

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: John Vincent**  
**Interviewer: Bob Brown**  
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Bob Brown: This is Bob Brown and I'm interviewing John Vincent at the Mansfield Library in Missoula on April 22, 2010. John, where and when were you born?

John Vincent: I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, September 16, 1942.

BB: And how did you happen to be born in Connecticut?

JV: Well, my dad went back to Yale pre-med after receiving his master's in English Lit at Oregon, and the war came along and he dropped out of pre-med and went into the merchant marine and went into officer's training school and served for the duration of the war in the North Pacific—excuse me, the North Atlantic and the South Pacific. I stayed out with my mom and my dad's brothers in Eugene, Oregon.

BB: So you were born when?

JV: September 16, 1942.

BB: Nineteen forty-two, I see. And then you grew up in Oregon?

JV: I spent about three years there and then moved to California, Berkeley, California, actually, long before it was the Berkeley we think of today.

BB: (laughs) Meaning today we think of Berkeley, California, as a sort of a counter-culture, sort of an ultra-progressive place.

JV: Yes, that's correct, and I think an apt description. It was very different back then, but a great place to spend some early years. Then my dad moved back to Connecticut to take a job for a manufacturing company so I went through elementary school there. Then my dad made one of those great family decisions and choices. He was a salesman and he was offered the Pratt and Whitney account in Hartford, Connecticut, or the Boeing account in Seattle. A westerner at heart, he decided that we'd move west and so we did in 1954 and of course, came through Montana on the way and fired my young imagination for sure.

BB: So then you continued to be raised in the Seattle area.

JV: That's correct. We actually lived in Bellevue, which was at that time a small suburb of Seattle. I went through junior high and high school there, and ultimately college at Seattle

University. Earned a Bachelor's degree with honors in American Government. Went back for another year to become certified in education to be able to teach. Right after that, in 1971, moved to Bozeman because I got a teaching job there.

BB: So this is an interesting and varied background, John, and you didn't actually come to Montana until adulthood. What motivated you toward a career in public service? Because you ran for public office within just a few years of your arrival in Bozeman.

JV: That's right. We came in September of '71, and I ran in the '74 election primary and general and of course, was elected to the legislature. Well, I studied government in college, went to Seattle University and my degree is in American Government along with minors in History and Philosophy and the certification in Education. I think I've actually earned a degree in Education but I never went in to receive it or claim it or whatever you do in those situations because I had done what I wanted to do which was to be able to teach with the certificate. That took care of that, but—I obviously had an interest in government. I think two high school teachers were instrumental in that regard. Of course, I taught government for 30 years, so I followed in my government teachers' footsteps. My parents were not politically active, but they were very politically interested, more than anything else, from working class backgrounds. But more than anything else that I remember, [we were] always solidly on the side of those that weren't as fortunate as we were.

BB: I think you'd probably just in part described your political philosophy. I'm assuming it was similar to your parents' and that your parents helped shape it, but I don't want to put words in your mouth.

JV: They helped shape it, and more than anything else I think they shaped a, not only an open mind, but a mind that was not only compatible with, but could empathize with those who were less fortunate. There was absolutely no bias in our household in regard to any religion, in regard to any ethnic group. I grew up as a very young child listening to New Orleans and Chicago jazz 'cause my dad loved that and loved black music, blues music. Living in Berkeley, we had close associations with both Chinese and Japanese people and grew up remembering—I guess the best way to explain that is that in 1958 when we were still a long way from any kind of racial progress in the South, at Seattle University black men were playing basketball. That was something that we really thought was just very special and Elgin Baylor was the "man," so to speak. I just never gave any thought to that, but at the same time we were rejoicing in the talents of black basketball players at Seattle University in Seattle Washington. We all know what was going on in the South and we all know how hard it was for blacks to gain entry into all the professional sports, although Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby had already accomplished that in baseball. But always open-minded. My best friend in high school was Jewish, Paul Dobrin(?), and we hold the distinction—at least I've always thought of it as a distinction, although hardly anyone knows about it—we integrated in 1961 an all-black baseball team in Seattle, Washington. We were the first two white players to play for an all-black team. And we—

BB: (laughs) So you played competitive baseball for Seattle University on their team?

JV: Well, I did as a freshman and then I had heart trouble and that took care of the baseball career. I had gained the attention of some big league scouts. I don't know how far that would have gone, you know, as a young kid and even now in advanced adulthood, you always think that you're better than you are and that you could have gone further than you really could have but there was some promise there, it just didn't unfold.

BB: What position?

JV: I played shortstop and third base primarily.

BB: And you were a heck of a hitter?

JV: A pretty good hitter, a pretty good hitter. At least up to that level.

BB: So you arrived in Bozeman, Montana, you're a young school teacher interested in government, inspired by these two teachers in high school who apparently were very civic-minded, very—How did they inspire you?

JV: I think they inspired me by teaching politics and government using what was going on in real time to teach it. I'm sure we had a textbook, but I don't remember it. But a lot was going on at that time. Eisenhower was president; Kennedy was coming on strong. I was enamored with John F. Kennedy. I think a lot of young people were at that time and so that was inspirational. With my two high school teachers and my parents always interested, but not active in politics, I just came along in that venue.

BB: So here you are in Bozeman, Montana, and you decided after you've only lived there for something like four years to run for the state legislature. Now then, Bozeman had a reputation for being pretty solidly Republican area, both within the city limits, or at least Gallatin County did, and outside the city limits. Why did you choose to run as a Democrat?

JV: Well, because I've always thought of myself as a Democrat, I guess. I can't really give you a single moment where all of a sudden it flashed in my brain that I was a Democrat or a Republican. I just think I've at some point just gradually moved to the Democratic side.

BB: Do you know what you're parents were?

JV: Well, I can tell you my dad voted for Eisenhower the first time around but voted for Stevenson the second time around, and I don't think either my mom or dad looked back.

BB: Really? After that they continued to vote for Democrats after that?

JV: So in Bozeman it was kind of interesting because [I was] a new kid on the block, so to speak, learning. But as you well remember things changed at that point. The '72 Constitution went into effect, and we were running in single-member districts. I just discovered by reading the paper one day that the races were filling up, but in the House district that I lived in, which was House district 78, no Democrat had filed. No Democrat filed, and no Democrat filed, and it got down to a couple of days left and no Democrat had filed. So I said, "Well, you know, maybe it is a Republican area, but there are at least—first time around in single-member districts—ought to be a contested race." I decided to drive up to Helena which I believe you had to do in those days, but I'm not absolutely sure, but my wife and I drove up there. I parked in the back of the Capitol and went into the Secretary of State's office and that was Frank Murray's office at that time and said, "I'm John Vincent, and I want to file for House District 78." [He] said, "Okay." I filled out the form and I paid my 15 dollars and before I did that I asked the ladies at the front counter there, "Has anyone else filed?" because at that point, my only reason for filing was to have a Democrat in the seat. [She] said, "Nope, nobody's filed." And then another gal said, "Well, come on into the back because that's our most current record. It's absolutely up-to-date where the one at the front desk is lagging a little bit." I went back there, and she flipped the cards or whatever it was and said, "Someone has filed in District 78 and it was Dick Corne, who was also a government teacher." And—

BB: Who was also a government teacher and Dick also filed as a Democrat.

JV: That's right, and so I said, "Well, that takes care of that." I went back to the front desk and I said, "I've decided not to file. A Democrat's already filed and that's what I was looking for." So they tore up my filing application and gave me my check back—I'd written out a check—and I went back out and got in the car and told Peg, "You know, I don't need to file." Those are the exact words I used, "I don't need to file. Dick Corne filed." I reached to turn the car on and head home. She reached over and turned the car off and said, "You know I really want you to think about this because I don't want to hear you talking all the way back home that, 'Gosh, I should have filed, I should have filed.'" We sat there, and I don't think it was much more than five minutes and for some reason I said, "Okay, I'll file." I went back and at that time Frank Murray was at the front counter and so I said, "I've changed my mind. I wanna file." At that moment Frank Murray—and I'm sure you remember a little bit about good old Frank—he said, "Vincent you're gonna make a great politician." Of course I bit and he said, "'Cause you can't make up your mind." (laughs) The form was filled out; I wrote out another check and got back in the car and drove back to Bozeman and taught the next day and knew that I was in the Democratic primary.

BB: I'll be darned. Did a Republican even file in district?

JV: Yes, a fellow named Tom Lehman filed, and I won the primary about two to one. I worked really hard at it.

BB: Did you live in the district?

JV: Yes.

BB: I don't think Corne did, did he?

JV: No. And I've always lived in the district that I've run in.

BB: Well, I knew Dick Corne as you did because we were all three government teachers and Dick did serve on term in the legislature later on, but I thought he lived out on the other side of town.

JV: He did. He did. He moved and he'd lived in a couple of locations outside of Bozeman now. But I worked real hard and did a lot with yard signs and beat the pavement. Did a tremendous amount of door-to-door and then just repeated the process. This, of course, was long before you needed a website, long before you needed TV, maybe you did a touch of radio, but I didn't. You put some ads in the paper and went door to door. I won that race, I think, by 400, 500 votes. I can't remember exactly but— [Vincent 575, Corne 273]

BB: But a solid win.

JV: A solid win.

BB: What an amazing story and in particular because you went on to serve how many years in the House of Representatives?

JV: Sixteen.

BB: Sixteen years, and during that period of time you served as Minority Leader, Majority Leader, and Speaker, I think, didn't you?

JV: Right. My first leadership position was in '79 and that was Majority Whip. And then '81, Republicans took control of the legislature and I wasn't in the leadership so I did committee work then, and then Majority Leader in '85. Speaker in a tied House in '85. Minority Leader in '87 and Speaker again in '89.

BB: So I think at least half the time you were in the legislature you were in an important position of leadership, and it's just such an amazing story that you could have very easily driven home that day. My guess is you would have ended up running for the legislature at some point in your life, but what an amazing story. Was that the first time you'd ever been in the Capitol building when you went to file?

JV: Yes, yes it was.

BB: First time you probably ever set foot in the building.

JV: Right.

BB: There you are on the first day of the legislature, gone all door-to-door, done all this work and that sort of thing, and you find yourself a member of the legislature from Gallatin County. Were there any particular interests that you were aware of in Gallatin County that were important? Because you had a single-member district entirely within the city limits, even though Bozeman's—the Gallatin Valley and Gallatin County's an agricultural area...I don't know how important that was to you or the university or...What were the main interests that you felt important to represent in Gallatin County when you got to the state legislature?

JV: Well, in fairness, I would have to admit that I didn't factor in the agricultural community in Gallatin Valley at that time. I look back at it and think that I should have paid more attention to that particular aspect of our economy because at that time the Gallatin Valley was still an agricultural community. Of course MSU is a state college and our ag school so to speak, so I knew that MSU was important, that much I knew.

BB: Who were the important public figures? Were there some opinion leaders that seemed to you to be important during that period of time?

JV: Well, there were perceived community leaders, and it was essentially the good old boys on Main Street. There were any number of them, from the school superintendent to leading business people. But at that time there were no women on the Bozeman City Commission. I don't believe there was a woman at that time on the County Commission, but I could be a couple of years off there. But it was a men's world politically, except for Dorothy Bradley. Dorothy Bradley, you know, opened the gates for women in our area down there.

BB: Do you remember Helen Johnson?

JV: Yes, I remember Helen Johnson. She was a Republican legislator, and I don't...I can't remember whether she was elected after we went into single-member districts or not.

BB: No, I think she was back, maybe even before you got to Bozeman. She was back in the '60s, I think, some time. [Served one session, 1961.] But she would have been more of an anomaly. Dorothy Bradley is someone who probably broke the door open for women. There were more women that followed her, I would think probably.

JV: Right, Dorothy Eck followed sometime after that, but that's a mighty impressive one-two punch there given the history of the Montana Legislature.

BB: Tell me about Dorothy Bradley.

JV: Dorothy was recognized at that time as really being special. She was a student up at MSU, I do know that, and she got involved in politics, I think, at that time—you know, Earth Day, first Earth Day was 1970 and I know she was very active in environmental issues. She was smart, attractive and politically motivated. I think she just followed her instincts and—amazing that she was able to get elected under the old Constitution where she had to run in Park County, Gallatin County, and part of Madison County as well. But she led the way, and I think inspired me. I was just a touch older, but I guess I kind of looked at Dorothy and said, “You know, if she can do it, I’ll probably never live up to her standards or her ability, but I think I can do that too.” So I recognize her as a true leader in that regard, setting an example and opening the door to younger people running for the legislature.

BB: Is she someone you worked closely with in the legislature?

JV: I don’t remember that all that clearly. I’m sure that I went to her from time to time for advice and followed her lead on any number of occasions. I didn’t sit next to her. I sat next to Herb Huennekens my first term. And at that time—

BB: He was a Democrat from Billings.

JV: He was a Democrat from Billings, and I really—except for his smoking— (laughs) I really liked Herb and he was one hell of a teacher. I sat next to him. I remember the first vote. The first vote was a very interesting vote, and I knew that Herb was going to take good care of me. What had happened is that back in those days—and you no doubt remember this—we would take a little time off and one of the first days of the legislature and we’d go down to the state prison and we’d do a tour. Well—

BB: Were you on the Appropriations Committee?

JV: No, no. But John Driscoll was Majority Leader and John got up and made a motion that we go to the prison on this day during this time. Maybe it was Wally Mercer that got up on the other side and made a substitute motion to go at some other time. Of course, we had 67 Democrats in the House at that point, hardly any room for Republicans on the others because, as you know, it was the Watergate year. But at any rate, a lot of Democrats liked that Wally Mercer-time frame instead, and they were voting that way. Herb said—I think I was reaching up to vote for the Mercer side of that issue—and he grabbed my hand and said, “You vote with the Majority Leader. You vote with the Majority Leader.” So I did, and from that point on he wouldn’t necessarily at all tell me how to vote, but more than anything he told me when to stay seated rather than getting up. When you first get up to the legislature, you’re full of oats and you think you need to stand up and say something on everything that comes up, but Herb kept a hard right hand on my left leg and held me down a good deal of the time, which I learned from.



BB: You've already shared with us, I think, a pretty good idea of your first impressions of the legislature. Any other comment along those lines?

JV: Sure. I learned quickly. I think there are some people that are suited for the legislature and can deal with the politics of it and the reality of it, and some people that can't. There's both sides of that story, but I've seen people in the legislature that were so convinced that the right thing should always prevail that when they see that it always doesn't prevail, they determine that it's not the place for them. I had that experience. The first bill that I sponsored, or at least the first bill that I had a committee hearing on, was a bill to limit interest on credit cards to 10 percent. I was prepared for that bill. I mean, I spent weeks studying that issue, getting my hands on all the information I could. I could have won a debate at Harvard, given everything I knew on that bill. The committee hearing went smoothly—the big banking lobbyists flew in from all over the country—I answered every question; I did [feel] a little nervous but I thought I did an outstanding job on it, and I remember feeling very good after that committee hearing that any question that came up I had a strong, objective rebuttal to it. That bill went down like the Titanic and I said, "Why, I had it. I had all the arguments covered. No one refuted anything that I said." That taught me a lot about how the legislature really worked in that you cannot always (laughs) depend on winning the argument, in the classroom debate sense that there was a lot more involved in it than that. I learned that lesson and went on from there.

BB: The power of logic doesn't always prevail over the power of lobbying.

JV: (laughs) That's correct. And then—

BB: But you, I'm sure, impressed the members of the committee and other people that were there with how you conducted yourself and so I'm sure that even though your bill went down, you probably were a more credible member of the legislature yourself after that. That might have been part of what got you on the path toward a leadership position.

JV: Maybe so. I'd never thought of it that way until you raised it here, but thinking back on it, I do feel that I did an excellent job on the bill. Then something else. You know how legislators sometimes react to losing a bill? I think I handled that well. I didn't cry. I didn't moan—

BB: But you had to have been shocked.

JV: Oh, I was shocked, but I had Herb there. I had other people to talk to and they weren't surprised at all because they knew the ropes. But it was a great learning experience, and I think it taught that, "Okay, I can handle this. I can lose. I know to win I can't always depend on the logic of the argument." Later that session, I think it was—I forget the name of the group, it wasn't EIC, maybe you can remember it for me. But they came in with a major amendment; it's really became the heart and soul of the Montana Subdivision and Platting Act, the public interest criteria—

BB: The MEIC is the Montana Environmental Center—

JV: Information Center—

BB: And that's not who it was, you're saying?

JV: Well (pauses) I think it was.

BB: Could have been.

JV: I think it was. It was Phil Tawney and I think Phil's passed away now, but I think he was working for MEIC at that point—

BB: And it was a subdivision and platting?

JV: It was a major amendment to the Subdivision and Platting Act. No doubt about it, the most controversial bill of that session.

BB: And big implications in your growth area of Gallatin County.

JV: Huge, huge because it gave local governing bodies, cities and counties, specific public interest criteria that had to be met in order to approve, deny or conditionally approve subdivisions. It's still, I would say, about two-thirds intact, having been signed into law back in 1975. It's been amended a couple of times. But the truth of the matter is—is that MEIC, Phil Tawney—they couldn't find anyone to carry it. They could not find anybody because you don't hand a piece of legislation like that to a freshman legislator. But that's exactly what happened. And I was nervous about it because I did not have the background, the expertise, the information I needed. Relatively quick study, but probably not quite thorough enough. But the bill went through the process. It filled up about a page and half in the Journal of Procedural Motions. It had a gubernatorial veto, which we overturned—or an amendatory veto that we overturned. It went back and forth. I'm trying to remember the name of the senator, he's a realtor. Roskie, George Roskie.

BB: George Roskie, Republican of Great Falls.

JV: Yes, realtor. They were death on this bill. I remember it was my first conference committee, and I sat—and I was chairman and I sat right across from George Roskie, who really knew the ropes and I'm just the new kid on the block. All I knew going in was that whatever he wanted, I was gonna say *No* to. That's about it; I didn't have to have a reason. Those were my marching orders. Just say *No*, and that's what I did. Eventually the bill finally passed and something maybe unprecedented happened at that point because it was such a hot bill and people were worried that until it was actually signed something else could go wrong. Someone could move to reconsider it, something procedurally-wise could be done. So the Chief Clerk of the House,

with the Speaker's authority, gave me the three copies of the bill, and called Tom Judge up, who had reservations about the bill—

BB: Tom Judge is the governor at the time.

JV: Tom Judge was the governor at the time, and he came over about midnight or somewhat after midnight in his pajamas to the governor's office. I hand-carried that bill down to him and he signed it. Then I hand-carried the bill back upstairs and I don't think that's ever happened before that anyone was—I don't want to say I was entrusted with the bill but I don't know if you've ever heard of a legislator carrying a hot bill downstairs and deliver it to the governor, who had to be awakened to sign the bill and get it signed.

BB: Why didn't you wait until nine o'clock the next morning?

JV: I think the reason was that people were so gun-shy on this bill that something could happen.

BB: I'm just wondering what could happen between midnight and eight in the morning.

JV: Well, I don't know but we were in one of those late-night sessions; and maybe, I can't remember, but maybe we didn't get out 'til—

BB: Did you personally call the governor at his house? Did you make the call?

JV: No, I didn't. I think either the Speaker did or the Chief Clerk of the House. But all of a sudden I'm carrying this live bill down there to have the governor sign—

BB: So after the conference committee's report had been adopted on both sides, you had that done—

JV: Well, it went way beyond that conference committee report. It bounced back and forth between the Houses and it went down for a—Tom had originally done an amendatory veto on it and that was overturned and we went back and forth. Like I said, it took up about a page and a half of steps in the journal. In fact I think Phil Tawney once thought he'd write a book about it because it was such an interesting legislation.

BB: Well, I was there when that took place, but I don't remember that story at all (laughs) so it's very interesting to me.

JV: I didn't talk very much about because (laughs)—

BB: Was the governor grumpy when you—?

JV: I think he was resigned to it.

BB: I'm just wondering if he was—

JV: Cause he was in the realty business at one time as well.

BB: But I can see how he would maybe a little bit...maybe wonder a little bit about the necessity of him having to come up there in his bathrobe and bedroom slippers at one a.m. to—

JV: I didn't ask. I didn't ask. He was there in his office, and I was there and that's what we had agreed to do and so we did it.

BB: I'll be darned. (pauses) I want to ask you your impressions and opinions of some important legislators, but since we're on the subject of Governor Judge I'd also be interested in your thoughts and observations on him. I mean, that's an interesting story in itself that he was concerned enough to come up there in the middle of the night to sign the bill. Are there any stories or anecdotes or anything that you can think of that kind of typify him or his leadership style or his personality or philosophy? Any experiences you had with him that kind of are emblematic of Tom Judge?

JV: I really didn't know Tom that well. I didn't spend that much time with him. I know that he and I got along very well, got along very well, but I don't remember ever becoming close to him in any way. I do believe, and you'll have to take my biases into consideration here, I do believe that if you look at Tom Judge and governors since then that if you're scoring legacy, if you're scoring positive legacy I think Tom Judge would rank number one. I think given the coal tax, amendments to the Constitution, the subdivision and platting act, any number of other important pieces of legislation, I think that he probably accomplished more than any governor has since. Now I recognize that that could be, that could be disputed, but—

BB: Anderson's administration was accomplishing some things too, and I think they would think they would probably share in some of the things you've mentioned. But the Judge administration certainly was—it was during the Judge administration that enormous environmental legislation was enacted.

JV: Yes, right. I'm not absolutely convinced that Tom signed everything that he did in that realm with great enthusiasm, but he signed it. He put it into law, and we still have a lot of that on the record that's still doing, in my opinion, a good job for Montana.

BB: You know, John, that's an interesting comment you just made too, because I've conducted others of these interviews and there's a little bit of difference of opinion about whether Tom Judge was the leader, or an instrumental leader, of what some people refer to as Montana's second progressive era or whether he just kind of rode the crest of it. I don't know, you know, where the complete truth is there, but I think you've just indicated that he certainly went along with it, he certainly didn't oppose it, but maybe it's questionable whether he led it.

JV: Yes, I don't know if I could make a definitive statement on that myself, but on the Subdivision and Platting Act, the public interest criteria that we just talked about, remember he did send up an amendatory veto and he didn't sign that bill enthusiastically I know. But here's a governor looking at 67 Democrats in the House in that '75 session and fewer in the next session but still a substantial body of Democrats and we didn't have term limits there. And Tom was still thinking about running for governor again, and we got into that Judge-Schwinden face-off, but Tom was a good politician there's no doubt about that.

BB: How were you involved in the Schwinden-Judge competition? Maybe we should clarify that. Judge was the governor. He had been elected twice, had filed for a third term and his lieutenant governor, at the time, Ted Schwinden, filed in the Democrat primary against him in 1980 and that put a heck of a lot of Democrats on the spot.

JV: Right, and I was one of them. I think in all honesty at that time, I was probably looking out more for myself and my future than I was for either Tom or Ted and trying to make a selection not on the basis of who would be the best governor but the person that I could be closest to. I know I was considered as a lieutenant governor by Judge, along with Joe Roberts, and Tom selected Joe. But I know before that that I had talked to Ted and indicated that I could probably support him, so I went back and forth, sat on the fence with both ears to the ground. I was young and I was ambitious and I didn't want to close any doors and I hemmed and hawed on that one. I ultimately supported Tom, but it wasn't a good time for me and it wasn't a smart time for me either. I got caught in my own self-interest, to be candid about it. I was smart enough on down the line to recognize that that was a bad mistake—

BB: You think you should have come out more forcefully earlier on for on or the other?

JV: Well, I should have. I should have come out for one or the other and stuck with it.

BB: What price did you pay?

JV: I don't think I paid any price at all politically, except I've always felt about it. I've always felt bad that—

BB: Did it affect your working relationship with Schwinden?

JV: No, no. Ted was very good that way. He could get very angry at you, and I remember a couple occasions where he got extremely angry at me—

BB: Did he have a volatile temper?

JV: Yes, he did in private. You could get stung by his temper without any doubt, but the next day he'd forget about it. You could go back and work with him. I had a couple of real good toe-to-toes with Ted in the mansion, very heated arguments, which is kind of out of my character,

and the bottom line is I was Speaker of the House and my first obligation was to look after the best interests of House Democrats and the House as a whole. Ted's interest was on the executive side. There were a couple of times when Ted wanted me to do some things in regard to timing, in regard to procedure in the House that I didn't want to do and so I didn't do 'em.

BB: I'm surprised that he was that involved in the inner workings of the House of Representatives.

JV: I wouldn't say he was. I'd just say that on a couple of occasions—

BB: Having to do with the time of adjournment maybe—

JV: Well, time of adjournment, timing of legislative sessions in regard to bills that he had pending, something like that. Your mind grows a little hazy and you don't keep a journal. At that time I was just glad to get out of the mansion, but to his credit he never took it out of your hide. Never took it out of mine.

BB: How would you compare him? You worked more closely with him than you did with Judge. You were a young freshman legislator when Judge was governor, but your entire time with of legislative—well, not exactly, I guess you were legislative leader when Stephens was governor too, but I think that's right. But anyway, you completely overlapped Governor Judge and you had some important jobs in the House of Representatives. I mean Schwinden and you had some important jobs in the House of Representatives when Schwinden was governor so you must have gotten to know him pretty well. Would you have, would you be able to compare or contrast his approach to the job and his leadership-style, say, with either Stephens or Judge?

JV: Well—

BB: He's the one you would have known the best.

JV: It's hard to say because the big push, the environmental push in the legislature, which was at the core of the Democratic party at that time, that and labor, and reconciling the differences between the environmental side and labor. But in those early years we were able to do that at least to some extent. I remember occasions, probably would never happen today, when Democratic leadership, liberal leadership, got together with John Lahr at Montana Power and with labor leaders—

BB: Jim Murry.

JV: Jim Murry, especially, and work something out. I don't know if that happens any more or not, but—

BB: So you got Lahr, the lobbyist for the Montana Power Company, kind of the keystone of the corporate business interests in the state, and Jim Murry, who's the head of the AFL-CIO and they're two—wouldn't you think have very much in common, but you bring them in and with key Democratic legislative leaders and work out some compromise.

JV: Right, we were able to do that. I don't wanna suggest that I was at the center of that all the time—

BB: But that happened then.

JV: That happened then and—

BB: And that would have been in the Schwinden administration.

JV: That would have happened in Judge's—in the '75 session, the '77 session and the '79 session.

BB: Pretty much under the Judge administration.

JV: Right. Pretty much under the Judge administration, I think less so. But I think one of the reasons for that of course is that so much had been accomplished and was already on record that there wasn't that kind of,—almost single issue emphasis in the legislature that had occurred before. Because the coal tax had been taken care of, all the environmental legislation had essentially been taken care of. We were moving into that and then slowly moving into stream access and those kind of issues. I think that the major difference in the legislature when Ted was there was—the biggest difference was whether or not to reduce the coal severance tax. That was the big issue.

BB: He eventually became a proponent of reducing the tax, depending on the increase that he hoped would result in production. So the idea was that we could encourage more production by reducing the tax and attach those two so the tax comes down if the production goes up. I think that was the idea wasn't it?

JV: Right, that was the idea, and we created a coal tax trust oversight committee. I was appointed to that. I can't remember who made that appointment to be honest with you, but it was in concert with the Governor Schwinden. Our tax was to essentially, at that time, protect our right to have a coal severance tax because there were some issues at the federal level which threatened to, if not eliminate that right, impinge on it to a great extent. It never happened but that's why we were created.

BB: You'd only been in the legislature for five years, I think, four or five years, and you ran for Majority Whip. That's a little bit precocious maybe for a young guy. A Whip isn't big leadership

but it's certainly regarded as a stepping stone. There were probably people senior to you there who were interested in that, I would think there probably were. What's the story?

JV: Well, if I could backtrack just a little bit because that was in the '79 session. In the '77 session John Driscoll ran against J. D. Lynch for Speaker, and Driscoll won by one vote. I voted for Driscoll, and only for that reason. Only for that reason I was given the chairmanship in my second term and I was chairman of the then-Business Industry Committee. And Joe Quilici wasn't.

BB: He was Lynch's fellow Butte Democrat?

JV: Yes, that's correct. To his credit Joe did everything and anything he could to help me because I really believe that the only reason that I got that appointment was because I voted quote-unquote "right" for Speaker. I don't think that I was truly ready for the position.

BB: And Quilici felt he was in line for it?

JV: That's correct. That's correct, but he was very gracious about it. He and I have been friends forever now, and he helped me a lot. But that goes to show you that everything isn't always dealt out at the legislative level on merit or experience so I had kind of a jumpstart. I know now chairmanship is considered leadership in our current Montana Legislature; it wasn't when we were there. Although committee chair, especially appropriations and a couple others, had a lot to say about how things turned out. But in regard to Whip, that involved politics as well. John Scully who was—

BB: John, so you ran the risk of getting seriously crossways of the Butte delegation. You supported John Driscoll from Hamilton against J. D. Lynch from Butte for Speaker. You were the deciding vote. I mean anybody could claim they were, but certainly you could too. You're a relatively junior member of the legislature—in fact only in your second term—and here there's a fellow been there for about a decade, I think that's probably about [how long] Joe Quilici had been there, and so you get the job that he felt he was entitled to. How does that strengthen you to run for Speaker, to run for Whip two years later?

JV: I don't...You've asked... (laughs) That's an excellent—

BB: Didn't the Butte delegation have their knives out for you? Or did you work out such a good relationship with Joe Quilici that—what are your thoughts?

JV: I don't know. I really don't know.

BB: Somebody come to you and say, "Vincent, you should run for Whip," or did you (unintelligible)



JV: No, I decided I wanted to run for Whip and it got wrapped up in politics. John Scully, who was a more conservative Democrat from Bozeman, had his eyes on Speaker in '79, and we did have the majority. But a strong opposition developed to that—

BB: In the Democratic caucus.

JV: In the Democratic caucus. And—

BB: You were somewhat on the spot, I take it.

JV: I was very much on the spot—

BB: He was your fellow Bozeman Democrat, but also you felt yourself somewhat more progressive than him and a little uncomfortable—

JV: That's correct. That's correct, and so I don't know if it's fair to say that a deal was cut. I don't remember [it] that way, but someone looking at it from the other side of the window sure could. The alternative came up of having—I had his name in my pocket just a second ago—Gerke.

BB: Harold Gerke, Democrat from Billings. Had been Speaker before.

JV: Harold Gerke had been Speaker before. And the liberals in the Democratic majority, not wanting to go with John Scully, rallied around Harold Gerke for Speaker. And then after that—

BB: And they prevailed.

JV: They prevailed. Sort of a team ticket formed. And it was Gerke, Dussault and Vincent.

BB: And Dussault was [a] woman, Representative Ann Mary Dussault from Missoula.

JV: From Missoula.

BB: And so—

JV: And she was running as Majority Leader and I ran for Whip. And of course there were three separate elections—

BB: So you're on the other team from John Scully. Who were the—do you remember who Scully's Majority Leader and Whip were?

JV: No, I don't.

BB: Okay.

JV: But it had more of an eastern Montana-Butte nexus to it than anything else. And of course—

BB: And I know all three of you prevailed.

JV: Right, and of course when you're from the same hometown as a candidate for Speaker and don't vote for that candidate, you're going to be remembered for that, to put it diplomatically.

BB: Scully went on to become a corporate lobbyist or something or other, didn't he, after that?

JV: That's right.

BB: And who he went to work for?

JV: I think he went to work for Qwest or for the telephone company at the time, AT&T maybe? I'm not really sure. He was upset with me. Dorothy also voted for Gerke and I think that was based almost totally on voting record and philosophy. Voting record and philosophy. Then strangely, well I don't know it was strange or not, but in the next election, in the '80 election, John Scully was defeated.

BB: So was Harold Gerke.

JV: Norm Wallin beat John Scully, and at that time we felt that that was because Norm really worked at it and John made that fatal mistake of taking for granted the position that he had held for three terms before.

BB: What a story. Well, that took some courage to do that.

JV: I think so, to some degree, but because we're trying to be as close to honesty as we possibly can be on this I wanna fault myself again. I was looking to be in a leadership position, and this is a way to get there. I don't know if I thought of it myself. I don't know if I decided that I wanted to be Whip or whether someone suggested to me, "Why don't you run for Whip? Dussault will run for Majority Leader, and Harold will run for Speaker." It could have been that way, or I could have decided I was gonna run for Whip.

BB: They said, "Well, Vincent's a guy that's got a good chance of winning. Let's try to get him on our team," and included you with them. Then the next legislative session you were—

JV: The next legislative session I was out of leadership.

BB: Do you remember who you defeated for Whip in the Democratic caucus?

JV: I will in just a minute here I think.

BB: Oh, okay. (Laughs.)

JV: A fellow from Great Falls, and the name'll pop up in my mind—

BB: Swanberg?

JV: Nope, Les Teak.

BB: Oh, Wes Teague?

JV: Wes Teague.

BB: Wes Teague.

JV: Wes Teague, right. And I liked Wes; he was a nice person. I always liked him. whether he was really cut out for leadership or not, I don't know.

BB: I remember he had a terrible hairpiece, do you remember that? (Laughs.)

JV: Yes, I do.

BB: He had a wig and it just looked like a Brillo pad.

JV: I know. He had had a rough time and he continued to have a rough time. Now I'm gonna forget another name here, and I apologize for that, but I couldn't anticipate everything that was coming up. The 1980 election was a good Republican year. The Republicans won in the state and Ronald Reagan was elected president and we were in the minority. I ran for Minority Whip and lost. And I asked around a little bit to find out why because I felt I had done a good job as Majority Whip. The response was that with Ann Mary Dussault as Minority Leader, I think she was, pretty sure she was Majority Leader that year.

BB: She was Majority Leader in '79. I'm not sure she was Minority Leader in '81.

JV: In '81?

BB: I don't know for sure. I don't think so.

JV: Okay, then it was Kemmis. Dan Kemmis was. And it was felt that he—

BB: Kemmis, Democrat from here in Missoula.

JV: Yes. It was felt even then, even among some liberals, that a Kemmis-Vincent tandem was too liberal. So [William] Red Menahan was elected Minority Leader.

BB: Democrat from Anaconda.

JV: Right. Right, and of course I like Red. I always have, and that stung a little bit because it was the first time in any election that I'd been beat. But I just went ahead and got the committees I wanted and concentrated on doing good committee work. And I think it's good along the way to get bounced every once in a while. It brings you back to earth; it reminds you you can't take anything for granted. And you're still on the team, and you just have a different job now. And of course we got the majority back in '83.

BB: In the '82 election Democrats got the majority back, narrow majority I would think.

JV: It was narrow—

BB: And so [you] decided to run for leadership again.

JV: Yes, I ran for Majority Leader, and Kemmis was Speaker. And that time it was okay, for whatever reason. And I think that Democrats regained the House on that occasion because of I-95, which was the economic development, Build Montana Initiative.

BB: The Democrats got an initiative on the ballot to use coal money to invest in the state? I'm trying to remember what—

JV: That was part of it. But it was just a broad outline. It didn't have any—it needed a lot of legislation to implement. But the point is that it was Dan Kemmis' idea to get that on the ballot and have Democrats run on that platform.

BB: Be something before—

JV: Before something. That was also with Ted Schwinden's approval; I think the Schwinden administration came up with the Build Montana slogan. I think he might have even used that as a campaign—

BB: Campaign slogan.

JV: Campaign slogan. So we were rewarded in that sense. I don't know if I was ready to be Majority Leader or not. I did the best I could, and I think I got mixed reviews at the end of that session. But one—

BB: Who was Minority Leader? [Jack] Ramirez?

JV: (Pauses.) It had to be. It was either [Bob] Marks or Ramirez that year. They were both good.

BB: Well, Ramirez was defeated for governor. So he wouldn't have been in the '81 session, but he came back in the '82 election. He was back in the House of Representative for a couple of terms after that. But I don't know if he stepped directly into leadership or not. Marks was Speaker and Floor Leader, I think, a couple of times in there, kind of where you were.

JV: So I have difficulty keeping that straight. But I was chairman of the House Select Committee on Economic Development, and we created the legislation to implement I-95. That was a major stroke, I think. The legislation was always far better than it has been utilized. I think there's a lot of it that's still there that has never been run with. Maybe it's the time to, now, take another look at that. But all the givens that we dealt with with economic development back then have changed quite a bit so it would be hard to say.

So I came out that session having been Majority Leader, but I seemed to remember some press that there were some House Democrats that had been critical of my performance. I'd have to admit, once again trying to be as honest as forthright as possible here, that I wasn't nearly as well suited for that job as I was for Speaker. I just, as we've talked before, I've always had a hard time—I've never had a hard time making a final decision, actually doing. I've always done that. I never missed a vote in the House of Representatives the entire 16 years. Never missed a vote on any bill or resolution. But I like to think things through. As Majority Leader, you can't stand up and be forceful when you yourself are, to some extent, some degree, undecided or recognize that some of the things that are being said by the Minority Leader or the other side, if you will, are true. You have to be able to let that run off and stick to your point and just argue what you want to argue and not be concerned about the rest of it. That's—

BB: That's why floor leaders are often lawyers.

JV: (laughs) They can just forget all that stuff I guess, but—

BB: Well, they're the war chiefs, and the Speaker is more the administrative chief of the whole House of Representatives. Sometimes certainly can be involved in politics but the Floor Leader's jobs are pretty much to represent the point of view of their caucus, of their party.

JV: Right, right. I think that I just was not cut out for that job. I could handle the process, the procedural things. I became, in my own estimation, very good with the rules because back then if you were in the role of a Majority Leader, Minority Leader or Speaker and you messed up on the rules you were going to be hung out to dry by someone on the other side that knew the rules. Usually the Majority Leader or maybe the Speaker out there, and they would be diplomatic about it but they would let you know that you made a mistake. They'd let you repair it, but only after they had taken you to the woodshed and made sure everybody knew you made a mistake. So I got very good at the rules and process, but not so good at being, as you said, the war chief.

BB: I'd just like to ask you to describe some other legislator during that period of time. You already mentioned a couple of names. Francis Bardanoue.

JV: Francis was a rock, all the way from just being very good to me to letting my daughter sleep under his desk when she was just very, very little. Relied heavily upon by everybody in the House in regard to his expertise of the state budget. Gained some disfavor because generally speaking he was not as strong on funding education as some of us from university communities thought he should be. But a master at putting that budget together. A master on one occasion of finding money that we didn't know that was there and saving us from having to make severe cuts or raise taxes. Francis has a special place in my heart.

Two stories. When we were at the Colonial putting together the rules and the organization for the 1985 session, which was tied, [we] spent two days there and we had to decide who was gonna chair each committee. All the committees were going to be evenly split, but who would chair each one? We were going to alternate. I had the first call on that. And thought that I made the right call at the time, and I may have; but on the other hand, maybe I should have reversed it because I chose taxation instead of appropriations. So that meant that Gene Donaldson would chair appropriations and Francis would be the vice-chair.

BB: And Gene Donaldson was a moderate Republican from Helena.

JV: Yes, and I wish I could tell you more about my thinking at that time, but I do remember that Bob Marks felt that Francis shouldn't be in either one of those positions. That his time had passed, that he couldn't concentrate to the degree he needed to. I don't think he ever used the words "too old," but I think he strongly suggested Francis' role in the appropriation process should be greatly diminished. But that's not why I made the choice I did. I think I did at that point in that session because I thought taxation was going to be a more critical issue than appropriations.

BB: There's more philosophy too, in the taxation committee. Who chaired the taxation committee?

JV: (Pauses.) Danny Harrington.

BB: I see.

JV: Danny Harrington chaired it, and he had been—

BB: Democrat from Butte.

JV: Yes, he had been vice-chair for quite some time and opposed to the sales tax. At that time that was still a big Democratic no-no, as you know. So I went that way, and Francis handled that

very well and did his work as vice-chair. I think what really happened there, because it was evenly split, is that Gene Donaldson and Francis Bardanouve hit it off and essentially were co-chairman and worked through that budget. It wasn't an easy budget, but—

BB: That was the '85 did you say, John?

JV: Yes, that was the '85 session.

BB: That's your first session as Speaker.

JV: That's right.

BB: Who did you defeat in the Democratic caucus?

JV: I was unopposed.

BB: Okay.

JV: I was unopposed. I was unopposed both times that I ran for Speaker, although Dave Brown from Butte was, in essence, present. On both occasions I went around the state well before the elections in November and went all around the state campaigning for folks and talking to folks that I felt would be back. So I actively campaigned for it, and Dave didn't. Both times I was unopposed for Speaker.

BB: Was he even nominated then?

JV: No.

BB: I see.

JV: No.

BB: Just a couple more here. Dan Kemmis.

JV: Dan was an excellent politician and an excellent policy person. He put together I-95, drove that, got elected, we went from the minority to the majority with Dan. Extremely intelligent, just played a different role as Speaker than I did. He was much more heavily involved in policy, and although I don't believe a John Mercer in regard to talking to people about votes and what they should do, he was certainly capable of that. And—

BB: He would get a legislator, a wavering legislator in his office and try to make sure that he voted the way Kemmis wanted him to vote.

JV: That's right. That's right. Dan was not afraid to do that. In an unfortunate way that became tough duty because we just had about a three-vote majority and we still had, at that time, a number of eastern Montana Democrats.

BB: Somewhat more conservative.

JV: Somewhat more conservative.

BB: You had the Butte delegation that had a reputation for being kind of independent.

JV: We had the Butte delegation as well. So I don't know. I don't know. I think the numbers played out to the point where Dan didn't need to worry about Butte, but if Butte and eastern Montana Democrats voted together, we weren't gonna get very far. He needed to hold them together. I think he held them together, not entirely by persuasion, but by being a tough Speaker to put it as diplomatically as I can. As I've mentioned to you before [that] when I was elected in '85, I made the commitment to the caucus that I will do everything I can to persuade you that as Democrats we need to do this or we need to do something else. I'll make my argument, but in the final analysis you have to vote the way you feel is best to vote and just left it up to them. I think that took a lot of pressure off of them, and actually gave them more latitude. I mean, it's one thing to be told you have to vote this way; it's another one not to have been told but know that the Speaker would sure like you to. But he's not gonna put the hammer on you because you build up that camaraderie and it just worked that way. But I'd like to get back to Francis.

BB: '85 session, you're tied.

JV: We're tied.

BB: So your approach to it was the gentle approach to leadership.

JV: That's right. Of course, Bob, at that time we still had—I'd like to address this point too. In '85, well, we still had more moderate-to-conservative Republicans in the House. Now one argument that I've made when I talk about the difference between when we were there and today is that my feeling is that in my time a conservative Republican legislator, man or woman, was in essence a conservative Republican business person. They were concerned about the proper relationship, in many different ways, between government and business. But they recognized that there was an important relationship there. So when push came to shove, you could sit down with your Republican colleagues and work something out. Sure, Democrats, we always wanted to spend more, and Republicans wanted to spend less. But we'd work something out because conservative Republican business people knew that a reasonably well-functioning state government and local governments as well were in the best interests of Montana businesses. Now, there's the ideological far right; they won't sit down and talk. They



aren't concerned about that. I can't tell you how many times—well Bob Ellard's a great example.

BB: Republican representative from Bozeman.

JV: Republican representative from Bozeman. A wonderful man, he was in livestock business. He was conservative, but he would sit down and work things out. We worked very hard; we passed what was then called the tourist tax and only applied to West Yellowstone. And Dorothy Bradley and I worked really hard with Bob on that bill. West Yellowstone desperately needed it and they supported it. But for Democrats it was a sales tax, but Dorothy and I working together got almost half the Democrats to vote to give West Yellowstone the right to vote as to whether or not they wanted a tourist tax. And now you've got it in West [Yellowstone], you've got it in Virginia City, you have it up—

BB: Whitefish.

JV: In Whitefish, and so it's still up to the vote of the people. But that gives you an example of how we could work together.

BB: (unintelligible)

JV: I think that with that far right element in current legislators it tends often times to bring out the worst in the far left. I mean, there just gets to be that antagonism.

BB: Yes, the polarization.

JV: Polarization is an excellent word for it. As I wrote in one piece, the Continental Divide is right outside of Helena, but there has—in the '90s and into the '80s—there's a divide right down the aisle, at least in the Montana House, less in the Senate. But it's there, and it's there because we've lost that moderate center that can work together on these things.

Francis. Toughest legislative decision I ever had to make. This bumps us ahead about to the '89 session. Francis was once again chairman, I had appointed Francis chairman of the—

BB: House appropriations.

JV: House Appropriations Committee even though the other side thought that he should no longer be chairman, as I mentioned before. At any rate, we went through that whole process—

BB: They just felt that he was too old.

JV: Well, I don't know. I don't know whether it was sincere or—(Pauses)—whether something else was going on. I don't know. But I had no reservations appointing Francis chairman. Not

only didn't we have anyone else that could do the job, we didn't have anybody that understood the budget like Francis. But that's just the beginning of this story. We won't go through the legislative session, and as you know the budget gets down to the end. I created a more open process so that the Free Conference Committee on the Budget was not in some little room somewhere. It was out in the open at night under the cameras. And you know, under the cameras you're always gonna get something a little bit different than you do behind closed doors, but it worked and it opened it up. But just prior to that I was coming from Bozeman and a number of other legislators—primarily from Missoula and Bozeman, some from Billings and some from the smaller university units—felt that Francis was not, as a member of the Free Conference Committee, going to be generous enough to the education budget. I can't remember whether part of that was the school foundation program, but I don't believe so. I think it was just the university budget. So I decided that Francis was not going to be on the Free Conference Committee. Of course once you make that decision, you have to tell Francis that that's what you've decided. So 44-year-old Speaker of the House calls in an institution, a veritable institution and a long-serving member and Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee more than you could count on one hand, and tell him that he wasn't gonna be on the Free Conference Committee, which I did. And Francis cried.

BB: Wow.

JV: And I cried. The toughest single thing that I did. I guess someone could argue that I really didn't have to do it, but I did it. I did it on behalf of funding for the university system. I know I put, on the Democratic side, I put Dorothy Bradley and Gary Spaeth on the Free Conference Committee, and I think Gene Donaldson was on it as well. I've never forgotten that. Never forgotten that. All I can say for sure is that it was the hardest thing, the hardest decision and the hardest thing I ever had to do in the House. Or felt that I had to do. No one knows that. Now if someone someday listens to this tape, they'll know that, but I, and everyone in the legislature at the time knew it. But it's not a story I tell, out of respect for Francis. It's not a story I tell to show that I could—although I come across as pretty mild mannered and all that—that I can be really tough if I need to be. I don't save that story for occasions, political occasions where I need to prove it to somebody. I just don't mention it at all.

BB: Dorothy Bradley eulogized Francis Bardanouve at his funeral, so I take it there weren't any hard feelings between the two of them as a result of this.

JV: No, no. Francis was just that way. You know Dorothy, and you know she would never want to do anything to hurt Francis, but we felt so strongly about that university budget. But that goes back to the relationships and the camaraderie that—we didn't have it with everybody, but those of us before term limits that stuck around and worked with people session after session after session. You build up trust, you build up credibility, you build up respect so that even when things go wrong or go bad or something happens that you disagree with, you can work your way through it.

BB: In regard to that, we've just got a few minutes left, and I'm just gonna shoot some names to you. People that worked prominently with you and deserve a place in the history of Montana during the time that you were an important leader in the legislature, in addition to Francis Bardanoue. Hal Harper.

JV: Hal Harper was respected by Democrats. He was elected Speaker after I left, that would've been the '91 session. He had been in the legislature, was seriously hurt in an automobile accident, and then came back. I don't know how many terms he ultimately served, but Hal was always there. He had a special interest in environmental issues and I think did an outstanding job of pulling that kind of legislation together and keeping it on track.

BB: Jack Ramirez.

JV: Jack Ramirez. We didn't like Jack, to be honest with you. I say that with a great deal of respect. He was good. Maybe we felt that he was too good. I mean very smart, very—

BB: Republican lawyer.

JV: Republican lawyer.

BB: From Billings.

JV: From Billings. Majority Leader at one time. Very astute, knew the rules, fast on his feet, very friendly to some big corporate interests that we didn't look that fondly upon necessarily. But he was creative and innovative and always a force. I'd say Jack Ramirez was always a force on the floor to the point where we would hope that he didn't get up and say anything, because we knew if he did he'd have an impact because he knew what he was talking about, especially on taxation issues. He was especially good on tax issues. I don't think that we really had anyone on our side that could go round after round with Jack and come out on top.

BB: He had a reputation for heavy-handedness as I think you've more or less just told me.

JV: Yes.

BB: And at one point, I'm not sure it was this session, but at one point, because I think of that leadership style, he had some Republicans that essentially revolted against him in his caucus.

JV: That's right. He was heavy-handed, and he didn't have—no fear, no fear, no self-doubt. He not only knew what he wanted, but he knew how to go get it. He did alienate some Republicans, I think, because they felt that they were being pressured into doing some things that they didn't want to do. Much like I talked about me becoming Speaker in '85 after committing to eastern Montana Democrats that I wouldn't put the hammer on them in the same way that Speaker Kemmis did.

BB: John Mercer.

JV: John Mercer. The second coming of Jack Ramirez. That's the way I looked at that. We saw it coming.

BB: A Republican lawyer from Polson.

JV: Republican lawyer from Polson.

BB: Who had served somewhat as an understudy of Ramirez, is that your impression?

JV: That's right, that's right. I think he essentially became Jack Ramirez and was fortunate enough to have a long run of Republican majorities in the House and therefore was [like] Jack Ramirez as Speaker of the House four separate times. And—

BB: Total of eight years.

JV: Total of eight years, right. I think that, at least compared to myself, a Speaker that paid most attention to process and procedure, making the House work, making sure that everything functioned and ironing out differences between people and different conflicts. Mercer, I think, got more involved in policy and the politics that surrounded the policy where I was much more inclined to leave that to the majority leader.

BB: John Harp.

JV: John Harp.

BB: Republican from Kalispell.

JV: Republican from Kalispell and one of our favorites because although I'm sure that he voted 75-to-80 percent Republican, he would cross the line. He would come over to our side and vote for some of our legislation. There was a time, and I think it was during the '85 session, when we talked to John...we're talking about John Harp?

BB: Yes.

JV: We talked to John on any number of occasions about becoming a Democrat.

BB: This was when the House was tied.

JV: Yes, right. Right in the middle of a session, and I think he felt comfortable with the idea of being with us. I think he liked us and we liked him, but you know, you can talk about changing parties but actually doing it.

BB: Of course he went on to move over to the Senate.

JV: Right.

BB: He was uncomfortable in the House. He had such a poisoned relationship with Jack Ramirez that he left the House, ran for the Senate and then emerged as an important Republican leader in the Senate. He was Majority Floor Leader, I think, three consecutive times; he was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. He was an important leader in the Republican party, but when he was in the House he was, by your experience with him, pretty shaky.

JV: Yes. I think he felt suppressed.

BB: Two or three pieces of legislation that stand out in your memory. You've already mentioned a couple of them when you first got there, the zoning and subdivision act. Was there another piece of legislation or two in the '80s?

JV: I think I can cover that generally. I think that I sponsored five separate bills that became law on DUI.

BB: Driving under the influence.

JV: Driving under the influence. At that time, just to give listeners some idea, the first one was to require a day in jail for a first conviction. That was amended to give the judge the authority to do that but not mandated it. Then the next legislative session it was mandated. So I worked hard on DUI legislation. I think another thing I'm proud of is what was then called the Youth Conservation Corps, which has turned into the Montana Conservation Corps. I sponsored the Youth Conservation Corps Act, and it passed. But it didn't get funded, and to make a long story short, Dorothy Eck, bless her heart, continued to work at that and continued to work at that and finally got it funded and changed it to the Montana Conservation Corps, which is now funded by grants. There's no state money going to the Conservation Corps now. But my dad was in the CCC during the Depression, and [was paid] 30 dollars a month that he sent home to his mom to save the farm. He always talked about what a great experience that was, and so I put that bill in in his honor and didn't get all the way home with it. But you know how the legislature works, sometimes it is incremental, step by step. You gotta open the door first. So I'm really proud of that because I've seen what it's turned into and it's a good thing for kids.

BB: That's great. John. We're getting close to the end of the tape, and I want to just mention that you left the legislature, when, in 1990 or 1992?

JV: We had a special session in 1990, and that was the last time I was there.

BB: You didn't seek re-election in the 1992?

JV: No, no.

BB: Then shortly after that, you returned home to Bozeman and you were elected to the Bozeman City Commission. You were mayor of Bozeman during the 1990s. You were elected to the county commission from Gallatin County, and you chaired the Board of County Commissioners in Gallatin County. So you've continued your involvement on the local level in politics and in leadership positions. Then you re-emerged in the election of 2008—

JV: 2008.

BB: —as a member of the State Public Service Commission. So you had an opportunity when you were Speaker in the '89 session before you left the legislature to become, to know and maybe have some impressions of Governor Stan Stephens. Then you would probably have, with your work on the Public Service Commission, have some impressions of Governor Brian Schweitzer. Maybe we could kind of close out our interview, or almost close it out, by asking you to share your impressions about Stephens and then also about Schweitzer.

JV: I have distinct impressions of Stan Stephens. One, a legislative perspective, because he was president of the Senate when I was Speaker of the House in '89. And on the Republican side in the House, if you want to look at this, I had Bob Marks and Jack Ramirez.

BB: John, I think he was governor in '89. He was elected governor in the election of '88.

JV: All right, then it was...I'm sorry, it was '85. It would have been '85; I'm sorry for that slip.

BB: So you were Speaker when he was president of the Senate, and then you were Speaker when he was governor.

JV: That's right. That's right, and I worked extremely well with Stan in the '85 legislature. I had a much harder time working with Jack Ramirez and Bob Marks. And so when push came to shove, and I really needed to, I went the back [way] through the restrooms, as you'll well remember, and went back and talked to Stan. And I can't give you any specific instance, but I know that I did that on several occasions. And Stan and I were able to work some things out. They weren't policy; more procedural than anything else. Timing, process, working things out. You know you've got that natural—the Senate will sometimes want to do something different than the House and vice versa, but I'd slip through there and talk to Stan. He was always good about that, and we, more often than not, came up with something that resulted in both bodies working more in a synchronized fashion than they would have otherwise. So I thought he was just absolutely tremendous.

I didn't have that same impression as governor, to be honest with you. I think I jumped the gun on that a little bit. I criticized his budget right off the bat at the beginning of the '89 session and I think I should have taken more time. I still didn't like the budget very much, but I probably, to be more diplomatic about it, had taken more time before I started to raise any objections I had to it. But Stan got off to a rough start. I mean, you had the black car, you had the Lincoln, you had Ray Shackleford, who dummied up his credentials for purposes of becoming head of the Department of Revenue, I think that it was. He got off to a rough start that way, and then I'd never really after—

BB: The black car, there was a controversy over the automobile the governor was going to be driving.

JV: Right. I just didn't think that he was really working hard at the job of being governor, and that really bothered me because I remembered him as the Senate President and how well we worked together. And what an effective job he did and [I] wanted to see that when he was governor, but I never really saw that. Never really saw that.

BB: Do you think he was a better fit for a legislator than a governor?

JV: Yes, yes, I'd say so. But I never really talked to him about it. I never really thought that much about it. I just didn't have the feeling that he was really there and really governing the state and being proactive.

BB: He didn't seek reelection, which would make one wonder if he enjoyed the job.

JV: That's right.

BB: Now you ran in the Democratic Primary against Brian Schweitzer in 2004, and then you served on the Public Service Commission during his governorship so you've come across him in terms of debating him and then in terms of working with him. Watched him pretty closely. What are your thoughts? What are your impressions?

JV: I think that I'm somewhat biased in that because I almost always put it into context because I ran for governor against Brian because I thought that I would be a better governor. So I'm always comparing what he does, and how he does it, with how I think I would handle it and how I would do it. There's such a huge difference between those two, between myself and Brian in how we conduct ourselves. And how we would—

BB: We're talking style—

JV: Style.

BB: To some extent substance I suppose, but style too.

JV: Right. And one of the things that I think I'm especially sensitive to is working with the legislature. I mean, I'm a product of the legislature, I respect the legislature. I would, if governor, if I had've been governor, I would have enjoyed tremendously collaborating with both Republicans and Democrats as governor to see what we could accomplish together. I don't think that Governor Schweitzer has that same bent. I'm sure not as stylistic. I don't have a bolo tie; I don't have a dog. I'm just plain old John Vincent, in a way standing up in front of the class, explaining. I could get my kids enthused, but I'm not a rabble rouser speechmaker. I don't look at politics as a show, and I guess I don't know if Brian does or not. But in fairness I think that a lot of times that seems to be the impression that people have. Very ambitious. I mean when Conrad defeated him, he never stopped running, and there's a great irony because if he had just slowed down for a while he'd be in the United States Senate today. Which is where I think Brian really wanted to be. I think he's a very astute politician. I think he can read the public extremely well. He doesn't make many public relations mistakes. It'll be hard to put this in context years from now, but you know he held up all the grant money for the local communities and then took a couple hits on that and the next day the grant money was released. So I think he corrected that error really quickly. But great self-confidence, a strong personality. Whether he will in the final analysis leave a true legacy, in other words, things that those of us that pay attention to can think of ten, fifteen years from now. That was the Montana Environmental Protection Act—that's Tom Judge. Whether he's going to leave anything behind with a real positive legacy like that or not, I don't know.

BB: Might be somewhat the opposite of that because it seems as though what he is really championing now is a major coal development in the eastern part of the state, which would be somewhat the opposite of the Tom Judge legacy.

JV: Yes, yes. Well the full story of that is yet to be seen, but we're moving into an entirely new age now of alternative energy and clean energy. There're gonna be some bumps along the way, but the days of coal will eventually come to an end. About the only thing you can say about coal mining in Montana or Wyoming is that it's safer than coal mining in West Virginia. But it all burns the same.

BB: John, how do you want to be remembered?

JV: I guess more than anything, someone, when you get right down to it, someone that cared about doing a good job and that worked pretty darn hard at it. That worked hard at gaining the credibility and respect that he came in contact with at all levels of office. Someone that tried to do his best.

BB: Well, I appreciate you, and I appreciate your public service.

JV: Thank you.



BB: Thank you.

[End of Interview]