray's from the time of the start. Mansfield, Metcalf, Melcher, Battin, Arnold Olsen, you just keep naming them.

BB: So you remained out of politics for a few years (unintelligible), is that right? Except for your involvement in veteran's affairs, right?

LE: Yes.

BB: Then you ran for the Constitutional Convention.

LE: Yes.

BB: Is there a story about that?

LE: Well Lee Robinson, you know him?

BB: A rancher here in this area.

LE: He had that big building once you come into town. I just talked to him the day before yesterday. He had some kind of a virus and he was on an airplane. He was one of the candidates and...

BB: He was a pretty active Republican isn't he?

LE: Oh yes. I think he gets disgusted with them once in a while.

BB: His father was Fred Robinson?

LE: Yes, he was a senator when I was in the House.

BB: He cast a pretty big shadow on Montana too?

LE: Yes, the only thing he ever said about me, "He's a dangerous little boy." They had tricks.

BB: Would you have thought he might have been close to the Anaconda Company, for example, and the work that they did here?

LE: It's like the governor said, "I'm a lap child." That's what Fred was. He was their lead man.

BB: He was the lead man for the Anaconda Company in the legislature?

LE: Yes and the power company. He was a big supporter. That was hard to overcome, you know. He had served many years. He got beat one session. Mrs. Phillips ran against him. He said, "You don't have to pay any attention to me. Vote for Watkins." When the vote was taken, (unintelligible) and she got elected.

BB: Who was Watkins?

LE: He was a legislator.

BB: This was before you served.

LE: Yes.

BB: Was it in the '30s or '40s or something?

LE: Oh I don't know just when he would have been. It was probably just a session or two before me. I can't remember all of them.

BB: Joe, tell us about the Con Con. Why did you run for the Con Con? Lee Robinson was running—Fred Robinson's son. You felt that he wouldn't be very good?

LE: No, no, no. I wasn't really excited about the Constitutional Convention. I thought that the legislature could amend the constitution in the three or four places that it could use some help. Anyway, so I ran for it. Marion Waters was another candidate from Saco. Barnard, Lloyd Barnard—he was also...

BB: He had been a legislator.

LE: When they lined us all up for the Constitutional Convention, they made it so that you-- if you were in politics, you couldn't run.

BB: If you were holding an office, you couldn't run.

LE: They couldn't keep us from running. Anyway, I got elected. There was a difference between the constitution, the makeup of the constitution and what they do, and what the legislature does. The legislature, the first thing they ask you is how much the taxes are, what the appropriation is, and who is going to get the money. That's what the legislature does is look after that type, to see who gets the money and how they spend it. The constitution, that was just to sit down the rules that you live by. The delegates of the constitution were probably the greatest bunch you could ever put together. They

were dedicated, educated, scattered throughout the whole state, young, old, men, and women. They sat us in alphabetical order to keep us from being political.

BB: Was that good?

LE: I suppose it was. I sat next to Marian Erdmann and next to Dorothy Eck. I had a post on the side and Dorothy [Daphne] Bugbee in front of it. Anyway, in the constitution, like I say, they weren't interested in anything these things might do. They knew what they wanted done. Where they lost me was in the appraisal of all properties. They changed it from County Commissioners. They stripped the County Commissioners, and put it within the state.

BB: So that the appraisal of property was handled by the state Department of Revenue rather than by the local County Commissioners.

LE: Yes and thinking this over, I was certain that when you take thousands of pieces of personal property and move it from the counties to the state, it was going to involve a lot of work. I could see millions of dollars going into this thing; by the way it cost millions. It is still costing millions. Thirty years later, they still don't have it quite right. There's still that two percent deal.

BB: Joe, what was the reason for that? Why did the Con Con feel it was necessary to take the appraisal power away from the locally elected people?

LE: They didn't think the county could do it.

BB: Of course the county had been doing it.

LE: Yes but they weren't sure between the counties it was the same. They were going to make it the same.

BB: It was an equalization problem. Weren't there also questions that there was some dishonesty?

LE: There could be, but that would have corrected itself. The state could have been the ones between the counties. They could have investigated the counties and straightened the counties out. They could have raised the counties up or down so they end up being the same over the state of Montana. I could see millions of dollars spent on this thing. I looked it up one time. It looked like it was 16 million dollars for a year's appraisal. I could be wrong on that. Then the next thing that happened was the water rights. This was the same kind of a situation. You take water rights out of the county, which were thousands of them, move them to Helena one at a time. That's going to cost millions of

dollars. They had been over 30 years at it. They're only half done. They haven't even entered into the lawsuits yet. This is going to be a very expensive venture.

BB: How did the constitution affect water rights?

LE: Before, the water rights were kept locally.

BB: So it was just as simple as that.

LE: You just had to change one word and put it in the state.

BB: They all have to be re-filed. I'm not sure that I understand the process, re-adjudicated or something?

LE: You had to take my water rights. I finally met with somebody in Havre. We went all through all the water rights. This takes in underground wells, dams, puddles, rivers, streams, and so forth. The state claimed it all.

BB: Was the thinking that sometimes water crosses a boundary, a county boundary and that it would be better off if it was a central location? You might have water rights in one county?

LE: Oh you could have that, but they were in the counties that you were in. If you wanted to know what person had what rights, you'd go to the county and look them up. In that moving process, you can see that each one had to be handled singularly. It wasn't something that you could bunch. So like I say, this has been going on for 30 years.

BB: I know it's been a problem for a long time. I'm aware of it too. I guess I didn't really understand exactly what the problem was. It isn't just a matter of physically taking some water rights on paper from the courthouse and making copies of them and sending them to the state?

LE: Except they've got to get an agreement from everyone. In other words, they had to personally interview me. They couldn't just take those water rights unless you screw around with them without getting a person that's involved in it. So this was a real problem for me in the convention. Now one thing that bothered me, and that's the Board of Regents. We used to have three parts of government: judiciary, legislative, executive. Now we now have four parts. The Board of Regents—the only difference is that the regents are appointed, not elected. They have all kinds of authority. We're still suffering from that.

BB: And as a legislator on the Appropriations Committee, you'd remember that. That's why it was a red flag. I know, I shouldn't say I know this, but my recollection is that Francis Bardanouve was concerned about that same deal. Do you remember that?

LE: Oh, I can just hardly remember it now. He was. He picked that stuff all up, you know.

BB: I think he had the same concern you did about that. When Racicot was governor, Racicot attempted to curtail the power of the Board of Regents. Racicot's argument was that if the elected officials have to raise the taxes and appropriate the money for the university system, they're accountable for it. Then when the legislature goes home and the money is turned over to the Board of Regents, they resent it as he did, the idea that the Regents could say, "Well we're not going to give quite as much money to Western as the legislature decided to do. We're going to give more of it to Northern," or whatever. It was his idea, "Look, they shouldn't be able to do that. They weren't elected. They don't need to be accountable for this." There was an attempt to amend the state constitution to do that. It was voted down.

LE: It's surprising what happens, what makes different bedfellows. One time, some of the legislation against them, the next time you're completely opposite. I was going to show you this. Let's see, what was I going to talk about?

BB: You were going to show me something? You can tell me.

LE: I was going to show you how the vote was set up.

BB: Oh, in the Constitutional Convention?

LE: Yes. Here it is.

BB: Oh yes. This was what was on the ballot. Because now, Joe you were a delegate for the Constitutional Convention. You had enough concerns about it, the ones you just mentioned to me, that when the convention concluded, you decided that probably it wouldn't be a good idea to have it be confirmed. So you were one of a handful of delegates who opposed the ratification of the constitution.

LE: I signed it. The reason I signed it was because I agreed with most of it. I wasn't trying to kill the thing.

BB: What was your position when it went on the ballot? Did you vote for or against ratification?

LE: You mean when I voted at home?

BB: Yes.

LE: I voted against it.

BB: You kind of talked against it too.

LE: I was trying to find the news release I had.

BB: Did you give reasons for being against it? That's what you're going to show me here?

LE: Yes.

BB: This was your news release?

LE: Yes.

BB: Statement by Leslie Joe Eskildsen, Vice Chairman of the Rules Committee and floor manager. "We delegates to the Constitutional Convention agree to present the new constitution to the people objectively, neither selling it or defeating it and let the voters make up their own minds about it. Due to recent action by some delegates the past weeks to form a so-called Truth Troops to go out and hard sell the new proposed constitution. I feel no longer obligated to any earlier agreement.

"If the new constitution was indeed the fine document that some people would have liked to believe it is, the people would have such an automatic and spontaneous enthusiasm about it that it would pass entirely on its own merits. However, this hasn't happened, the reason being that there is nothing in the document to inspire their enthusiasm. There really is nothing in it to enthuse me. Therefore, I have no choice but to express my total opposition to the entire proposed new constitution.

"The only good parts in the new constitution are those which were copied from our present constitution and if we rejected the new in its entirety, we will still retain the good in our present document. Since the Convention adjourned, I have spent endless hours going over the work of the Convention and I have concluded that I cannot in good conscience recommend the new constitution to the people of Montana." That was your statement.

LE: See now, had they not gone out and hard sold, I wouldn't have. In fact, I didn't do a whole lot. I didn't try to kill it. I could have, I guess.

BB: Were you joined by other delegates in opposition?

LE: I was pretty much on my own I think. I don't know. I never got involved in trying to promote the thing or not promoting it. Let's see, I told you that they were hard working delegates.

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

LE: Oh there were a whole bunch of them. Let me explain a little bit on this first. OK, this was the official ballot. Now the Constitutional Convention in its wisdom said that for anything to pass, it had to get 50 percent of the votes cast plus one. That means that if 40 people voted for it and 39 voted against it, and 79 voted all together, it would lose. Do you get that?

BB: Yes.

LE: OK. The reason they did that was because of these added [issues], which authorized gambling...

BB: There were three side issues: capital punishment, gambling, and the unicameral legislature.

LE: Unicameral went down. So when they voted for gambling, it won easily. The people in the Convention figured that there was a good chance it would go under and it wouldn't make it. More people would vote for this main constitution and they wouldn't bother with that other thing. It turned out to be opposite. The same thing happened with the death penalty. About two to three or something like that. The outcome was and when the votes were counted, the main constitution didn't get 50 percent plus one of the votes cast. It got more than half the votes that were cast for it, but not the ones--like it was set up where they had to get [more than half] of the total votes. Anyway, it was decided by the courts that it had passed.

BB: By a 3 to 2 decision in the state Supreme Court. It was kind of a tortured decision, as I recall too.

LE: It was as plain as a nose on your face because we made it that plain. I know good and well that the people didn't figure that it would be the constitution that could fail.

BB: That was an unusual development. I agree with you. What are your recollections of Graybill, who was the president of the Constitutional Convention?

LE: He ran for Congress.

BB: Against Battin I think.

LE: Yes it could be. He got beat and he was kind of a sour guy. When it came to the Constitutional Convention, he did one tremendous job. I was the floor leader on that. It was my job to instruct the delegates how to conduct themselves on the floor. All it amounted to was to get recognized and only one person would speak at a time. I pressed it on them because as Mrs. [Marie] Durkee, who was the bookkeeper, if two people spoke, she couldn't write it down. So if you wanted to be heard you had to wait. Even Kelleher and Heliker finally got the message.

BB: Bob Kelleher and George Heliker, Con-Con delegates were both pretty talkative, is that right?

LE: Oh yes. One's a professor and the other's an attorney. They were proud of themselves. I set up the committee room. I sat the chairman next to the vice chairman. When you have a meeting, you'll introduce everybody. You take the proponents first and let them speak. When they get through, if there's a question, you go around the room. Once you establish this pattern, everyone will do it and the people who come to visit will know what's going to happen. So that's the way it was.

BB: Now Joe, we talked a little bit about lobbyists. Were lobbyists involved in the Constitutional Convention? Were business interests and so on represented before the committees and the constitution?

LE: Yes they were. They were there. I think they set them on the outside hall.

BB: Were they discouraged from being too actively involved? Were the delegates discouraged from interacting with them?

LE: I can't really remember. I remember I brought a couple of lobbyists in to sit by me. Why don't I lighten it up a little bit and tell you a story?

BB: Good.

LE: All right. Supposedly I'm a real liberal. The only person I know that's more liberal than me is Dorothy Eck. We josh about it. This day I said to Marian Erdmann, "Marian, I got her. I got her today." She said, "You have?" I said, "Yes." So when Dorothy got there, I leaned across Marian's desk and I said, "Dorothy, I want to ask you something." She said, "What?" I said, "If you're so liberal, how do you feel about free love?" She said, "You're place or mine?" I lost it again.

BB: She called your bluff on that one.

LE: Those ladies were sharp. They were capable and they were determined. As far as work, they put out a lot of work.

BB: In my interviews I'm getting some conflicting information on whether the business community in Montana, whether you describe them as lobbyists or whatever, were involved in the Constitutional Convention or very involved or not. I've had a couple of different people tell me that they were discouraged from being there, that there was sort of a feeling that the delegates shouldn't associate much with lobbyists. The lobbyists felt kind of unwelcome there. I've picked that up. I've also picked up, "Heck no, there were lobbyists there all the time." What do you think about that?

LE: It's true. Lobbyists were kind of ostracized for a better word. I had a couple of lobbyists come and I set them down beside me. They couldn't throw them out. They wanted to do this job all by themselves.

BB: Did that idea come from Graybill?

LE: I think so.

BB: You say they wanted to do it by themselves...

LE: The delegates. The delegates were eager. They were movers. They wanted to get the job done. One thing I did do-- they set us in alphabetical order to keep us from getting involved in politics. They thought that everything should be voted on a roll call vote. I got up and I said, "Don't do that. If you want to roll call vote, ask for it. Otherwise, you're going to spend all your time on roll call votes just on a motion to adjourn."

BB: Yes that was good advice.

LE: Anyway when I get disgusted with them-- shut it off now.

BB: I don't know if I can Joe. Tell me after it's over.

LE: I can tell you now. Anyway, when they get carried away and things weren't going my way, once in a while I'd just get up and call for a roll call vote. What it meant is 125 dollars for Durkee. They're not doing anything. It made me feel good, see.

BB: That was probably a good deed.

LE: When I was the department commander of the VFW, [Robert] Durkee was my quartermaster. He was also in the Senate when I was first in the House. He was very capable.

BB: Bob Durkee was a legislator from Havre.

LE: He was in the Senate. He was very capable.

BB: I am curious if we have anything more on the constitutional convention?

LE: I can't really think of anything.

BB: Let me just mention a couple of names: Mae Nan Robinson?

LE: She was a fireball young lady. She could hold her own. She was dedicated. I think she became a legislator.

BB: She's an attorney in Missoula.

LE: She had lots of ability.

BB: Otto Habedank?

LE: Otto- I barely remember him. I can't remember what resolution he was on.

BB: Marshall Murray?

LE: Yes he was a nice gentleman.

BB: You served in the legislature with him too didn't you?

LE: Yes he was a nice guy. He was the kind of guy I liked. They aren't backbiters or anything. They were just good friends back and forth.

BB: Bob Campbell?

LE: He gives me hell all the time. I got a letter from him. He liked to promote these get-togethers for the Constitutional Convention. I can't think of anything [I'm] less interested in. They like to get together and tell how great they are.

BB: So you haven't been going to the reunions?

LE: No I don't. Anyway, he called me up from Fort Benton. "I want to get a room for you. You get here." I said, "Don't get a room for me." He said, "The rooms will be taken." I said, "That's fine. I'll go to Great Falls."

Anyway, he called me up a couple of days later madder than hell because I didn't come and take that room see. I said, "I told you I was going to Great Falls." The one I got here is announcing the next convention.

BB: Was there any speech that anybody gave during the Constitutional Convention or anything that still stands out in your memory?

LE: There was a Mrs. what's-her-name?

BB: Cross? Louise Cross?

LE: Yes; she was a pretty capable lady.

BB: What's memorable about her?

LE: She was after something. I can't remember now what it was. Whatever it was, she was dedicated to it. It was some kind of rights.

BB: She was concerned about protecting the environment. Wasn't that her big thing?

LE: It could have been. This was quite a few years ago. I can't remember. I got to adjourn at sine die anyway.

BB: Because as the Floor Leader, you got to make the motion to adjourn sine die. You mentioned Fred Robinson and when I came here today, I hadn't remembered that he was from this area, but of course the Fred Robinson Bridge is named after him. He was a prominent legislator for 20 or 30 years or more. I'm just curious to know-- you know we talk about the Anaconda Company and this whole era of corporate dominance and that sort of thing, if you ever saw anything that you could point to anything concrete that would connect Fred Robinson to the Anaconda Company's power structure?

LE: I don't think I could.

BB: It was just a gut feeling on your part that he was a part of the...

LE: I never saw him vote against them.

BB: There's an old saying that, "Birds of a feather flock together." So did you see Fred with other like-minded people doing things together that would lead you to believe that he was a part of that group?

LE: He was a senator and I was in the House. So I probably never saw him too much.

BB: I'm thinking like at the lobby of the Placer Hotel as an example, where you guys would be there milling around in and out.

LE: You have to realize that Fred has got a little age on him by this time. So he wasn't as active as I was. I didn't figure that the lobbyists could corrupt me, so I went.

BB: Do you remember Jerry Anderson?

LE: Oh yes. He wrote a poem about me. I got it in there some place. We used to kid back and forth. So he wrote this poem about me.

BB: It was a clever funny poem? He's a clever guy. Was that one of the mock legislative sessions do you suppose? He did mock sessions.

LE: It could have been. I can't remember. Anyway, he gave it to me. I knew Jerry. I've seen Jerry several times. He's aging a little you know.

BB: He's still over there and is still an active lobbyist.

LE: You'd think he'd have it made by now.

BB: He probably does but I think he likes to stay busy. He likes to stay involved. Look, we've just got a couple of minutes left on the tape. Is there anything you'd like to say in conclusion? Is there anything we've left out of the interview that maybe we should have covered?

LE: All I can say is that it's an experience that I'm glad I had. I wouldn't particularly want to do it again, but it was enjoyable when it was taking place.

BB: I appreciate your public service and I know the people of Montana do too. I appreciate you contributing to the Montana State Historical Archives, Joe. As you know, this interview will be placed on file and historians will be able to refer to it in the future.

LE: I do have a request. Please correct my language.

BB: I'm not sure I can do that. I think it's going to go in the record as what's been recorded here today.

LE: Is that right?

BB: It's good. It's much appreciated. Thank you, Joe.

[End of Interview]