

Tape 4, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is December 4, 1992, and this is Tape 4, Side 1.

So you were talking about your...

VA What I saw, as the years went by, people would run for office, and they'd go to different groups, and they would tell them what they thought they wanted to hear, and they'd get elected. But they had a real problem when they got to Salem because, having now what we call being a split personality in the campaign, who am I supposed to be now that I'm here? How do I vote? What do I do? They've had a real problem. I've seen some just really have an awful time. I never had an awful time. I would just do what I thought was the thing to do, and then go back, and I always figured if the people like what I'm doing, they'll reelect me, and if they don't, I'll go back in the rug business. So I was always very comfortable.

Well, we were talking about that first campaign. I really think - I'm not sure I want to go down in history this way, but I really think I was the first to use lawn signs in 1958. We thought that would be a good idea, and my friends - I had a friend that was a painting contractor, and we got some boards cut up, and he painted them yellow, and then we cut a stencil. We were down there in his paint shop, a bunch of us, and we were stenciling Atiyeh for Representative, or whatever we did, you know. It was all stenciled, and then I'd go out and try to find places to put the lawn signs up. I went to - I'd say, well, now, who's influential. I can remember a good friend of mine from that point forward, Henry Hagg, a nice guy, a dairyman out in Washington County. He was very well known and highly regarded, so I went to see Henry. I introduced myself and sat and talked,

and I said, "You know, I'm running for the legislature. If you feel that you can support me, I'd appreciate it." I didn't get a - I wasn't forcing him to a commitment right there. And he was my supporter then, and we were good friends till he passed away. Henry was really a nice guy; a very nice man. So I did things like that. In those days you ran countywide, not in single-member districts, and in my case there was five of us running in the primary. The two highest votes were the ones that won. Actually, in the primary that year we had one incumbent running. He was running for his third term in the House.

CH Do you know who that was?

VA Leon Davis. I thought to my - I think we all thought to ourselves, okay, there's four of us running for one spot, because Leon is the incumbent, and there was no incumbent in the second seat. But it turned out I won the primary. He, in the general election, got a few hundred more votes than I did, but we both won in the general election, and that was my first session.

It was also fascinating - I can remember this vividly as well - on the night before the primary election, all of a sudden I had this terrible feeling, and I said to my wife, "I might win. Then what do I do?" You know, you go through it, and all of a sudden, My God, I might win this thing. Now what do I do?

Another bit of things I remember from that early campaign was Hillsboro High School candidates night, and two things happened at the same time in the same place. Somebody asked me a question, and I said, "Gee, I really don't know the answer to that." Then another question was asked, and I can remember this because we had Leon Davis, who was an incumbent, and, then, Arthur Ireland, and Arthur Ireland was ^{an incumbent} - he shared. He was part Washington County and part Yamhill County. So anyway, he was Arthur Ireland, and he was an incumbent. Leon Davis was in the insurance business, and Arthur Ireland was a farmer, dairy farmer. Anyway, the question came up - and I'm sitting between

them. The question came up, What do you think of the severance tax?

CH The timber severance tax?

VA Just severance tax, the way it came up, but yeah, the answer is yes, timber. And I think Arthur leaned over to Leon and said, [whispering] "What's a severance tax?" Leon says, [whispering] "I don't know." And I thought hey, these guys are incumbents, you know. I don't feel so bad. They don't know - I don't know, but they don't know either. Anyway, after somebody had asked me another question and I said I don't know, we went down and had coffee and cookies afterward, and several people came up and said, Hey, by George, I really like that. If you don't know, you just say so. And I started laughing to myself. Hey, I ought to go around saying I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I got a lot of good reaction out of that [laughter]. Well, that was that first campaign.

CH Well, why did you run? What was your main motive or your main reason for running?

VA Well, I was interested, very much interested, in government. I didn't think it was going in the right direction. There was a lot of, even then - you know, my father-in-law said, "Why do you want to run for public office with all those crooks?" There was a bad image at that time. I thought well, I'm just going down there, and I'll do a good, honest job and work as hard as I can, and maybe somebody will say they're not - you know, raise the status of elected officials. There are things that I felt very keenly about. I thought that things were not running the way they should. We talked earlier about Franklin D. Roosevelt and my views. So I just - I think that's what it was all about.

CH Were there any compelling issues for you at the time?

VA No, which, incidentally, that's not bad either. In other words, I didn't have one thing I wanted to go down and do. I did - you know, you learn, again. I was going to straighten out all of state government in one session as a freshman legislator. That's where I said, whoops. Like I said earlier, when my dad died and I was in the business, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. I finally said to myself, You've got to be patient around here. No, I didn't have any, but I did work hard in the committee, I was really concerned about what was going on, I wouldn't mind speaking, sometimes too much...

CH This was after you got elected?

VA Yeah, and I'm on the floor during debates on bills and things of that kind. I became - I was an active participant and, as I say, sometimes talked too much.

CH What did you say in the voters pamphlet? Do you recall your original statement in the voters pamphlet as to why you were running?

VA No. I suppose it's somewhere, but I don't recall that, although there is an interesting piece of history. Well, let's see, here. Here we are. In that first campaign I received \$217.50 and spent \$138.70.

CH So what did you do with the extra money?

VA I don't know. Maybe I carried it over to the next campaign. I really don't know [laughter]. Now, when I say that to you, you know campaigns today are incredibly expensive. I actually have the newspaper clipping on that. And it appeared because I filed that with the Washington County Courthouse, as well as - I thought I had to do that. I didn't really have to do that. I had to file it down in Salem. So it showed up in the Hillsboro

Argus, and that was fortunate to the extent that now I've got those figures that I would have long-since forgotten.

CH How did the general election turn out?

VA I won, Leon Davis - I think I had fifteen thousand - oh, let's see if I have that. Here we are. Leon Davis had 15,993 votes, and I had 15,511. The next closest was a Democrat. There were two Democrats. It was 12,127, and the other one was 11,986. So I won.

CH And when you first got down there, what was your impression when you first walked in? Can you remember the day that you walked into the capitol?

VA Not in that context. Obviously, I remember standing there and being sworn in on the floor of the House of Representatives.

CH How did you feel after you got elected? I mean was it a - did you feel euphoric, did you feel depressed, did you - what...?

VA It was a new experience, and I was willing to go into it. No, euphoria wouldn't be quite it. Obviously, you're glad to win. I don't know, I just - I suppose it's like going from grade school to high school, you know. It's a whole new thing. When I tell you that, you know, you're a big shot in grade school, and all of a sudden you're the smallest shot in high school. Fortunately, I met up with four others who were freshmen like I was, Republicans, two from Eugene, one from Bend, and one from Salem. Actually, four of us - not the Salem guy - we lived in the same motel, and we were four Republicans who were freshmen, and we got - we still hang around together.

CH Who are they?

VA Carl Fisher from Eugene, Monty Montgomery from Eugene, Doug Heider from Salem, and Pat Metke, M-e-t-k-e, from Bend. The interesting thing that came out of that, the following session, Bob Smith came in from Burns, and so the six of us - and they began to call us Young Turks. We institutionalized that years later. We have a plaque with a Turkish kind of little dagger on it, and Doug Heider's wife found a cartoon one time - we all have it - and a fellow sitting at the bar talking to the bartender, he says, "I used to be a Young Turk, but by imperceptible degrees I'm ~~now~~ an old Turk." So that kind of eased the way. We had a lot of fun, the five of us initially and then Bob Smith the following session. Democrats were widely in control. I don't recall the number. We'd jump in and make motions. We didn't know quite how to follow up with them so we could win.

CH The Republican Party was kind of in a quandary then, wasn't it, because they had maintained control for so many years, and, then, in 1956 the Democrats surged to take control. And at this point they're still in control, thirty-three Democrats to twenty-seven Republicans, but did you feel...

VA Now, wait a minute, for your tape, it's thirty-two Republicans and twenty-eight Democrats.

CH Was it thirty-two and twenty-eight?

VA Today.

CH Oh, today.

VA You're talking about then?

CH Yes, 1958.

VA Oh, excuse me. I don't remember the number, but you've got

it.

CH Or actually, maybe this was...

VA I couldn't contradict you or correct you either way because I don't remember.

CH Was it a difficult time to run as a Republican? I understand that part of that was because of the big tax increase that the Republicans had put in.

VA That's my understanding.

CH And so where were you standing on that issue, then, when you ran?

VA Well, that had taken place, so now I'm running in 1958. And even before that, apparently there was some big to-do about basic school support or something like that. But that all came before I went there, so I just heard about it. It wasn't difficult, no, as a Republican, although I had my first brush with the labor unions, which - I have to say one thing for them. [They're] consistent. All of my twenty-eight years, they never supported me. Organized labor. A lot of labor people voted for me, obviously, or I couldn't have gotten elected. But I recall the Washington County Central Labor Council was going to ask candidates to come out - I remember this very well - and so I went out, like I went wherever else they asked for candidates to come and talk to them. And I do recall that night that there were several candidates for different offices, all Republican, not a Democrat. Not one Democrat showed up. And then I read, I don't know, a few days or a week later, in the Argus that they supported all the Democrats. I said, Why the hell did they bother me? Why did they take my time? If they're going to do this anyway, why invite me? Just don't bother. I've got other

things to do. That was my reaction at the time. I've had, since then, many good friends in the labor movement, even today, since I left office, but the organized party never did support me, which, incidentally, was kind of a pleasant thing for me. I'd go, as governor, to their conventions. I knew they weren't going to support me, so I wasn't nervous. The ones that were hoping that they might have a chance, they were nervous as a cat. I wasn't nervous at all. I'd go down and chat with my friends down there that I knew and have a good time. I knew they weren't going to support me, so I was the most relaxed guy there. It turned out that way.

CH How did you feel, in terms of deciding what to do about commuting versus renting? You said you lived in a motel. Some people commuted, didn't they?

VA Yeah.

CH Although at that time it must have been pretty difficult getting up and down Highway 99.

VA It was still about - for me, about an hour, which I guess isn't all that much, but for us Westerners - I guess if you live on the East Coast, that would be just a normal commute. It was easy, it was convenient. When I look back on it, I left Dolores with the kids when they were much younger. Tom would have been nine or ten, I guess - well, just getting to be ten, and Suzanne would have been four or five. It's one of those things you look back and sort of regret. I missed a lot of times with the children, left Dolores with a lot of raising of the kids, and maybe selfish in that context. You can't relive that.

CH What about your secretary? Did you have a secretary at the time?

VA Yeah. I actually had the secretary that was - her name is Marian Carr [~~sp~~]. She was my secretary for quite a long period of time. [She] lived in Salem. Another interesting thing of those times, the legislators didn't have an office. Your office was your desk. You had a filing cabinet on the side hall, outside the bar, they call it, on the hall. They're still inside the chambers. There was a room with typewriters, and my secretary would - before the session ended, she'd try to get there. I'd dictate to her, you know, so she could get her favorite typewriter out of a whole roomful of typewriters. Actually, the legislature was much more accessible. Now that they've all got offices, they've got someplace to hide. They've all got staffs, all of them. The cost of running the legislature has increased horrendously, not that that was very pleasant. Amending bills, they used to actually cut and scotchtape bills. I mean, amendments would come in, and you'd cut and they'd scotchtape. That was actually tough on the secretaries, but very good for us as a legislator because we could see what amendments were being made. Today they don't do that. They engross the bill. There's amendments, and so they go print a new one, so now you've a new one, and you don't know what the old - unless you've got an old one and want to do some comparing, you can't figure it out. Then, we had, I think, blue ink for House amendments and red ink for Senate amendments so you could tell which was which. It was tough for the secretaries. It took a lot of their time just amending bills. That's, now, 1959. Not all that long ago.

CH At that time could lobbyists come down and directly contact the members on the floor?

VA Oh yeah Well, when I say yeah, after a session is over, the doors are open. Anybody can walk in or walk out who wanted. I mean, there was no restriction. You couldn't do that, obviously, during a session. The doors were closed and there was only a limited number of people that could come into the chambers.

CH How would you describe who your constituents were?

VA That's another good thing, and I say good in the sense that - versus today with single-member districts - I told you, running countywide. So my constituents, obviously, ran from urban to rural, and I had to be aware of the total concept. Today, in single-member districts, you're rural or urban, and your viewpoint is very provincial; very provincial. And that's really one of the bad things that's happened since I've been in the system. Single-member districts.

CH What did you consider their needs to be? What were they wanting from you?

VA Well, it varied with what was going on at the time. Washington County, on the east end, was growing, schools were just overwhelmed, new schools had to be built. Then, you go further out into Washington County, and dairy farmers were concerned about milk prices, and those that were in the timber industry in Washington County were concerned about the taxes on the timber. One of the very early bills I got involved with in 1959 that finally passed in 1961 was the timber tax bill. That was a big issue at that time.

CH Was that the severance tax?

VA No. We didn't go into severance until later on. So, I mean, I'm just sort of picking those things up as we move on, this kind of diversification we had.

CH What assignments did you want? What committee assignments did you want when you were just going down there, or did you have an idea as to what you wanted?

VA I actually wanted to be on a tax committee. As it turned

out, that was quite unique in the sense that I was on a tax committee in the legislature all the way through. As you go through, you're on different committees at different times, and I was, in addition to being on a tax committee, but I was always on a tax committee, from Day One until I left the legislature, which was also an advantage as I moved through and became even a governor. I had a great sense of what was going on. I think I'm one of the very few of anybody that read the annual report of the Department of Revenue. I mean, I read this thing. I had a good sense of - when I say "who," we never knew by name, but category, who was paying taxes. That's why, when I hear them talk about the wealthy, the wealthy aren't going to do it for us. There aren't enough of them. If you took all their money, it still wouldn't help. Most of where you're going to get your money is from us. That's where you get the money from, because there's more of us than anybody else. Those are the kinds of things that I learned. And when I finally agreed to the sales tax bill of 1985 [?], I knew precisely - I say precisely. Generally, I suppose, is a better word - how it was going to affect taxpayers. It was a very fair bill. It was a very good one. It was the best one I ever saw. I was on the food and dairy committee in the House.

CH That first session you were on fish and game and rules and resolutions.

VA Yeah.

CH Were those committees that you wanted to be on, or did they just assign those to you?

VA I think they just assigned them. I think - you ask for committees, but, you know, what do I know about committees. Fish and Game was okay because I like to fish. I wasn't a hunter, but I liked to fish. Rules was a pretty good committee. That was a

committee, really, that at times would kind of hold up bills. That was more or less the speaker's committee.

CH It was?

VA Yeah. The House Committee on Taxation is nine, I think, as I recall, but at that time it was three Republicans and six Democrats. Doug Heider was a member of that committee; he was a freshman. Fay Bristol, from Grants Pass, was the other Republican. We looked on him as being the wise head. He had been there before. It turns out he really wasn't. A nice guy, but he wasn't that wise. Clarence Barton was the chairman of that committee.

CH What did you think of Clarence Barton at that point?

VA Well, he and I hit it off pretty well.

CH Was he speaker then?

VA No. He was speaker in 1963. Bob Duncan was speaker the first two sessions I was there, '59 and '61. Clarence Barton was generally mistrusted by the Republicans, but he and I got along together very well. I think it was because I just - you know, I wasn't intimidated by him, nor he by me. Obviously, he thought less of me because I'm a freshman, and he had been around, but I didn't mind standing up to him at all, and we spoke our minds pretty clearly. I can recall later on, as we were talking about - I don't recall what it was, late in the session, and I said something like - we were wondering what Clarence Barton was going to do, and I said, "Well, this is what he's going to do." "Well, no, you can't trust him." "What makes you say that?" "Because he told me." If he told me - now, he may have told somebody else something, and he didn't mind turning his back on him. But if he told me something, I knew I could depend on it. So we had a good

relationship, although we didn't always agree.

CH I notice some other members of the committees, these committees that you were on, which stand out in terms of people either that you've mentioned or people that I've heard of. Holmstrom.

VA Bill Holmstrom, yeah.

CH He was chair of the fish and game, wasn't he?

VA That's right. That session, incidentally, was the first time we licensed boats in the state.

CH Was that a controversial issue?

VA Oh, not really. It had something to do with the federal government. They said either you license them or we will, so we said what the heck, if we're going to take money from the boaters, we might as well take it for the state of Oregon somewhat. But that was the only session I was on fish and game. And, you know, I think among the reasons, I can recall the fish and wildlife department or fish and game - no, fish and game was one department, and, then, there was a fish commission, which was later merged and became fish and wildlife and they're all together. Anyway, they came, and they wanted to raise the deer tag, I think from one dollar to two dollars, and so I made the foolish mistake of saying why. Well, we can use it. Well, that's not a good enough reason. Maybe you need seventy-five cents, maybe you need a dollar and a quarter. So they got kind of indignant, including some of the old-time committee members. No one should really ask a question. I told you; we need a dollar. What more do you need from that? So I wasn't on fish and game after that. Very much like one time I was on the emergency board, one session, and I kept asking the question,

What's the emergency, and you're not supposed to ask questions like that, so I wasn't on it again [laughter].

CH You've mentioned the Rules and Resolutions committee as being the speaker's committee, and maybe for clarification to whoever is listening to this, what do you mean by that?

VA Well, if the speaker had some bills that he really didn't want to see go anywhere, then - and the chairman of that committee would really be the close buddy of the speaker, and it became known that if that speaker didn't want the bill, he'd give it to the rules committee, and that was the end of that bill.

CH In this case being Ben Musa?

VA Ben Musa, yeah.

CH And what was your impression of Ben Musa?

VA Quite an egotistical guy. I never got very close to him. I don't want to be unkind on a historical tape. Not one of my favorite legislators. I didn't really dislike anybody. I'd get along with anyone, but I had higher regard for some than others. Ben was not one of those that I had particularly high regard for.

[End of Tape 4, Side 1]