



# **Nevada Legislature Oral History Project**

**THOMAS J. HICKEY**  
Democrat

**Assembly, 1972 – 1982**  
**Senate, 1982 – 1994**

**NOVEMBER 18, 2008**  
**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

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**THE HICKEY HOME**

**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

Interview conducted by  
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Get Consensus, LLC  
Under contract to the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau

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## **PROJECT INTRODUCTION**

The 2007 Nevada Legislature approved an appropriation for a project of conducting oral histories with former state legislators, and in the summer following the conclusion of the session, the Research Division of the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) conducted a competitive bid process to identify and obtain a contractor to carry out the project. A committee consisting of LCB and other state personnel with expertise in Nevada history and politics evaluated and ranked the proposals received. In January 2008, a contract was signed between LCB and Get Consensus, LLC, for an 18-month program.

Administered by Donald O. Williams, Research Director, and coordinated by Amber Joiner, Senior Research Analyst, the Nevada Legislature Oral History Project consists of video- and audio-taped interviews, which have been transcribed, edited for readability, and indexed. An initial list of suggested interview subjects had been presented to the Senate Committee on Finance when it considered Senate Bill 373, which proposed an appropriation for the creation of an oral history of the Nevada Legislature. Using that as the starting point, LCB staff considered several factors—such as age, length of legislative tenure, contributions to the State of Nevada, and whether a formal oral history of the individual had been published or was underway—when identifying the former legislators who would be interviewed. The final list provided to the contractor revealed a careful balance of legislative house, political party, and geographic distribution among the interviewees.

After LCB staff acquired the written permission of each subject, the contractor would proceed with scheduling the interview at a time and place convenient for the former legislator. Each interview was simultaneously filmed and audiotaped. The audio recording was transcribed verbatim and then edited by the contractor for readability. Each interviewed legislator was provided the opportunity to review his or her edited document, and any misstatements or errors in the videotape were corrected in the text. The contractor produced three copies of each final product, which includes the text and a DVD of the interview film. Copies were presented to LCB's Research Library and the State Library in Carson City; the subject legislator also received a copy of his or her interview. The repository of record for all digital film and audio files is LCB's Research Library.

Together, these interviews make a significant contribution to the annals of Nevada politics and provide incomparable context to the state's legislative history. The official legislative record outlines the chronology for actions taken by Nevada's lawmaking body; these oral histories vividly portray the background and circumstances in which such actions occurred. Invaluable for understanding Nevada's politics in the latter half of the twentieth century, these interviews present interesting explanations, entertaining stories, and thoughtful observations that might otherwise have been lost.



**Thomas J. Hickey**  
**November 18, 2008**

## THOMAS J. HICKEY

Thomas J. Hickey began his 22-year legislative career with his 1972 election to the Assembly where he served for ten years. In 1982, the Democrat from North Las Vegas was elected to the Senate where he served until 1994 when he ran unsuccessfully for Secretary of State. Mr. Hickey chaired the Assembly Committee on Agriculture during most of his decade in the Assembly. In the Senate, he chaired the Senate Committee on Government Affairs in 1985 and 1991, the two sessions during his tenure when the Democrats held the majority. For ten years, he chaired the interim Committee on High-Level Radioactive Waste.

Mr. Hickey was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska and graduated from the University of Omaha. While a legislator, he was employed as a brakeman with the Union Pacific Railroad, retiring shortly before his final session. A bachelor when he was first elected, Mr. Hickey married Lillian Lujan in 1981. A native of Cuba, Mrs. Hickey served on the State Board of Education from 1989 to 2001 and was honored by having a neighborhood elementary school named after her in 2006. Mr. Hickey proudly credits his wife as being a better politician than he. Mr. Hickey is also particularly fond of his Irish heritage and usually led off the Legislature's biennial St. Patrick's Day festivities with a recitation of a limerick.

In this interview, which lasted about 90 minutes, Mr. Hickey answered a variety of questions on topics relating to how the two houses and their committees functioned, the important issues on which he toiled, his personal perspectives on key political figures, and the impact of legislative service on family life. In particular, Mr. Hickey reminisces about his legislative mentor Assemblyman Paul May (D-Clark) and explains the complexity of the legislative process. He fondly recalls several legislators, including Jean Ford (R/D-Clark) and Assemblywoman Eileen Brookman (D-Clark). He mentions the difficulties faced by Ms. Ford when she transitioned from being a Republican Assemblywoman to a Democratic Senator. Mr. Hickey also explains that he initially became the chairman of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture because he had not voted for Assemblyman Keith Ashworth (D-Clark) for Speaker. Assemblyman Ashworth won the contest and assigned then-Assemblyman Hickey to the committee as punishment. Mr. Hickey explains how he turned the assignment into a positive experience and continued to chair the committee for many sessions. Under his leadership, the Agriculture Committee started the popular legislative farm tours, visited all corners of rural Nevada, addressed corruption on the Nevada Dairy Commission, and processed important legislation that provided expiration dates on milk cartons. Mr. Hickey also discusses other issues, including the Equal Rights Amendment, the MX Missile, Bullfrog County, and the constant battles between Clark County and the City of Las Vegas. He tells an exciting story about fighting with a knife-wielding assailant one evening as he left the Legislative Building.

This interview was conducted on November 18, 2008, at 2:30 p.m. in the study of Mr. Hickey's home where some background noises, such as the barking of his dog, Lady, were picked up by the recording. Although audible, these noises do not detract from the interesting conversation. After his departure from the Legislature, Mr. Hickey led efforts to preserve and protect this area on the east side of the Las Vegas Valley.

Dana R. Bennett  
May 2009

**Dana Bennett:** Good afternoon, Senator Hickey.

**Tom Hickey:** Good afternoon, Dana.

**Bennett:** Let's think back to January 15, 1973, your very first day as a legislator. It was very cool and overcast in Carson City, and a storm came in later in the day. Can you remember what you were feeling and thinking about when you walked into the Chambers for the first time as a new Assemblyman?

**Hickey:** I had a very good friend, and I was very fortunate in that. His name was Paul May, and he was like a mentor for me. Paul showed me the ropes and calmed me down. You go into a strange setting; you're not particularly knowledgeable of what your job is; and it is very fortunate that you have a friend who will help you with some of the direction and knowledge of how a legislator works.

*Paul W. May, Jr. (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1984 and 1986 to 1988.*

The first thing you learn is that you have a lot of material to read, and in the reading of that material, you have to be selective so as not to be taken up with trivial issues. You soon learn that the most important thing is to start specializing in whatever interests you. That's what I did. You can get on the wrong side of the Speaker or your majority leader politically and soon find yourself in committees that you don't necessarily feel are beneficial.

At that time, the Assembly had 40 members. All of us were trying to get selected into the best possible committees, so when we came home after finishing with the Legislature, we could pound our chests saying we did this or did that. You learn as you gain more experience that most of the people back home do not follow it that closely or pay attention to the introduction of legislation. I soon learned that wasn't important. So most of my work, believe it or not, wasn't necessarily to put my name on legislation but to make sure that proper legislation—from my point of view—was passed.

**Bennett:** Looking at your list of the bills, I noticed that you didn't have a large number for which you were the primary sponsor. Did you have a particular philosophy about that?

**Hickey:** I think I just explained it to you. Yes, I did. When you're a legislator, the disadvantage of having your name on a bill means that there are people within that Legislature who won't vote for that bill because your name is on it. Sure, there will be some who will. But why take that kind of chance? You can go and converse directly with the number you need. It's a numbers game once those bills come on the floor.

**Bennett:** What would you say was some of the best advice that Assemblyman May gave you?



**Hickey:** Paul told me something that was very, very true. He said, “Watch the door—the entrance to the Assembly,” which I did. There were two, by the way, and outside those doors were always lobbyists. This was Paul’s advice: “Watch and see who they’re talking to.” That could give you a very good hint on which way they were going to go. So I did that. I followed that advice. And he was right. When we got into a vote count, especially on close legislation, that became important. Then there were people who would leave the Assembly hall, so they wouldn’t have to vote on something controversial. That’s why you see absentees in your research. Then all of a sudden, they appear in other votes. Now maybe there’s an argument that they had to go to the restroom, but I would tell you the suspicion is still there.

**Bennett:** What surprised you the most as a young Assemblyman about the legislative process and the Legislature?

**Hickey:** How little I knew. The process is complicated—the sifting through a number of bills. Also the brightness of some people and the dumbness—no matter how intelligent, by the way. There were some who fit in as legislators; others did not.

**Bennett:** Who impressed you the most?

**Hickey:** I thought Paul May was a good legislator. I served with Jean Ford. Jean Ford was very bright. She had a cadre of ladies around her to help her with legislation. I told you that you had to read a lot of material.

*Jean E. Ford (Clark) served in the Assembly from 1972 to 1976 as a Republican and in the Senate from 1978 to 1982 as a Democrat. She passed away in 1998.*

There was a lady who sat with me, and I can't recall her name. I thought her husband was a detriment to her. She was sanctioned by the Republicans, but she was probably the brightest lady I served with. Very bright. She was a nurse and a Republican member of the Assembly. I'm sorry I can't give you her name, but I just don't recall it.

Torvinen was another person I served with. He ended up as District Court Judge. Very, very bright man. Another Republican. But when we got into tort law, even the Counsel Bureau used to refer to him to develop legislation dealing with tort law. He was very bright. Always liked him. When he'd get up before the Assembly, his great statement was, "Words to the wind." [laughter]

*Roy Lee Torvinen (R-Washoe) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1974.*

**Bennett:** The Assembly was known and is still known as the place where there are a lot of speeches. Since you served in both houses, is that a fair characterization?

**Hickey:** There are some people who just like to get up and hear themselves. Now Paul was probably one of the greatest speechmakers in the world

because when he'd stand up, he'd make his little speech and sit down, and then everybody would turn to each other and say, "What did he say?"

**Bennett:** Why was that?

**Hickey:** [laughter] He mumbled. Look, by the time you go through these committees and vet everything that should be vetted, you have to trust the committees when they deliver that legislation to the floor. Generally, the Chairman of that committee will stand up, or the sponsor of that bill stand up, and explain what the bill's about. That's it. Anything longer than that is too long.

**Bennett:** You chaired the Assembly Committee on Agriculture for five sessions?

**Hickey:** Oh, I enjoyed that. That was a discipline by Speaker Ashworth.

**Bennett:** What had you done?

**Hickey:** I didn't vote for him. Keith was all right. At that time, he was an executive at the Sahara Hotel. He went for Speaker, and I just didn't vote for him. He said, "You understand?" I said, "Sure, I understand." He said, "I'm going to make you Chairman of the Agriculture Committee." I said, "Well. That's very nice of you." So I became Chairman of the Agriculture Committee. Then I traveled around the state bring-

*Keith Ashworth (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1976. He was Speaker in 1973 and 1975. He served in the Senate from 1976 to 1984. He passed away in 1996.*

ing the Agriculture Committee to the small counties. They really appreciated that, by the way. There was some key legislation that was passed in my tenure as Chairman, such as dating milk cartons. Did you know that?

**Bennett:** I didn't know that.

**Hickey:** Yeah. It was hard to understand, but we felt that we also should have a milk authority to continue to control price. That was to protect the local dairies.

There was one thing that happened my first year, and this was shocking. We had corruption in the dairy business. We had people taking money who were supposed to be regulating the industry.

**Bennett:** Do you mean on the Dairy Commission?

**Hickey:** Yes. When I learned of it, we felt that it would be much better, at least for the state, to talk about resignations. If the Attorney General wanted to indict and convict, that was up to them. But I'm talking about as a Legislature. We demanded the resignation and got it.

**Bennett:** There was a debate for a while about getting rid of the Commission completely.

**Hickey:** I opposed that, but you're right. That was one of the reasons that we never let the corruption surface.

**Bennett:** So you found corruption on the Dairy Commission [**Hickey:** Oh, yeah.] and asked for resignations?

**Hickey:** We got one or two who were really responsible for what was happening. What they were doing, if I remember correctly, was taking kickbacks from the dairy people.

Now down here, our major dairy was Anderson. Going beyond corruption, one of the problems we had down here was that Anderson had a tough time getting placement in the supermarkets. So what we did—I was not alone in this—was put pressure on the supermarkets because they do have slot machines. We said, “Look, we have a Nevada industry here. We want it supported.” They were tough to deal with—the Safeways—all of them are very tough to deal with. But eventually, they came along. So there are things that you can do as a legislator that can help the state. I was concerned about jobs in the industry. This wasn’t a particularly big city as it is today, so that’s what I did in the Agriculture Committee.

**Bennett:** Your committee also would go on farm tours. [**Hickey:** That’s right.] Was that a new process for the committee, or was that something that had gone on for a long time?

**Hickey:** Oh, no. I started that. All of a sudden, the other legislators saw that, and Ashworth told me,

“Well, you made a silk purse out of a pig’s ear.” I said, “Yeah.”

That scared them to death. They thought I was running for statewide office.

**Bennett:** And were you?

**Hickey:** No. I just enjoyed it. It gave me an opportunity to visit all the small counties, which was a neat thing.

**Bennett:** So none of the other committees would tour around the state?

**Hickey:** Not until I started it.

**Bennett:** What was some of the legislation that came through the Agriculture Committee that you are the most proud of?

**Hickey:** The thing I was most proud of was being able to maneuver through a very tight situation dealing with the corruption in the Dairy Commission itself. I was a freshman then, and I did get help from the Counsel Bureau. They knew about it, and we all felt the same way: “It’s been done. How do we set it straight?” I was in favor of keeping the Commission. How do you manage that? I think we did a good job.

**Bennett:** Tell me a little bit about the Legislative Counsel Bureau. What was that like when you got there, and how did that change over your tenure?

**Hickey:** There was a change going on when I arrived. Russ McDonald had just retired, almost. He waited until it was set up, so I couldn't tell you the difference about what was going on inside the Counsel Bureau. I do know that there were some things that occurred that disturbed me, and it wasn't when I was a freshman. You're just getting your feet wet when you're a freshman. But as I went on, what really bothered me—I hold the leadership in the Legislature more responsible than the Counsel Bureau—was allowing lobbyists to go in that back room.

*A Reno native, Russell McDonald was a Rhodes Scholar from Nevada in 1939 and graduated from Stanford Law in 1947. He was Legal Counsel and Director of the Legislative Counsel Bureau from 1963 to 1971. Roy Nickson followed him as LCB Director.*

**Bennett:** Into the bill-drafting area?

**Hickey:** Yes. As you know, each expert on certain legislation is sitting back there, and I know the lobbyists certainly know who those people are. I thought it was unethical to do that, and I reported it, but nothing happened. How is the Counsel going to fight the leadership of either house? They're not going to fight them.

**Bennett:** Tell me about lobbyists when you were in the Assembly. What was your interaction like with some of the lobbyists?

**Hickey:** I had good relationships with the lobbyists. At that time, Jim Joyce was a powerhouse up there. What made Jim interesting is that three or four of the legislators had gone to school with him at the University in Reno. That clique—and it was a clique, including Richard

*James A. Joyce of Las Vegas was a fixture in Nevada politics and the hallways of the Legislature from 1973 until his sudden death in 1993.*

Bryan—moved almost in unison. That helped build Jim, and it was also what I watched. See, I was never in a clique.

**Bennett:** When did you move to Nevada? You were born in Nebraska.

**Hickey:** I came to Nevada in 1963.

**Bennett:** What brought you to Nevada?

**Hickey:** Railroad. Union Pacific. I met Don Mello up there. He was with the Southern Pacific. He was in the Assembly at the time. Tough guy to deal with.

*Donald R. Mello (D-Washoe) served in the Assembly from 1963 to 1982 and in the Senate from 1982 to 1989.*

**Bennett:** How so?

**Hickey:** I don't know why, but Don almost seemed angry all the time. I don't know why. I know that he developed some real hatred of him in that Ways and Means Committee.

**Bennett:** Did you ever serve on that committee under his chairmanship?

**Hickey:** Oh, yeah. I've been on both Finance and Ways and Means. After you get so much seniority, you get on those committees. I assume the selection is done the same way today. One of the things that I noticed very quickly was that people were moved into the positions of the Speaker, the majority leaders, and that type of thing because of lobbyists. It was a weak part of the system.



**Bennett:** To back up quite a bit—why did you run for the Legislature in the first place?

**Hickey:** Crazy.

**Bennett:** You were crazy?

**Hickey:** Well, I had been around it. I had no real desire to become a legislator, but a friend of mine who was in public relations said, “Why don’t you run? There’s a hole.” There were newly formed legislative districts throughout the south here. So I ran. Problem was that all the important endorsements went to my opponents. But I was able to win that election fairly well, and it gave me an opportunity to go up there. I didn’t know what I was facing. All I knew was that I was a legislator, an Assemblyman.

**Bennett:** Why did you run as a member of the Democratic Party?

**Hickey:** Always been a Democrat. I got involved in politics in Omaha. You’ve heard of medical care for the aged? That was initiated in Omaha, Nebraska, because of Mutual of Omaha. Mutual of Omaha used to sell policies to married couples to take care of their older fathers and mothers. The rates were continuing to rise. Now this was a long time ago—1948. Harry Truman went in, and just like it did here, brought in a Congressman. So the Congressman was a fellow by the name of Gene O’Sullivan, and he was from Omaha. Gene

O'Sullivan introduced medical care for the aged. It didn't pass until 1963. So it tells you about legislation.

**Bennett:** You were interested in politics before you got to Nevada?

**Hickey:** Oh, yeah. I had been interested in politics. I didn't see myself becoming an elected official. But it was very nice how I was treated once I became one. It's different. The only thing is you have to realize you don't own that job. That's hard for some. It's a mantle that can be removed every two years.

**Bennett:** What was your first campaign like?

**Hickey:** Tough. I walked the district. It was very tough. I met as many people as I possibly could. A limited amount of funds. It was tough.

**Bennett:** How did that compare to your later campaigns when you were running as an incumbent?

**Hickey:** When you run as an incumbent, you have a record. However, there is such a turnover of the electorate that you have to keep reinforcing your name, so you're always on edge—at least I was. As you probably have guessed, I've done better than most in these elections. But it's different in the fact that you do know a little bit of what's ahead of you. When you run the first time, you don't know. You also watch, so

you're careful to not make the mistakes that can be made in a campaign.

**Bennett:** After so many years of running for the Assembly, why did you decide to run for the Senate when you did?

**Hickey:** I liked the idea that I wouldn't have to run every two years, and the opportunity in this district opened up. Is the duty a little different? Yeah. In the Senate, they don't go through the detail that they go through in the Assembly. Often, the Assembly will go into much more detail on legislation. A perfect example is Ways and Means. They'll form subcommittees to look at specific areas in the budget, whereas in the Senate, it's a broader look—an approval or a disapproval of what's coming over. The decision is made—I'm sure it's still the same—by the Chairman whether to accept legislation that starts on the Senate side or Assembly. There's a balance to each with both sides. Then you throw a Governor in the mix, and you got all kinds of things.

**Bennett:** You worked with quite a list of Governors. What was your interaction like with some of them?

**Hickey:** I later became O'Callaghan's enemy, but I considered him our best Governor. I liked List, by the way. He wasn't a bad guy—a womanizer—but he wasn't a bad person. Most of them

*Robert F. List (R)  
was Governor from  
1979 to 1983.*

were not that bad. I always felt that Richard Bryan was running—just the way he worked the Governorship. Who else did I serve with? I can't remember them all.

*Richard H. Bryan (D) was Governor from 1983 to 1989.*

**Bennett:** With Miller.

*Robert J. (Bob) Miller (D) was Lt. Governor from 1987 to 1991 and Governor until 1999.*

**Hickey:** Miller came in as Lt. Governor and then stepped in as Governor. I knew Miller when he was District Attorney down here. I can't make a judgment on him. But on all of it, Governors do what Governors do.

**Bennett:** What was it about Governor O'Callaghan that makes you think of him as one of Nevada's best Governors with whom you served?

*Donal N. (Mike) O'Callaghan (D) was Governor from 1971 to 1979.*

**Hickey:** He was a good administrator. He was Governor, and yet he used to get up at four or five in the morning and call in his staff. If he thought something was wrong, he'd come after them. He made mistakes—don't get me wrong—but I thought he did one great thing for Nevada, and that was the mental health system, which I understand has been discontinued. I think that that's a terrible problem in our state. There are other real tough problems. And I served with Jim Gibbons. I know him.

*Current Governor Jim Gibbons (R) represented Washoe County in the Assembly from 1988 to 1994. Current First Lady Dawn Gibbons (R-Washoe) served in the Assembly in 1991 and again from 1998 to 2004.*

**Bennett:** When he was in the Assembly?

**Hickey:** I know both him and his wife, yes. They were just coming in.

**Bennett:** Nevada went through some major changes and some major issues during your tenure, particularly in the 1970s. There was the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] and the MX.

**Hickey:** The MX? God, you're bringing back old memories now.

**Bennett:** Tell me about that. You introduced a bill to set up a study on the MX.

**Hickey:** Governor List was in favor of the MX, and I was, too. I saw it as an economic advantage to the State. The idea behind the MX was to put missile silos on BLM [U.S. Bureau of Land Management] land. The opposition to the MX missile lay with the cowboys. They were afraid that it would interfere with the grazing of their cattle. You know, I can't recall the exact number of acres that are needed for one cow, but they're huge. You can understand their concern because the military is starting to take over. The MX missile was to be a deterrent, as we were told, and I supported that. If I recall correctly, Paul Laxalt came out against it, and that killed it. I thought it was because the Republican leadership all moved toward what Paul Laxalt recommended.

*During the 1981-1982 interim, Hickey chaired a committee charged with studying the MX Missile System, a defense system proposed during the Cold War. The committee did not meet.*

*Republican Paul Laxalt was Governor from 1967 to 1971 and U.S. Senator from 1974 to 1987.*

The Equal Rights Amendment instituted a need for all the states to pass a resolution, then it would go to Washington, and they could work on it. See, Congress itself didn't have

enough courage to face up to their obligation because there was national legislation. They brought it here because we were one of the key states. There were about two or three of us that they had to get it by. At that time, there was a large Mormon influence in this state. It's still here, by the way. But percentage-wise, it was even larger then. The main emphasis came out of San Francisco, but it brought national leaders for and against the amendment here to the Nevada Legislature.

It was the first time I was in a major legislative fight, probably the biggest I've ever seen. It had effects on the Legislature that were never corrected. All the legislators were under scrutiny. What they were doing up there—or not doing—was watched very closely. One legislator was caught not living in the state. A lobbyist had arranged for him to live on the California side in Tahoe. So he was bombasted. The rest of us just had to watch our Ps and Qs. We were always on edge. That's what was created, and when the votes come down, the amendment lost. It was lost on the Senate side. At that time, the leader over there was Jim Gibson, a Mormon and conservative.

By the way, I didn't vote for it, either, just to be straightforward with you. There were things in it that were so objectionable in my district that I weighed whether it was worth

*James I. Gibson (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1958 to 1966 and in the Senate from 1966 until his demise in 1988. He was Majority Leader from 1977 to 1985.*

getting involved in that kind of turmoil. But I lost some very good friends because of that. It was that kind of a resolution. Did I think it was all bad? No. I thought the real issue was equal pay for equal time, and it was a true injustice, I felt. But other issues were tied into it. I thought the real loss occurred when it was tied with the gay community, at least at that time and place. I can understand it because we were talking about civil rights. That's where the philosophy originally came from.

So that's what happened. Was the Legislature the same? No. It broke it in two. Broke cooperation—all of it.

**Bennett:** Did you hear from your constituents quite a bit on that particular issue?

**Hickey:** No.

**Bennett:** Not on that?

**Hickey:** Groups, usually special interest groups, would start letter-writing campaigns or phone calls. Same thing was true of this. What happened, though, with the Equal Rights Amendment, because it affected so many people that I knew, was that it broke up the Legislature, and I didn't need letters to tell me that. It didn't break them up according to party.

**Bennett:** How did it break them up?

**Hickey:** Whatever their district and whatever pressures they felt were right. See, there was not a single lobbyist that I can remember who got involved in this thing. They usually go running when something is this emotional and maybe far-reaching, which it was. So the Legislature was never the same. You never heard that before?

**Bennett:** I had not, no. It was a fight over two or three different sessions?

**Hickey:** Oh, a real fight!

**Bennett:** Were there any other issues during your tenure that rose to that same level of difficulty or conflict?

**Hickey:** Not really. See, there was a certain amount of right to the ERA. At least, I think there was. But it seemed to me that the Legislature was more cordial before this amendment came, and then all of a sudden, there was a lack of trust or that type of thing. I don't know what happened in the back room with the Legislative Counsel Bureau. But the real success of it was that it forced real thinking on how we can involve women in the work force and improve their treatment. I could see that. Didn't even need a law for that.

**Bennett:** Now you were involved for many years in another contentious issue, high-level radioactive waste. [**Hickey:** Yes, I was.] Tell me about that.



**Hickey:** I'll tell you where I traveled. I traveled to China.

**Bennett:** With the High-Level Radioactive Waste Committee? What did you go to China for?

**Hickey:** I went to visit their nuclear plants.

**Bennett:** When did you do that?

**Hickey:** Just remember, I never went for press. I told you, the press could do more harm than help. They're not looking for reasonable legislation; they're looking for somebody to make an outrageous statement. You learn that, as I learned at a very young age as a legislator, it doesn't count. You can be made to look like a fool. What you really want to work for, when you're in the Nevada Legislature, is reasonable, decent legislation that can help people. Just remember: when you pass legislation, somebody benefits and some don't. It's always there. You try to make it as fair as possible.

Now with high-level radioactive waste, they used to write many, many statements that I was supposed to have made. I never made those statements. It was the press that made the statements. I fought some powerful people. Grant Sawyer was involved. O'Callaghan was involved. Greenspun, over here at the *Sun*—hell, he quit talking to me. Richard Bryan. There were about four to five key people in this state who fought bringing high-level radio-

*Hickey chaired the Legislature's interim committees concerned with High-Level Radioactive Waste from 1983 to 1994.*

*F.G. (Grant) Sawyer (D) was Governor from 1959 to 1967.*

*H.M. Hank Greenspun founded the Las Vegas Sun in 1950 and operated the newspaper until his death in 1989.*

active nuclear waste into the state. I didn't think that was unfair. I thought it was fair.

I thought they were stupid in doing it, by the way, and I'll tell you why. They decided that the way to solve the high radioactive nuclear waste issue would be to use the influence of politics. Politics really decided the selection of Yucca Mountain. There were three states up: Nevada, Texas, and Maine. Maine is where President George Bush, Sr., is from. Texas had Jim Wright as Speaker of the House. Nevada didn't have the political power. So the President stepped in. One of the tenets was supposed to be to bring the waste by railroad. There was no railroad up to Yucca Mountain, so that should have disqualified Yucca Mountain. But it didn't. They moved it to Yucca Mountain primarily because the bombs were blown up around there.

But anyway, to get back to the political argument. I disagreed. They wanted to short-change the issue. They wanted me to come out and attack. It would have shown unity here in the state that we didn't want the waste, politically speaking. I looked at it a little differently. I was looking at the kind of money that could be offered to the State. We were in the range of about a hundred million a year. We weren't dealing with buttons. Richard Bryan said, "Well, that's a bribe." I almost told him

off for it. I was going to say, “You mean, all those campaign contributions you’re getting are a bribe?” It may or may not be. That hundred million was to take care of a lot of things.

Bob Loux had just been selected, and by the way, I always had fun with Bob, to be honest with you. Though he thought I was an enemy, I always had fun with him. It always concerned me that Bob sometimes didn’t deal through government. Bob would go to these various four, or the four would go to him, to push buttons. I knew that, or at least, I had suspicions. I forced the committee to look at the total picture rather than a political picture.

Now, on the other side, the DOE [U.S. Department of Energy] kept it fairly legitimate. The special interests—the power companies that had this waste—would do almost anything to get it through. They didn’t care how dangerous it was. Their main goal was to move the waste out of the repositories next to those power plants. There has never been a system developed yet—it’ll be coming—that’ll move that waste from those power plants to the Nevada Test Site. Bob Loux’s office has constantly talked about the dangers—you know, the thousand trucks or so—but there’s no guarantee *how* it’s going to be moved, except you have one of the most influential groups in the United States that says it’s going

*Bob Loux was Director of Nevada’s Office of (later, Commission on) Nuclear Projects from 1976 to 2008.*

to be moved. And that's the National Academy of Sciences—the big guys, the scientists who are studying this. They've studied shooting it out into the atmosphere. Turned it down. Talked about burying it in the ocean. Turned it down. The whole system, they're convinced, has to be buried. Now there've been failures in this country on other sites with burying this waste. It is dangerous. There's no doubt about it. In my opinion, they made a terrible mistake in requiring certain criteria to bury the waste. In the future, I see it as something that always has to be watched and protected throughout maybe centuries because it is dangerous as it moves. Well, a little speck of plutonium can kill you.

There are legitimate arguments for accepting this waste. That's why it was worth a hundred million. In the end, the lobbyists for these companies decided they'd have a better opportunity moving the issue out of Nevada and into Washington, which is what they did. Now Senator Reid is in a spot—a powerful spot, by the way—to try to stop it. But just remember. There are several states involved in this thing, not just Nevada, and Nevada's not big.

*Nevada's Harry M. Reid (D) is currently U.S. Senate Majority Leader.*

**Bennett:** Now related to this was your legislation for Bullfrog County. [**Hickey:** Bullfrog!] Tell me about Bullfrog.

**Hickey:** Okay. My old friend Paul May on the other side—I was a Senator at the time—came up with—or I did—or we—doesn't matter—came up with the term Bullfrog. Our thinking was that we would form a county where this waste is going. We were looking at more money—not just a hundred million—but the support for a county, which would be under the control of a Governor, like Richard Bryan. He would select the county commissioners. He would select the sheriff. He would control the political entity in Bullfrog. He could approve or disapprove anything that happened in Bullfrog. We thought he'd go for it. He did, by the way.

See, when you're dealing in legislation, you have to get both houses and the Governor. He had approved of it. Everything went very well, if you look at the history of it in both houses, and then it went over to the Governor. By the way, the opposition to Bullfrog had originally come from the utilities: "Where did these crazy Nevadans come up with this idea?" So I think Bryan signed it, then he had to back off because he got a call from O'Callaghan. O'Callaghan was wondering where this had come from, and when he found out, he killed it. They didn't really think this through. See, if there was a Bullfrog County, they'd have to deal with the Governor's office without having to deal with anybody else.

*In 1987, May was a member of the Assembly Committee on Government Affairs, which introduced A.B. 756 to carve the Yucca Mountain area out of existing Nye County in order to create Bullfrog County. That bill died in the Senate in favor of S.B. 595, which was introduced by the Senate Committee on Taxation. Governor Richard Bryan signed the bill and appointed the county's first commissioners. The county seat was set at Carson City. A lawsuit filed by Nye County resulted in Bullfrog County being declared unconstitutional, and in 1989, the Legislature formally repealed the laws that created the resident-free county.*

Paul and I would kid, saying, “Maybe I can make county commissioner or be the sheriff of Bullfrog or something like that.”  
[chuckles]

**Bennett:** There were no people living in that area, correct?

**Hickey:** Doesn’t matter, does it?

**Bennett:** But it would have been set up with a different sort of government?

**Hickey:** Once an idea goes out, it’s dangerous because somebody else will pick it up, maybe refine it, and then push it through. So they took it to the Court to stop it. Now, as you know, we have a Legislative Counsel, and the Legislative Counsel told us it was legal. Anyway, they took it to the Supreme Court. I have a very close friend on the Supreme Court. He excused himself, and Greenspun put his man on there. I’m not going to tell you who they were, but when I saw the move, I said, “Well, we’re done.” That’s Bullfrog.

**Bennett:** Where did you come up with the name for Bullfrog?

**Hickey:** Named after a gold mine located very close.

**Bennett:** That explains it.

Who were some of the more colorful people you served with?

**Hickey:** I thought Bob Price was. Bob loved to talk. Joe Neal! Joe's another one who loved to talk. [chuckles] His accuracy was a little loose, but Joe was all right. I always liked Joe. God, there were so many! I don't know if you would call him colorful. I can't recall his name, but he was a big, lumbering cowboy from Elko. He really never said anything, but you always knew he was around. A very interesting guy. Paul May was colorful, I told you that. He'd mumble when he talked. Everyone would ask, "What the hell did he say?" Another one who was always colorful was Eileen Brookman! Eileen used to bring chicken noodle soup to anybody who was sick. [chuckles] She was a neat gal.

*Robert E. (Bob) Price (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1974 to 2002.*

*Joseph M. Neal, Jr., (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1972 to 2004.*

**Bennett:** You did some fun things during your tenure, like the St. Patrick's Day celebration.

*Eileen B. Brookman (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1978 and again from 1986 to 1990.*

**Hickey:** Oh, yeah. I used to get a poem from the Counsel Bureau and recite it every St. Patrick's Day. Then we'd all sing. That was kind of fun.

**Bennett:** I have to ask you about this story. There is a legend that, when you were Chairman of Senate Government Affairs, some of the bills ended up in the "jelly donut drawer" in your office.

**Hickey:** I don't remember eating jelly donuts, but they probably belonged there. I don't know about the legend, but I do know that some of the bills had to be gotten rid of. Remember you only

have so much time, so you have to go through a number of these bills and see which ones pertain to what is important. Then if the others come up, fine. But you're limited on your time, so you have to schedule correctly. The scheduling becomes a problem when you have a 60-day limit. At that time, the bills didn't come out until 15 or 20 days after we started. It was a week or two before we could really go into session, so everything didn't get out. Would I kill important bills? No. At least, not the ones that were important in my mind.

**Bennett:** When you were serving, the sessions became longer and longer. In your opinion, what was causing the sessions to go longer?

**Hickey:** I think the bills became more complicated. One of the obligations you have with a bill is to give everybody a chance to have their say and let the process work. Sometimes, particularly with controversial bills, there would be some delays and some lack of concentration. There's also the possibility of conflict among the legislators themselves, and then all the maneuvering. There's a real problem with time constraints. It just seemed to keep going on and on. You have to realize that the Speaker or the Majority Leader had his own agenda to move certain bills through the legislative process. So it just forced it to go on and on. Do I think it was good? No. I would favor living up to the 60-



day rule. I also would have gone into annual sessions, which was always objected to.

But I've always wondered about the constitutionality of an Interim Finance Committee. I understand the need to make adjustments, but it should be done by the Legislature, not a small group sitting on the Interim Finance Committee. I always thought it had a constitutional problem. There are some other things that were problems, in my opinion.

**Bennett:** When you chaired Government Affairs, a lot of those types of issues went through that particular committee, especially the constant battle between Clark County and the City of Las Vegas.

**Hickey:** Oh, a *constant* battle. The problem was trying to maintain a balance between the two. Often, the County or the City would put in legislation that was favorable to one with no means of setting up a compromise to make the bill work. It would often revolve around money. At that time, the money from the Strip would flow primarily into the County, and the money from Fremont would flow into the City. There was always that fight about the line on Sahara. There was always conniving by both sides. The County was always in a better position because they had more legislators on their side; the City had less legislators.

*The Las Vegas city boundary runs along Sahara Avenue, which means the Strip is outside the city limits.*

Now I come from this North Las Vegas area, so I really was more neutral in dealing with the County and the City. In fact, when they had these legendary fights, they were something to behold. The lobbyists would call me just about any name you could think of. Then lobbyists on one side would come back and tell me what the other lobbyists had said about me. [laughter] It was silliness! In fact, I remember a particular instance with the woman who is now the head of the Water District here. She said that she had never met a dumber bastard than me. But when I told her I knew and that I was thinking of sending her home, it changed. Then I said, "Don't worry. I've been called a lot worse." [chuckles] It goes with the territory.

*Patricia Mulroy is the General Manager of the Las Vegas Valley Water District and the Southern Nevada Water Authority.*

**Bennett:** Thinking back on some of the issues you dealt with, is there anything that you might have done differently?

**Hickey:** Oh, yeah. Yes. I'll give you a specific instance that deals with welfare. I was sitting on the Ways and Means Committee, and the Legislature always reduced the amount of funding. There was a bill that came in that reduced the amount of inspectors dealing with welfare. You'd think it didn't mean much, but I was fortunate in that my wife worked for Welfare. The management came to me and told me that if we eliminated these inspectors, even though

it wasn't a lot, the real costs of welfare would go up. So I tried to stop the reduction of those two or three workers, I don't remember how many. It happened just as predicted. After they were reduced, welfare costs started climbing because these inspectors were the ones who made sure that whatever was reported by the welfare recipients was true. But they weren't there anymore, so the recipient could lie. I didn't fight hard enough to keep them on. Now the interesting part of it—you've seen this; you've worked in the Legislature—someone's going to catch the blame. Who do you think got the blame? Well. Welfare management told the legislators, but it went in deaf ears.

Also, I served on the Judiciary Committee, which took gaming issues. At that time, there weren't a lot of neighborhood casinos. There were people who wanted them, and there were people against them. It was very, very tough, when you think about it. Here was a group of people who had control of the major industry in this state, and they were trying to stop the very thing they had started. A free market versus a controlled environment. So I went with the other side, and I think that was a mistake. We'd be better off, I think, if we had it concentrated in a couple areas. Now we've got these casinos spread throughout the city. Up

north, they have the same thing. That's how it occurred.

**Bennett:** Because your residence was here, you would almost have to move to Carson during the session. Where did you live in Carson during the sessions?

**Hickey:** I lived in different apartments. The Counsel Bureau used to help us find something. I used the Counsel Bureau's help. As you know, Carson becomes so expensive when the Legislature comes in. They're so happy when we leave. [chuckles]

**Bennett:** We've talked about being in committees and the regular legislative day, but you were living up there. What about the evenings? What was life like outside of the Legislative Building?

**Hickey:** I'm probably the only legislator you're facing here who was attacked up there! At the steps that come down from the side door of the Assembly, two guys approached me. One had a knife! It was about seven or eight o'clock in the evening. They didn't get anything from me, but I did something stupid. I started fighting with them. I was hoping that somebody would see it on the cameras and come out and help me.

**Bennett:** Did they?

**Hickey:** No.

**Bennett:** So what happened?

**Hickey:** They ran away. I think they were a couple of drunks who started thinking that they could do things that they couldn't do. As you know, there are a number of ex-convicts in Carson who've gotten out of prison there. They probably went over to the bar, got drunk, and got stupid.

**Bennett:** Were you hurt?

**Hickey:** No. [**Bennett:** That's good.] Although the man was much younger, he was holding the knife wrong. That's how I knew he couldn't handle himself. See, to attack with a knife, you go this way [gestures up], not like this [gestures down].

**Bennett:** That's a little too much excitement!

**Hickey:** [laughter] There's always excitement in the Nevada Legislature!

**Bennett:** Tell me about your fondest memory of serving in the Legislature.

**Hickey:** I suppose it was the camaraderie with other legislators. Great bunch of people, all trying in their own way to serve the population. They do some strange things, like I have done. I just respect it. I respect what the Legislature attempts to do. I know that, in many quarters, they're not respected. But they still do it. That's all right.

I will also tell you that I've seen legislation passed there that was considered unimportant; it was *very* important. What the press considered important wasn't necessarily important. Glitzy! But not necessarily important. For instance, child welfare, prison systems, mental health, highways—the mundane operations that government has to do. If you don't have it, you soon notice it.

I never really solved the highway problem. I always felt that the Highway Department needed to be reorganized because of the need down here. The central authority in the north presented real problems and created costs. I don't know if it is the same today, but the amount of travel is huge. And that's an expense.

From a legislative point of view, we could never solve the education problem. I happened to be one who supported it strongly. If you did some research on me, you'd find that I was always involved in education, especially in trying to provide funding for education. I always believed in small class size. There were people there who didn't, and I always respected that. But I thought that the information for small class sizes was a strong argument.

Nevada started changing in education. It started with the Governor's Office. They were

all educational Governors, except when they started moving money out of education and into prisons. The prison issue is very, very tough to handle. No one has solved it.

There are unsolvable issues. I believe this. I believe that some of those unsolvable issues came from my time. We haven't figured out how to manage education money to generate what we're hoping to achieve. Prisons. We put somebody in prison; he's eventually going to get out. How do we handle that? It doesn't correct him. By the way, I had worked on prisons. I'm surprised that you didn't ask me anything about that.

**Bennett:** I'm glad you brought it up! It was on the list.

**Hickey:** I'm the one who brought boot camps. Do you know who fought it the most?

**Bennett:** Who?

**Hickey:** Prisons.

**Bennett:** Why did they fight it?

**Hickey:** I suspect they were opposed to it because they were looking at jobs. Yes, they did oppose it, and it was tough to get it through. I don't know if I put my name on that. If I did, I made a mistake.

**Bennett:** I think you were the only sponsor.

*S.B. 98 (1989) requires the establishment of a program for regimental discipline.*

**Hickey:** Nobody'd touch those kinds of things, so I *had* to put my name on it.

**Bennett:** Why do you think it was a mistake to put your name on it?

**Hickey:** I would lose a few votes. When you're involved in legislation, people sometimes vote against legislation because you're for it! There's a human frailty in all this. I'm glad to hear the boot camp law is still viable. Usually, these things carry on. I felt good about that, by the way.

I went to visit a women's prison and watched the graduation for beauticians. It wasn't a large number—maybe 20 or 30 ladies who were about ready to get out. The announcement was made that this was the last class to graduate. I asked why. The warden said that the Nevada Legislature discontinued the funding for this program. I said that I would try to put money back into it, which I was able to do. I was very proud of that.

But that's what happens. You have to be careful not to upset the apple cart with the stroke of a pen. We talked about how some benefit; some don't. I always took that stuff seriously.

**Bennett:** You also had an impact on the Supreme Court.



**Hickey:** I had a very close friend on the Supreme Court. His name was Al Gunderson. Nevada didn't have a cooperative system between the levels of judges and the Supremes. He attempted to set up a structure in the judiciary for everything to come together. He was absolutely brilliant—a mind that Nevada was very fortunate to have. A terrible weakness was his lack of control of his temper, but he was a man of extreme intelligence. Kind of a neat guy. You want to talk about a character! [chuckles]

*Elmer Millard (Al) Gunderson served on the Nevada Supreme Court from 1971 to 1989.*

**Bennett:** How did your legislative service affect your family?

**Hickey:** When I first went in, I wasn't married. Then I became married. My wife loves politics. In fact, she's probably better than I am. She served on the State School Board. Fortunately enough, she has a school named after her. She also could run on the Hickey name, which is a good political name, by the way.

*Liliam Lujan Hickey served on the Nevada State Board of Education from 1989 to 2001.*

**Bennett:** Why is that a good political name?

**Hickey:** It's simple and easy to remember. I suspect that there's a certain Americanization about an Irish name that has appeal. You'll notice that there are a lot of Irish names among people who run for office—on both sides, by the way. Both Republican and Democrat. I assume it's simple and easy to remember.

A survey was done for me when I'd been there four years [chuckles] by a guy who became a district court judge. A lot of the people who worked for me became elected. Anyway, the survey found that one out of two didn't know my name—didn't know their Assemblyman. [chuckles] Needless to say, I went out! I thought it was pretty funny. He did, too. Too funny!

**Bennett:** How did you keep in contact with your constituents?

**Hickey:** It's an interesting thing. There are certain pockets in these legislative districts, such as pockets for old people, which are very important and that you visit regularly. There are also certain key people throughout the community that you keep in touch with. The 300 percent legislative retirement issue cost ten percent in votes. At least, that's what it cost me for voting for that. You know that it was very minor money. That was O'Callaghan. I didn't even hold *that* against him.

Anyway, besides the key people in the district, you always had to have a relationship with the press, though I kept them at a distance. I never gave them information. See, you have legislators who would always run to them. I never did that.

*A.B. 820 (1989) revised the formula for legislative retirement benefits. Gov. Bob Miller's veto was overridden near the end of the regular session. In November 1989, at a short special session, the legislation was repealed, but several legislators lost their seats in 1990 over the issue.*

**Bennett:** Why did you leave the Legislature when you did?

**Hickey:** I tired of it. I was burned out. I really do believe that you can last only so long. I like the concept of seniority—people who do know what’s going on. I like that, but I think you can only go so far. Some have gone *too* far. You see them starting to slip. A perfect example is when they started ignoring Jake. Patted him on top of the head: “Nice Jake.” I didn’t want any of that. When your power starts slipping, the fun goes, too.

Even when we were in the minority, we always had to be reckoned with. See, you can be ignored, and that happens. The lobbyists wouldn’t come to *me* because I wouldn’t commit early. Never commit. I wanted to see the whole picture. When you commit, you’re just a number. If you’re not committed, you’re a different kind of number. But I’d always wait, and every once in awhile, there would be a real need. That’s when they got on bended knee and asked for help. Then you had to make a decision.

**Bennett:** We’re getting close to wrapping up. At the beginning, we talked about your first day in the Legislature, and we worked our way to your last *sine die*. How had the process changed over that period of time?

*Hickey ran for Secretary of State in 1994, losing to Dean A. Heller (R-Carson City) who served in the Assembly from 1990 to 1994.*

*With 16 years in the Assembly and 24 years in the Senate, Lawrence E. (Jake) Jacobsen (R-Minden) was the longest-serving legislator in Nevada history.*

**Hickey:** I became more experienced and had a different view on the construction and movement of bills. I became better at using the Counsel Bureau, which became more important as I became more experienced. As I went along, specializing in certain areas certainly gave me a kind of a grandfather look at what was going on. So yes, you do change—you do evolve—as you gain experience. It all comes down to, though, how you deal with people. I always kind of kept away. I kept most at arm's length because I didn't necessarily know who I could trust because of the changes going on. I knew some very well. I knew Raggio. I knew him. We never trusted each other, but we knew each other. That doesn't mean we were enemies. Bill is a very capable legislator. See, capability has nothing to do with what we're talking about here.

*A State Senator since 1972, William J. Raggio (R-Reno) has been the Senate Republican Floor Leader every session since 1977, except in 1981.*

I was always pretty good in controversy, except the nuclear issue. I took a lot of heat over that. That was pretty good controversy. As you get older in that Legislature, you expect people to attack you on stupid statements. You expect it. It's part of the business. That's all I can tell you.

**Bennett:** I want to thank you very much. This has been a wonderful conversation.

**Hickey:** Thank you. I don't know how wonderful it is.  
[chuckles]

**Bennett:** I think it's been great.

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ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

## ***ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM***

Get Consensus, LLC, is owned by Dale Erquiaga who serves as the project's manager and conducted some of the interviews. Dale is a native Nevadan with an extensive background in Nevada politics, having served as Director of the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs and Chief Deputy Secretary of State. With both Nevada and Arizona clients, Get Consensus is based in Phoenix.

Dana Bennett is the project's leader and has conducted most of the interviews. Currently a PhD candidate in public history at Arizona State University with a particular interest in the women who served in the Nevada Legislature between 1919 and 1960, she has also conducted oral histories with former Arizona legislators. Prior to returning to school, she was part of the Nevada legislative process for many years.

Gwen Clancy is the project's award-winning videographer. Based in Reno, she hosts and produces the documentary series, "Exploring Nevada," which is seen on local TV throughout the state.

Jean Stoess transcribed and indexed the interviews. A long-time Reno resident, Jean is familiar with Nevada politics in both elected and appointed capacities and has indexed several Nevada history works.