



Nevada Legislature Oral History Project

WILLIAM D. SWACKHAMER
Democrat

Assemblyman, 1946-1972
Secretary of State, 1973-1987

APRIL 29, 2008
MERIDIAN, IDAHO

WILLIAM D. SWACKHAMER
Democrat

Assemblyman, 1946-1972
Secretary of State, 1973-1987

APRIL 29, 2008
MERIDIAN, IDAHO

Interview conducted by:
Dale A.R. Erquiaga

Filmed by:
Gwen Clancy

Transcribed and indexed by:
Jean Stoess

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

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Swackhamer, William D. An oral history by Dale A. R. Erquiaga. Carson City, Nevada:
Legislative Counsel Bureau, 2009.

The record copy of the interview transcript is printed on archival quality paper and on file with the Research Library of the Legislative Counsel Bureau in Carson City, Nevada.

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.



William D. Swackhamer
April 29, 2008

WILLIAM D. SWACKHAMER

William Delany “Bill” Swackhamer was born August 18, 1914, in Winnemucca, Nevada. Long a resident of Battle Mountain (graduating from Lander County High School in 1931), Mr. Swackhamer worked with his father and brothers in the family mercantile business, E.O. Swackhamer and Sons, for many decades. During World War II, he served in the Army Air Corps and was stationed in Italy. After his return to Battle Mountain, he and Joyce Marie Smith Backes were married, and he helped raise her children, Lloyd and Rebecca. On March 17, 2005, Joyce Swackhamer died in Carson City, where she and her husband had remained after his retirement from state office.

A life-long Democrat, Swack (as he was known to all) ran for a seat in the Nevada Assembly in 1946 and began a distinguished, 40-year career in Nevada politics. He served in the Nevada Legislature for 14 regular and seven special sessions. An influential policymaker, Mr. Swackhamer was often in positions of leadership. He was elected Speaker for two regular and three special sessions; served as Assembly Majority Leader; and chaired several committees, including the Assembly Committee on Taxation and the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means. In this interview, he notes how plentiful Assembly Committees once were, acknowledging that he was the sole member of the Committee on Aviation for reasons even he did not understand.

Beginning with his first session in 1947, Mr. Swackhamer’s 24 years in the Nevada Legislature encompassed some of the more significant moments in the institution’s history, such as the lone annual session of 1960 and the first session in the new Legislative Building in 1971. The 1950s saw the Legislature grapple with the difficult issues of education funding, labor relations, and gambling regulation and ultimately set the stage for those issues in the remainder of the twentieth century. In his last session, Mr. Swackhamer was the primary sponsor of 17 measures. One created the Higher Education Capital Construction Fund from slot machine tax receipts; another required placement of President Abraham Lincoln’s portrait in the Assembly Chambers.

In the 1960s, the Legislature was reapportioned in order to give equitable representation to the urban areas. With Las Vegas exploding, the rural areas, such as that ably represented by Mr. Swackhamer, struggled legislatively. Indeed, it was redistricting that led to Mr. Swackhamer’s defeat in 1972, despite his being “ranked as one of the best legislators in Nevada history.”¹ Soon after, however, Governor Mike O’Callaghan appointed Mr. Swackhamer to finish the term of ailing Secretary of State John Koontz. In three subsequent elections, Mr. Swackhamer proved popular with Nevada voters and was returned to the office by some of the highest margins in its history. He retired from public office in 1987.

Visually impaired, 93 years old, and residing in a nursing home at the time of this interview, Mr. Swackhamer nonetheless remembered much about his long tenure in the Nevada Assembly and his subsequent experience as a four-term Secretary of State. This particular conversation concentrates on his legislative memories. He spoke for nearly two hours on April 28, 2008, at his daughter’s home in Meridian, Idaho. Mr. Swackhamer reminisced about many of

¹ *Nevada State Journal*, November 12, 1972.

the people, such as Assemblyman Cyril Bastian of Lincoln County, with whom he worked during his years in the Nevada Legislature and recalled many significant issues with which he was involved. In particular, he discussed the educational reforms of the 1950s, improvements made to the community college system, the importance of Lake Tahoe and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, and efforts to amend the laws concerning notaries public. He spoke about the changing nature of gaming in Nevada and the arrival of Howard Hughes in Las Vegas.

Mr. Swackhamer believed that Governor Charles Russell did more for Nevada than any other governor with whom he served, pointing in this interview to gaming regulation and the education reforms of the 1950s under Governor Russell. Mr. Swackhamer also spoke about the loss of rural and Northern Nevada's power to fast-growing Clark County. He had served as chairman of the Cow County Caucus while in the Assembly. Mr. Swackhamer's political acumen often resulted in victories for the rural counties over the two urban counties, such as in his first election as Speaker. In a "white-hot race" for the 1957 Speakership in which the Democrats were "violently opposed to any help from the Republican minority in organizing the Assembly," Swackhamer narrowly defeated Washoe County Assemblyman Chester Christianson "during nip-and-tuck maneuvering in the Democratic caucus."²

On July 10, 2008, shortly after this interview was conducted, Mr. Swackhamer passed away in Idaho. Consequently, this transcript was not reviewed by the subject legislator after it was edited for readability.

Dale Erquiaga
December 2008

² *Nevada State Journal*, January 19 and January 22, 1957.

Dale Erquiaga: Good afternoon, Mr. Swackhamer.

William Swackhamer: Good afternoon.

Erquiaga: I want you to think back for a minute to January 20, 1947, your first day at the Legislature. It had been unusually cold then it warmed up a bit. You appeared for work at the Capitol Building in, as we say today, the Old Assembly Chambers. Tell me what you found.

Swackhamer: It was, for me, very interesting. I'd lived in Battle Mountain, and I think that was the first time I was ever in Carson City, so everything was new to me. But I was treated very nicely and just got along real well.

Erquiaga: At that time, was there much staff for the Legislature?

Swackhamer: Very little.

Erquiaga: How did you figure out your job?

Swackhamer: We did most of our book work ourselves. We did have some help—they took care of the bill books. They put in the amendments and so on. But on the budget and things like that, we pretty much took care of it ourselves.

Erquiaga: Did you write your own bills?

Swackhamer: No, no. They employed somebody who had experience. I think it was a lawyer from Sparks or someplace, but he used to draft the bills.

For the 1947 session, the Assembly hired Donnell Richards of Reno and Frank Gregory of Carson to draft bills. The Senate's bill drafter was James Johnson, Jr., of Fallon who received a daily salary of \$10.

Erquiaga: So why did you decide to run for the Legislature?

Swackhamer: I really don't know. I had been in the Army; the war was just over; I got back; and they were looking at how to fill up the ticket. The fellow they really wanted to run had malaria or something. He didn't want to, so they settled on me and decided that I should run. My family thought it would be a good thing to try, and I did.

Erquiaga: Where were you during the war?

Swackhamer: I was in Italy. I was in an Air Force group.

Erquiaga: Let me ask, why do they call you Swack? Was that a name from the war?

Swackhamer: Oh, my name practically invites that as a nickname. I got that at home.

Erquiaga: So you came home; you ran for the Legislature; and then you kept running. You served until the 1970s?

Swackhamer: Yes. I was there for 26 years.

Erquiaga: You were Speaker for a while?

Swackhamer: I was Speaker for two regular sessions and three special sessions.

Erquiaga: What was the Speaker's job like in those days?

Swackhamer: It was easy. It was much easier than you'd think. The main thing was to try to keep the ball rolling, or it could stay there forever.

Erquiaga: If I understand correctly, the *Nevada Revised Statutes* were not in the form they are in today, so you had a different way of codifying the laws when you first arrived?

Swackhamer: No. When they decided to do this, the whole project was a recodification. A group of lawyers wanted to get this thing straight. I guess it was a mess for a long time because the past Legislatures never put it in a functional form—in a statute book so you could look and read it. So everything was hit-and-miss pretty much, and practicing law in those days must have been really a traumatic problem. The Legislature agreed to pay for it, and I think the original estimate for this whole project was \$70,000. Passing a statute was required to give the authority to a group to recodify the thing. It turned out to cost quite a bit more than \$70,000, but they did do a beautiful job. Now the NRS is good; you can find out the law. What you see now in the NRS *is* the law, not something that somebody else had enacted that never got any notoriety.

Erquiaga: The Assembly was known to have a lot of committees in those days. In fact, I understand that you were the only member of the Assembly Committee on Aviation at one point. How did all those committees function?

S.B. 202 (1951) appropriated \$75,000 for recodification of the statutes. After its passage, the Nevada Supreme Court appointed Russell McDonald at an annual salary of \$8,500 to oversee the project.

Swackhamer: They didn't, mostly. I think a lot of times the committees were created to make a chairmanship for somebody. How I got to be the chairman of the Aviation Committee was a mystery to me. I was in the Air Force but I was in radar. So maybe that was the reason I was the chairman of the Aviation Committee—I was in the Air Force.

In 1947, the Assembly had 40 committees for 41 members, and the Senate had 28 for 17. Mr. Swackhamer was a member of the Assembly Committee on Aviation in 1947 and its chairman in 1961.

Erquiaga: Where did you live when you were in Carson City?

Swackhamer: I lived in a motel.

Erquiaga: Did your family go with you?

Swackhamer: No, they stayed in Battle Mountain.

Erquiaga: Did you live in a motel all the time you were in the Legislature? You never had a house there?

Swackhamer: Never did have a house, no.

Erquiaga: But when you became Secretary of State, you moved to Carson?

Swackhamer: Yeah, then I bought a house.

Erquiaga: What did you do when you weren't in the Legislature? You would go back to Battle Mountain? Did you have a business?

Swackhamer: Oh, yeah, we were in business there.

Erquiaga: Did your wife run the business for you while you were gone?

Swackhamer: No, my brother did.

Erquiaga: Thinking about all the years you served in the Legislature, who would be the most effective person you served with?

Swackhamer: There was a young fellow, a lawyer from Reno. His name was Howard McKissick, and he was effective in the way that he was really the sponsor of the gaming law. He was a very, very smart, very energetic young fellow, and he was very effective.

Howard R. McKissick, Jr. (D-Washoe) served in the Assembly, 1956-1962 and 1966-1972. He was Speaker in 1969.

Erquiaga: What was the change to the gaming law?

Swackhamer: There were people coming into Nevada—gangsters, generally—because they were running illegal games in Detroit or wherever they were. They knew how to do it, and they'd come in to Nevada. The fear was they would bring the gangsterism in with them. So to keep it clear of the gaming group taking over the state, we changed the law. Actually, at one time, the gaming revenue tax provided more than 50 percent of the General Fund.

Erquiaga: Who was Governor when you arrived?

Swackhamer: When I arrived, it was a man named Pittman. Then with the next election, Charles Russell became Governor.

Erquiaga: What was Governor Russell like? He was a well-known Nevada Governor.

Swackhamer: Very excellent. He was one of the best. He had been in the State Senate from White

Pine County, so he was experienced in government. The salary of the Governor in those years was \$8,000 a year. Of course, he did have a house to live in—the so-called mansion. It had very little furniture in it, and the roof leaked.

Erquiaga: Tell me more about Governor Russell.

Swackhamer: Education in Nevada was just on the verge of complete collapse, and something had to be done. There was no question about that. Previously, when any group, any camp, or something had five kids of school age, it automatically became a school district. I think there were several thousand school districts in Nevada, and none of them were functioning too well. It was pretty obvious that something had to be done, so the Legislature enacted a law. They hired a group that specialized in the reorganization of school districts, Peabody Co., and they came into Nevada and studied this thing pretty thoroughly. They did a good job. They made a report about what needed to be done, which was a complete overhaul. The problem was that, up until that time, we didn't have a sales tax in Nevada; it was just something that people did not want. They did not want a sales tax in Nevada. But it was either have this resource coming in, or the rest of the project was going to fail. So the Legislature passed the sales tax. Then

Using an appropriation from the 1954 Special Session, Governor Russell's School Committee chose the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville to conduct a wide-ranging survey of Nevada's school system. The 444-page report was released at the end of 1954. One of its key recommendations was the consolidation of Nevada's 200+ school districts into 17 countywide districts. Although strongly opposed at the beginning of the 1955 session, the consolidation bill was passed.

the pressure was on Governor Russell, who had run on a no-sales-tax platform himself, to sign the bill. He showed a lot of political courage. Everybody thought, "This is your death knell as a Governor of Nevada." But he signed it anyhow because he could see that it had to be done. I think they filed a referendum on it, and the people sustained the Legislature. We have a pretty fair school system now for the kids that will learn and get a little support at home. It's working pretty well, and Governor Russell, I think, should be given credit for pushing that through.

The 1955 Legislature approved the Sales and Use Tax Act, which was subject to referendum at the next election. Affirmed by the voters in 1956, the Act cannot be amended by the Legislature. Any amendments must be approved by the voters.

Erquiaga:

Tell me about Governor Sawyer.

Swackhamer:

He was one of the best. It was during his time in office that they really got control of the gaming business so that they would not run the state. He really worked hard on that. Assemblyman McKissick was one of the principle authors of the legislation, and Grant Sawyer made it work. I'd have to say that gaming's authority was the money they provided for candidates. They were getting maybe a little too much power. The old saying is that the man that pays the fiddler is the man that calls the tune. But the way it works now, they are under pretty strict control, and they're making it stick. They have for a long time.

Erquiaga: Before campaign contributions were disclosed or lobbying was disclosed, was the system any different?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: Do you think those laws changed anything or just made folks more aware?

Swackhamer: I think that's it. I think they made people more aware.

Erquiaga: What was Governor Laxalt like?

Swackhamer: Not much. He was—I don't know—he just didn't seem to like the job. He just didn't do very much. He was not one of the best, that was for sure.

Erquiaga: Did you see the Governors? When you were in the same building, did they come to the Chambers much?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: When the Legislature moved across the way, they wouldn't come there, either?

Swackhamer: They very seldom came to the Legislature. It was the other way around. When they wanted to talk, they would call for us—ask the legislators to drop in on them, which everyone did, of course.

Erquiaga: When the Legislature was in the Capitol Building, were the Constitutional Officers located downstairs?

Swackhamer: The Treasurer was upstairs. All the others were downstairs, yes.

Erquiaga: What can you tell me about Governor O'Callaghan?

Swackhamer: He was very popular. Actually, the way Governors are remembered is really not so much the Governor himself as the situation that he came in to. Was it a critical situation in the state, and did he come in and take care of it? That never happened under Governor O'Callaghan. The laws that produced the revenues were working so well that just without changing anything, I think revenues increased by about 12.5 percent. So Mike O'Callaghan was Governor for eight years, and in eight years the amount of revenue was doubled without raising anybody's taxes. That's where you get people mad at you—if you raise their taxes.

Erquiaga: What was Governor List like?

Swackhamer: He was mediocre.

Erquiaga: And Governor Bryan?

Swackhamer: Here again, mediocre.

Erquiaga: He'd been in the Legislature when you were still there and served with him?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: Okay. Let me ask who you might remember from the legislative days when you were

first there in the '40s. Who else served with you then?

Swackhamer: Well, let's see. One of my best friends came from Lincoln County, a man named Cyril Bastian. He was a very good man. Gosh, it's hard to remember. That was 60 years ago!

Cyril O. Bastian (D-Lincoln) served in the Assembly 1942-44, 1948-56, and 1958-66. He was Speaker in 1955.

Erquiaga: Yeah, I know. That's a long time.

Swackhamer: Frankly, I can't remember everyone who was in there.

Erquiaga: Let me give you some names of some of the lobbyists over the years, and maybe you can tell me about them. Norman Biltz?

Swackhamer: Yeah, I remember him. He was from Reno.

Erquiaga: How about Charlie Bell?

Swackhamer: Charlie Bell was from Las Vegas.

Erquiaga: Wallie Warren?

Swackhamer: Wallie was from Reno.

Erquiaga: How about Joe Midmore? He was pretty well known, kind of controversial. Did you deal with him very much?

Swackhamer: No, I didn't have much to do with him.

Erquiaga: During those years, you must have run across George Wingfield. He was part of the Nevada political scene then.

Swackhamer: For a long time, yes.

Erquiaga: Did you have any interaction with him?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: You served with Harry Reid in the Assembly?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: What was Senator Reid like as a young Assembly person?

Swackhamer: I always had the impression he was dumb, but apparently he learned.

Erquiaga: He's gone on to some national fame now.

Swackhamer: Yeah, he wheeled into a pretty big job.

Erquiaga: I'm going to ask you about a few people who served as Speaker, if you remember them. Harry Hazard?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: Peter Burke?

Swackhamer: Yes, I remember Pete Burke.

Erquiaga: What was he like?

Swackhamer: He was a good fellow. Shortly after he left Reno, he went to New York and got involved in some pretty important things. But he was a good Speaker and a pretty decent fellow.

Erquiaga: John Higgins from Clark?

Swackhamer: Yes, I remember him.

Erquiaga: Okay. M. E. McCuiston.

Swackhamer: Oh, Ted McCuiston from Elko. Yes, I remember him,

Erquiaga: How about Cyril Bastian?

Harry E. "Hap" Hazard (D-Clark) served in the Assembly, 1938-40 and 1946-48. He was Speaker in 1947.

Peter "Al" Burke (D-Washoe, 1938-40, 1942-46, and 1948-50) was Speaker in 1945 and 1949.

John "Jack" Higgins (D-Clark, 1944-54) was Speaker in 1951.

Marion E. "Ted" McCuiston (D-Elko, 1938-42, 1946-54) was Speaker in 1953.

Swackhamer: Excellent. Very good.

Erquiaga: How about Chester Christensen?

Swackhamer: I remember him. He was from Sparks.

Erquiaga: Here's one that was a little controversial—
Bruce Parks, from Mineral County?

Swackhamer: Yeah.

Erquiaga: My notes say that in 1960 his election was
contentious. He tried to expand Ways and
Means. Do you remember this? Were you on
Ways and Means then?

Swackhamer: I can't remember exactly. I suppose I was. I
was on it most of the time, but I don't
remember the incident.

Erquiaga: When you first were elected, what counties
did you represent?

Swackhamer: When I first was elected, just Lander
County. In those days, every county had a
Senator. We had 17 Senators. The Assembly
was apportioned according to population,
and there were usually around 35 Assembly-
men. We only had one from Lander County
because we were such a small county.

Erquiaga: Then the one-man, one-vote ruling in the
1960s changed all of that?

Swackhamer: Yes, reapportionment changed all of that,

Erquiaga: What's the story behind that?

Swackhamer: Clark County had grown so fast that they
wanted—and got—a lot more political

*Chet Christensen
(D-Sparks) served in
the Assembly, 1948-
63 and 1974-76. He
was Speaker in 1959
and 1961.*

*Bruce M. Parks (D-
Mineral, 1956-60)
was Speaker during
Nevada's only
annual session in
1960.*

power because they simply had the votes. And they pushed that through.

Erquiaga: What was a regular day like at the Legislature? Was there such a thing?

Swackhamer: The floor session usually started about 10 o'clock, but the committees usually started work earlier, maybe at seven or eight o'clock. Then the session would go from 10 until lunch time. In the afternoon, we would usually have a brief session to take care of routine things that had to be taken care of, and then the committees would have the afternoons to do their work.

Erquiaga: Where did committees meet when you were in the Old Capitol Building?

Swackhamer: In the Old Capitol Building, they [laughter], frankly, met wherever they could a place.

Erquiaga: There were no committee rooms?

Swackhamer: There was one. The Ways and Means Committee had a long, narrow room about in the middle of the hall, but that was the only one. The rest of the committees would meet at the press table or pretty near any place they could find. [laughter]

Erquiaga: What was life like outside the Legislative Building in Carson? When you weren't in session, what did you all do?

Swackhamer: When we weren't in session, I usually went home.

Erquiaga: Did you go home every weekend?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: What did you do in Carson City at night?

Swackhamer: Well, not much. We had lots of receptions and parties, things like that. If you wanted to go to parties, you'd have something to do, but I don't recollect that there was any great thing that was obviously because of the Legislature. I think in those days Carson City was a very small town, and, frankly, there wasn't much to do.

Erquiaga: Were there very many women in the Legislature?

Swackhamer: No, there weren't very many. I think the first female legislator that I can remember was a young woman from Lovelock, and then there was lady, a woman from Lincoln County, but there weren't very many women involved in the Legislature.

Erquiaga: You were there when the first African American was elected, Woodrow Wilson.

Swackhamer: Yeah. I remember him. He was accepted; he was a pretty reasonable person.

Erquiaga: Then an Assemblywoman was appointed Lieutenant Governor, Maude—

Swackhamer: Maude Frazier. Yes, she was a head of the school district in Clark County and a very fine woman. Very knowledgeable and got the job done.

Louise Aloys Smith (D-Pershing, 1948-52) was elected Speaker for the last third of the 1951 Session.

Hazel B. Denton (D-Lincoln) served in the Assembly, 1952-56.

Woodrow Wilson (R-Clark) served in the Assembly, 1966-72.

Maude Frazier (D-Clark) served in the Assembly, 1950-62, and was appointed Lt. Governor in July 1962, serving until that year's election. She is considered the mother of Las Vegas High School and UNLV.

Erquiaga: So tell me how the Legislature organized itself. I see in your biography that you were chair of the Cow County Caucus. What was the Cow County Caucus?

Swackhamer: Just people that came from counties other than Clark and Washoe. They had a mutual interest in trying to protect themselves from being swallowed up. It was a group of legislators who would kind of stick together on certain bills to try to protect the interests of the smaller counties.

Erquiaga: The divisions between Washoe, Clark, and the Cow Counties—did that go back to when you started?

Swackhamer: When I started, Clark County was just beginning. There was a division at that time between Washoe County and the Cow Counties. Washoe County was very dominant, and they did not tolerate much monkey business from outside of Washoe County. They were pretty dominant.

Erquiaga: Then that got worse for the rural counties after the one-man, one-vote rule?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: Do you remember the right-to-work legislation in the 1950s? That was another one like the sales tax. It went to the ballot a couple of times. Were you involved in that at all?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

After a contentious battle, S.B. 79 (1951) passed with bipartisan support and was signed by Gov. Russell. Subsequent efforts by labor at the polls and the Legislature to repeal Nevada's Right to Work law were unsuccessful.

Erquiaga: Tell me about that.

Swackhamer: Well, you could not hire or fire somebody based simply on whether he belonged to a union. The “right to work” is what they called it. So you could get a job, and if you did not choose to join the union, you didn’t have to. Naturally, the unions opposed that very bitterly, but industry and the other side favored it. And it did pass.

Erquiaga: When you were first elected, the *Reno Evening-Gazette* said that 1947 would be the first \$100,000 session. Do you remember that discussion of how much it cost to run the Legislature?

Swackhamer: I don’t remember that particular article, but I remember the first bill that’s introduced in every session called Senate Bill 1 that was the appropriation to run the Legislature. Naturally, that always passed. The first session I was there, S.B. 1 was \$80,000 just to run the whole thing. The salaries for legislators were very small—\$15 a day—and no per diem, so it didn’t cost the state very much. But the \$80,000 didn’t quite make it, so we had to make another appropriation—I think it was \$10,000—to keep it going. But it was still under a hundred. That’s what they meant when they said that.

Erquiaga: How did bill drafting work?

Swackhamer: A fellow named Russell McDonald became the head of bill drafting, and it worked very well because Russ was a long-time Nevadan—a brilliant man. If somebody asked to have a bill drafted, whether he liked it or not, his job was to draft the bill as you wanted it. He would do it, but he had a knowledge or an intuition that told him what was going to pass, or could pass, and who was going to be able to get something through. So he spent a lot of time on things that were really going to happen, and a little less time on things that he knew were going to be dead on arrival.

A Reno native, Russell McDonald was a Rhodes Scholar from Nevada, 1939-40, and graduated from Stanford Law, 1947. He was the Revisor of Statutes, 1953-63, and Legal Counsel and Director of the Legislative Counsel Bureau, 1963-71.

Erquiaga: There were a lot of attachés when you were there. Were those young people, college people?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: How did someone get to be an attaché?

Swackhamer: Just go and apply for it.

Erquiaga: What did they do?

Swackhamer: Just general things. Taking care of the bill books was one of the things, and you could get some secretarial work done. But they just did general housekeeping-type things.

Erquiaga: Let me jump forward a little bit. You ran for reelection in 1972 but did not win that election, right?

During the redistricting session of 1971, the Republicans controlled the Assembly. Lander Co. became part of the Humboldt Co. district, long represented by Republican Bode Howard. He beat Mr. Swackhamer in 1972.

Swackhamer: Yeah, that's right.

Erquiaga: What happened there? What had changed?

Swackhamer: Well, I got the boot!

Erquiaga: What did you do wrong?

Swackhamer: Ah, well, I don't know, but I sure offended enough people, I guess. In 26 years, you can offend a lot of people. I was on the TRPA for two or three years and made a lot of political enemies there.

Erquiaga: So people from outside your district affected that election?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: Okay. Tell me about TRPA. You were on the first bi-state compact, while you were in the Legislature, and then you had been appointed to the TRPA when Laxalt was Governor?

Swackhamer: No. It was in the statute.

Erquiaga: What were your duties?

Swackhamer: The duty was to reverse the degradation of the water of Lake Tahoe because it was a national treasure. There was nothing vague or ambiguous about it. It says: "That is what this is for. Do it." When we got up there, we found out that the developers and the speculators were also interested in that land because they could make some real big money out of it. What was degrading the water was the runoff from this building, and stuff was going into the lake, and ruining it.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) was created in 1969 through a bi-state agreement between NV and CA, which was ratified by Congress. As Secretary of State, Mr. Swackhamer served on TRPA's Governing Board, 1973-87.

There were several of us that wanted to do it right and do what TRPA said we should do, but there were enough of them who wanted to find some way to compromise things and take care of everybody. One time, somebody came in to have a permit to build on some sensitive land, and they had all kinds of conditions that he would have to meet to be able to do this construction and maintenance. He'd sign anything because it didn't make any difference—nobody ever checked to see if he did it anyhow. Later we did get that through so somebody would check on them, and they didn't like that, either.

Erquiaga: When Laxalt was Governor, there was a lot of work on the community college and higher education capital construction. I think you may have been involved with that. It was slot machine money?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: For the University of Nevada System?

Swackhamer: Yeah.

Erquiaga: Do you want to talk about the growth of the university while you were in the Legislature?

Swackhamer: The university didn't have a great reputation. I think the Mackay School of Mines was considered one of the better ones in the United States: otherwise, it was an

Mr. Swackhamer was the only sponsor of A.B. 459 (1971), which created the Higher Education Capital Construction Fund with receipts from the slot machine tax. Passed and signed by Gov. Laxalt, the bill specified that the fund could be used only for construction of capital improvement projects for the University of Nevada System.

acceptable, but not an extraordinary, college by any matter of means. It wasn't very large, either.

Erquiaga: So mostly it was just the Reno campus and then the community college?

Swackhamer: First there was just the campus at Reno for the university, but there was no community college to start with. We got that started during the time I was in office.

Erquiaga: Do you remember the creation of the Interim Finance Committee?

The Interim Finance Committee (IFC) was created in 1969.

Swackhamer: Yes, I do.

Erquiaga: That was controversial at the time.

Swackhamer: Yes. And I think it still is. I think it was a mistake. The trouble with the Interim Finance Committee is that it gives the Legislative Counsel Bureau authority to spend money. Somebody has something that maybe failed in the Legislature, so they can come back in with the same thing to the Interim Finance Committee, and the trouble with that is the committee only hears one side of a question. If the whole Legislature was dealing with it, they could hear both sides. Of course, those meetings are open if anybody wanted to oppose it, but everybody in the state of Nevada can't watch every minute of every legislative session to see. I never did favor the Interim Finance

Committee. They said it would be a way to avoid having special sessions, which were very expensive, and it did do that. So some of the things that should have been dealt with by a special session were dealt with in the Interim Finance Committee. It was, I think, a wrong thing to do.

Erquiaga: How did the budget process change? When you first got there the Legislative Commission was new. Did the Legislature have control of the budget when you arrived, or did it gain more control while you were there?

Swackhamer: The budget, by law, has to be presented by the Governor's Office. I think that, up until that time, the Governor was presenting his budget, and the Legislature could amend it and change it in any way, but they didn't. They very seldom did much. Just passed it. But in the 1950s, the Legislature started taking a great deal more interest because the people were pretty restless due to the way that some of the things were going in the state. So the Legislature took an interest. The Ways and Means Committee in the Assembly and the Finance Committee in the Senate worked quite a lot on the budget. I know that there was more time spent by the Assembly Ways and Means Committee working on the budget than on any other thing. I can say that for sure because I was

Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

Erquiaga: What was that like?

Swackhamer: Mainly just working on the budget. Of course, any spending bills that would come up during the session had to be dealt with by the Ways and Means Committee.

Erquiaga: When you took office in 1947, I think there were 160,000 people in Nevada.

Swackhamer: Is that right? [laughter]

Erquiaga: By the time you left, there were about a million. So tell me how Nevada changed.

Swackhamer: The state didn't change much—Clark County changed. And the change that came to Clark County changed the whole state. This was after the reapportionment when the Senate got reapportioned; they had enough members in *each house* to pass anything they wanted, and they were more liberal than the northern Nevada people. So that was a big change, but that was not done by any legislative act. It was just done by economics, I guess.

| <i>U.S. Census Year</i> | <i>Clark County</i> | <i>Rest of Nevada</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1940 | 16,414 | 93,833 |
| 1950 | 48,289 | 111,794 |
| 1960 | 127,016 | 158,271 |
| 1970 | 273,288 | 215,450 |
| 1980 | 463,087 | 337,406 |
| 1990 | 741,459 | 460,374 |

Erquiaga: So a Democrat in Las Vegas was different from a Democrat in Lander County in your view?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: Would you say more liberal?

Swackhamer: Yes, somewhat.

Erquiaga: Why is that do you think?

Swackhamer: Because the northerners were very conservative, and the southerners were quite liberal.

Erquiaga: Things like unions versus ranching—those sorts of issues?

Swackhamer: Yeah, that kind of thing.

Erquiaga: Tell me about the state building program in the 1950s. I know there was a building fund after the war.

Swackhamer: It was kind of dissipated. Nothing much good came of it. It was, I think, pretty much wasted.

Erquiaga: You served on the Public Works Board? Was that when you were Secretary of State?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: After you lost your election in 1972, Governor O’Callahan appointed you Secretary of State the next year, right?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: How did you end up with that job?

Swackhamer: Well, we’d sold our business. I wasn’t looking for a job, but didn’t have anything to do. The governor called up and wanted to know about this other thing. He said that Koontz was going to resign, and he wanted me to run. I talked to my family about it, and they thought it would be an interesting

John Koontz (D) was Secretary of State from 1947 to 1973 when he resigned due to health issues.

thing: “Why don’t you take a crack at it?”
So I did.

Erquiaga: Why did Mr. Koontz leave office? Was he not well?

Swackhamer: Yeah, he’d been there for years. The Legislature was meeting, and he hated to go through the Legislature.

Erquiaga: How big was the office—the staff—when you got there? Do you recall?

Swackhamer: Yes, I can remember we had approximately 30 employees.

Erquiaga: What were your main duties?

Swackhamer: One thing about being Secretary of State is you had a lot of duties. The corporations were the big thing. They produced a lot of revenue, too, for the State. We were also in charge of the elections; we were in charge of the notary publics; and we had numerous things. When somebody got an idea that something should be looked at, they’d create somebody to look at it and then they had to find somebody to give the job to. Give it to the Secretary of State. [laughter]

Erquiaga: Is that how the Secretary of State ended up on the TRPA Board, too? Or was that because of you?

Swackhamer: No, it wasn’t because of me. I never left anybody in any doubt. I thought that Lake Tahoe should be protected because the

United States doesn't have very many real natural treasures, and that was one of them. It seemed to me it was a shame to let it get lost just to make somebody a few bucks.

Erquiaga: Let me talk to you about elections for a little while. When you were in the Legislature, you had some of the first legislation on mechanical voting machines, the change from paper ballots. Do you remember that shift?

Swackhamer: Yeah.

Erquiaga: When you became Secretary of State, you arranged for all the counties to purchase those machines to get them off paper, right?

Swackhamer: That's right, yeah. To go to punch cards.

Erquiaga: Why did you do that? Had there been a problem?

Swackhamer: Well, there had been a lot of minor problems. It was so slow to get the results, there was so much funny business that could go on. If the people who were on the counting board would see a mark on a ballot, they could throw that ballot out on the basis that the mark was in there for a purpose. We used to have two boards—the regular election board and the counting board—two groups of people running the election, one of them in the daytime and the other took over after the polls closed to count the ballots.

The first law concerning voting machines was passed in 1951. In 1960, the Secretary of State was given sole authority over voting machines. The use of punchcards was authorized in 1975.

With the change to punch cards, it was economical, and getting the returns out faster was just unbelievable. This was done at the request of the newspapers. They came and asked. You remember Cy Ryan?

Cy Ryan, a long-time member of the Capitol Press Corps, wrote for United Press International before becoming Bureau Chief for the Las Vegas Sun.

Erquiaga: Sure.

Swackhamer: He was one of them. If we could have a central bureau in the 15 rural counties and get them to report by phone on the progress of their election, our people could take it down and we'd have it on the computer screens in no time at all. And that's the way we did it. We got wonderful cooperation from the counties, and by 11:30 in the night, when they were used to just getting started really, we had the election for those 15 counties all wound up.

Erquiaga: Did your wife help you with some of that work?

Swackhamer: No, she never came and helped on that. Election night was the only time we met after hours, at that time, at the expense of the newspapers. We had some of our people who wanted to stay and work on the computers during the election, and they were paid by the newspapers.

Erquiaga: You computerized the office for corporate records?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes. Yes, we did.

Erquiaga: It was all microfilm when you got there?

Swackhamer: No. We went to microfilm afterwards. We had to because we were just running out of space in the building for storage.

Erquiaga: So it was all paper when you got there?

Swackhamer: All on paper.

Erquiaga: What kind of a task was that? Did the Legislature have to give you special money for microfilm and computers?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes. They were absolutely right. It was not only best, but it was best for the people, too. In those days, when somebody would call about a corporation, maybe all they wanted to know was whether it was in good standing. But whoever answered the phone would have to get up, go find the right place where it was stored, get the folder out, take it back and answer the questions, and then put it back. The average call lasted 29 minutes. The people calling about corporations would have to pay \$10 a year for that service, so it wasn't costing the taxpayers anything. But we got it changed so that when somebody called to ask if a corporation was in good standing, the Secretary of State's staff could answer yes or no at no charge. But if a caller wanted a lot of other information, then we could get it to them. That's when we pulled the micro-

film and copied whatever they needed. We charged for that.

Erquiaga: So how was campaigning for Secretary of State different? You'd only run in rural Nevada, and then you had to run statewide. How did you do that?

Swackhamer: I don't know. [laughter] I was surprised as hell myself that I carried every county in the state. I thought wasn't going to be easy to carry Clark and Washoe Counties with my background, but it turned out it was.

Erquiaga: Did you ever think of running for a higher office than Secretary of State?

Swackhamer: No, never did.

Erquiaga: You liked that job. That was enough?

Swackhamer: After 40 years, I began to get kind of tired of being a public official.

Erquiaga: Do you remember Third House?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes. That was from Mark Twain.

Erquiaga: Tell me how that would work.

Swackhamer: The members of the press would pose as different legislators, and then they would make a point out of anything that a guy had done that was not exactly brilliant. It was a fun night is all that it really was.

Erquiaga: Did it happen every session?

Swackhamer: Not, they stopped having it. I've forgotten just when, but when I first came there, they had it every session. Yes.

Erquiaga: Did they ever make fun of you?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: What did they say?

Swackhamer: I don't remember. Wasn't that bad.

Erquiaga: May I ask if you might tell me about some of the reporters you remember? Do you remember Robert Bennyhoff?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes, I remember him.

Erquiaga: Tell me about him. He was with the United Press?

Swackhamer: Yeah, he was very, very active. He was a good reporter, and he got along with people very well. I think most people really liked him.

Erquiaga: Do you remember Bryn Armstrong?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes. He was also a reporter for one of the papers.

Erquiaga: Reno.

Swackhamer: He was a college graduate but not in journalism. He graduated in language, but he was a good writer and pretty decent people. Everybody liked him.

Erquiaga: So here's a note from a Third House: "Mr. Swackhamer was impersonated by attaché

Ed Crawford in a most convincing session in 1953.” Do you remember the attaché Ed Crawford? His dad, Don, was a Democrat in the Assembly with you.

Swackhamer: Oh, yes. From northern Washoe. I remember him, yeah.

Erquiaga: But you don’t remember that convincing performance?

Swackhamer: No, I don’t.

Erquiaga: Let me read you another note about Third House. It says: “Some of the themes were the return of the legislators from a lost weekend in Las Vegas in best hangover fashion.” Do you remember that?

Swackhamer: I sure do. For some reason, the Legislature had some minor business in Las Vegas, so they adjourned and ostensibly took up again in Las Vegas over a weekend. Didn’t do much legislation, but had a real good time. It was really a stumbling thing to do at that time of the session. Really—we went on a little vacation, two days. We should have never done that.

Erquiaga: I’m surprised that Third House was reported in that way in the newspaper. Was the relationship with the press different in the 1950s? Did you feel safer with the reporters then?

Third House was a send-up of the legislature performed by the Capitol Press Corps, believe to have begun with Mark Twain.

Swackhamer: Yeah, I did. I felt that those people always treated me nicely, and I always wanted to be straightforward with the press, too. I was always treated well.

Erquiaga: What do you think of the press today in politics?

Swackhamer: I don't think much.

Erquiaga: How about when you left office. Had it changed?

Swackhamer: Yes.

Erquiaga: Do you think that's part of the change in Nevada?

Swackhamer: I think so. I think so.

Erquiaga: Let me ask you about another old-timer: Frank Johnson wrote a column called "The Lighter Touch." He was a political reporter.

Swackhamer: Oh, yeah, that was good, yeah. He was a good writer. He was a kin of the Hiltons, and he left the state and went to work in one of their clubs and went to New York. Then I saw him one night in New York by accident. Leaving a theater, here's somebody yelling at me, and it was Frank. But he was a real clever writer. He just wrote columns on everyday occurrences.

Erquiaga: You probably worked with Rollan Melton, too, from Reno.

Swackhamer: Oh, yeah. He was a very, very fine man.

Erquiaga: How about when Howard Hughes was in Nevada? He gave money to the State for the community college, and he was involved in gaming in Las Vegas. How was he received here?

Swackhamer: With suspicion, I think, mainly because he acquired two or three major establishments. It was not a law, I think, but it was a generally accepted rule that one person should not have more than one establishment. But he acquired them and in a peculiar way. Some of them were about ready to go broke just before Christmas—they always go broke just before Christmas—and he came in, took them over, and pulled them through. But he did a lot of good for the state without him knowing it. He reported the revenue as it came in. There was—and I think pretty near everybody knew—quite a bit of skimming going on in a lot of these clubs. When he started reporting so much better than the others, they had to kind of straighten up, and they reported a little better, too. So in one way, he really did a lot of good for the state.

Erquiaga: You met with Alan Bible and Howard Cannon in Washington, DC, about slot machines?

Alan Bible (D) was U.S. Senator from Nevada, 1954-1974. Howard Cannon (D) was U.S. Senator from Nevada, 1959-1983.

Swackhamer: Credits, yes.

Erquiaga: Slot machine credits? Tell me about that story.

Swackhamer: Years ago, we didn't have any community college program in Nevada at all, and the degree programs that were available were pretty good. The grade schools were running pretty well, but there was nothing in the middle. So we wanted to have a community college program, but didn't have any money. Mr. Bastian discovered that the federal government would license a slot machine for \$250, and instead of state control, it was under their revenue. So he said that we should get something like that for Nevada. I called Senator Bible, and he asked me not to ask him to introduce anything on gaming because the Bible Belt people back there were so backward about gaming. We just dropped the subject. Then New Hampshire got a lobbyist for the same reason, and they got it through. So we asked Bible again. I was thinking that he could argue that Nevada had a reputation of controlling gaming for 15 years and if anyone had a reputation of being able to control it, we should be able to do this. I thought we should enact this law that someone could go to the Gaming Control Board and buy a slot machine license for \$200, which they could take to the federal government, and with \$50, which the federal government kept, they could get the license. It wouldn't cost any Nevada citizen a dime, so we went to

work on that and worked a long time on that. In fact, I think I personally worked on it for 12 years—not constantly, but off and on. At first, there was concern about idiocy—most people thought I had lost my mind or something like that—but gradually the scheme seemed to get some support.

I don't know if you know how the gaming thing is reported, but the gaming tax is on the hold. So if a table won a hundred dollars, the tax on that was \$6.75. That was for what they cut, but there were no deductions. They could be losing money in their total operation but still paying the tax. Naturally, some of them didn't like that very well, and all of them thought the gaming tax was too high. I remember that Bill Harrah was one who recognized the fact that if we had this money coming in through the Gaming Control, then the industry would be paying a considerably higher part of the cost of running the government, and maybe they'd lay off the other thing.

So we gradually got some support, and it was a battle royal. Alan Bible and Howard Cannon were our Senators, and Walter Baring was our Congressman, and they did a magnificent job in Washington and got that thing through. It produced, I've forgotten, a few hundred million. The first five million went to the Board of Regents to

build facilities for a community college, and the rest of it went into the Distributive School Fund. So it helped everybody. The money that went into the Distributive School Fund was going to be spent anyhow, so then some taxpayer didn't have to pocket up the money. It finally worked out very well, and it's in place right now.

Erquiaga: That's obviously one of the things you're proud about.

Swackhamer: If I did any good, I'd have to say that at least that was a thing that I was personally involved with for a long time, and it did work out real well.

Erquiaga: What other things are you proudest of from your legislative days?

Swackhamer: I took an active part on insurance. We had a real funny situation: the Insurance Commissioner, who never had any real bad scandals or anything like that, but he had to have experience in the industry, so it just seemed to me like sending the rabbit to watch the lettuce patch [laughter], putting a guy in that came from the industry. We got that changed so they could hire somebody that was experienced in that line but was not connected. I don't know that it did any great harm or any great good, but it made a lot of sense.

The 1971 Legislature adopted A.B. 416 (introduced by the Assembly Commerce Committee), which revamped the state's insurance code.

Erquiaga: Any other issues from the Legislature that you're proud of?

Swackhamer: I spent an awful lot of my time on the Ways and Means Committee.

Erquiaga: Anything that you wish you hadn't done while you were in the Legislature?

Swackhamer: Yeah, I wish I hadn't ever got on the TRPA.
[laughter]

Erquiaga: Why?

Swackhamer: Because I made so many enemies up there, trying to do the right thing.

Erquiaga: You've said you think that's still a good agency to have, that it has the right assignment?

Swackhamer: If it would do the job that was supposed to be done, yeah. That would have slowed the growth of Lake Tahoe tremendously. But the problem was the growth at Lake Tahoe. All this growth was really diminishing the clarity of the water. So if they had done what the law said they should do, we'd still have a national treasure, which we don't have any more. Quite a few people would not have as much money, but that's the way it goes.

Erquiaga: How did that conversation start? Was there an individual who pushed for the TRPA? We always think it was Laxalt and Reagan,

when they were Governors together, but where did it start? Do you remember?

Swackhamer: I know there had been some concern about the Lake for a long time and that there had been some legislation in both California and Nevada. I know that, on the Nevada side of the Lake, all the effluent was gathered into a pumping system and pumped over the hill into Alpine, California, which was really sewage disposal. Alpine County used to call it “Lake Peepee.”

Erquiaga: What are you proudest of from your years as Secretary of State?

Swackhamer: Well, the laws concerning corporations, and elections were done very well. I was never able to get the notary public law as strong as I’d like it to be. Every year, we had a group that wanted to have a pretty much standard law for Secretary of State concerning what he had to do or get the records and so on. I introduced that bill every year, and every year the Judiciary Committee killed it just as dead as it could be. The law firms were the ones that were mainly abusing it. They would have the notary, but the point was that the notary had seen the person who signed the document. That didn’t happen. In too many instances, it was, “Oh, I’ll get this notarized later on.”

Erquiaga: It took a long time to get that changed.

Swackhamer: Did it finally pass?

Erquiaga: I think it finally did. It took a long time, you're right.

Swackhamer: Oh, that was a tough one, yeah.

Erquiaga: What do you think that Nevadans believe about their Legislature that simply isn't true? Is there anything that is a misperception? That people don't understand?

Swackhamer: No, I don't think so. I think people understand it very well. I know that Congress, the national Congress has a very bad odor in Nevada, but I don't think the State Legislature has achieved that.

Erquiaga: Let me ask about your family a little bit. Your kids stayed in Battle Mountain while you were in the Legislature?

Swackhamer: Oh, yes.

Erquiaga: How did Legislative service affect your family? Or did it? Did they mind?

Swackhamer: No. Once in a while my wife would come down to Carson City. There would be a real special function of some kind. She would come down and spend the weekend for something like that, but it didn't affect my family hardly at all.

Erquiaga: How did the Legislature change in the time that you were there?

NRS 240.155, added in 2005, requires that a person actually be present in front of the notary, and meet certain identification requirements, in order for his document to be notarized.

Swackhamer: It changed from largely a group of ultra-conservative people to a group of more liberal people.

Erquiaga: Did you participate in any of the national legislative groups while you were there or go to national conventions?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: How about when you were Secretary of State?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: Didn't do the national association?

Swackhamer: No.

Erquiaga: Did you ever go to a Democratic National Convention for President?

Swackhamer: No, no.

Erquiaga: Why not?

Swackhamer: I think those things were pretty well settled beforehand. God knows what we've got now, but in those days, the people pretty much knew what they were going to do. I don't know if you knew this or not, but we passed a Presidential Primary Act in Nevada years ago. To do that, we changed the state primary from September to June. We had to do that, and then we'd elect the delegates to the national committee. They were instructed, of course, for maybe the first two ballots. But we enacted it in the off year and

we never used it, and the next year we repealed it. We enacted it, never used it, and repealed it. We repealed it because Nevadans just hated that June primary because it made the campaign too long. And, boy, they were loud and clear—get rid of this!

Erquiaga: You were in the Legislature when that bill passed. I remember in the 1990s they talked about moving the primary to June, and a legislator said to the Secretary of State at the time, “We tried that once, and it didn’t work.” So that’s the bill he must have been talking about.

Swackhamer: Yeah, that was one of them.

Erquiaga: If you think about when you served as Secretary of State, how did statewide office change while you were there? Same kinds of people run from the time you started to the time you ended?

Swackhamer: No. Most of them came from Las Vegas.

Erquiaga: So tell me about the Capitol Building where the Legislature was when you arrived. What can you remember about the building itself?

Swackhamer: Well, as I recall, it was considered the ugliest state capitol building in the United States, but I don’t think it was all that ugly. It was not suitable for a Legislature. They did have chambers that were adequate for

both houses in the old Capitol, in that long hall. But they didn't have any rooms for committee work. In that way, it was deficient, but in every other way I think it was just fine. If they'd built some rooms for committee work and things like that, it would have been fine. They didn't need that other building, but the other building was designed *just* for our Legislature, and it really got fancy! Incidentally, according to the dictionary, the building we refer to as the Capitol is not the Capitol. The dictionary defines the Capitol as the place or the building where the Legislature meets. So according to the dictionary, the Legislature is the Capitol down there, with the things around it.

Erquiaga: Had the high court moved out of the Capitol Building when you arrived?

Swackhamer: They were across the street.

Erquiaga: Did you have much dealing with the Court either as a legislator or as Secretary of State?

Swackhamer: Some. Not a great deal, no.

Erquiaga: Anything else you want us to know before we wrap up?

Swackhamer: No, you brought things to mind that I'd forgotten.

Erquiaga: So what have you done since leaving office?

Swackhamer: Absolutely nothing. Bored out of my skull.

Erquiaga: You have always been interested in travel and reading and art. Do you still get to do much of that now?

Swackhamer: No, not at all. I have macular degeneration, and I can't read or write. That does crimp my style quite a bit.

Erquiaga: Thank you very much, Mr. Swackhamer.

Swackhamer: Thank you for coming in.

INDEX

- A.B. 416 (1971). *See* Insurance Commissioner
- A.B. 459 (1971). *See* Higher Education Capital Construction Fund
- Alpine County, California, 37
- appropriations to operate Legislature, 16
- Armstrong, Bryn, 29
- Assembly Chambers
 - Capitol Building, 1
 - Legislative Building, 8
- Assembly Committees
 - Aviation, 3-4
 - Ways and Means, 2, 12, 13, 21-22, 36
- attaché, duties of, 17

- Baring, Walter (Assembly, U.S. House of Representatives), 34
- Bastian, Cyril O. (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 10-12, 33
- Battle Mountain, 1, 4, 38
- Bell, Charlie, 10
- Bennyhoff, Robert, 29
- Bible Belt people, 33
- Bible, Alan (U.S. Senate), 32-34
- bill books, 1, 17
- bill drafting, 1-2, 16
- Biltz, Norman, 10
- Board of Regents, 34-35
- Bryan, Richard “Dick” (Assembly, Senate, Attorney General, Governor), 9
- budget, 1
- building fund, post-World War II, 23
- Burke, Peter Aloysius “Al” (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 11

- California, State of, 36-37
- Cannon, Howard (U.S. Senate), 32-34
- Capitol Building, 1, 8, 40-41
 - Assembly Chambers in, 1
 - committee rooms in, 13, 41
 - Constitutional Officers in, 8
- Carson City, 1, 4, 14, 38
- Christensen, Chester “Chet” (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 12
- Clark County, 14, 22
 - census data, 22
 - political power of, 12-13, 15, 22
- committees, work of, 13
- community colleges, 20, 33-35

Cow County Caucus, 15
Crawford, Don (Assembly), 30
Crawford, Ed, 30

Democratic Party
 conservatives in, 22-23
 geographical partisanship, 22-23
 liberals in, 22-23
 National Convention for President, 39
Denton, Hazel B. (Assembly), 14
Distributive School Fund, 35

Frazier, Maude (Assembly, Lt. Governor), 14

Gaming Control Board, 33
gaming law, 5, 7
 contribution of income to General Fund, 5
 influx of gangsters into state, 5
 skimming, 32-33
 slot machine credits, 32-34
Governor, Office of the, 21
Governors, 5-6, 8
Gregory, Frank, 1

Harrah, William F. "Bill," 34
Hazard, Harry E. "Hap" (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 11
Higgins, John M. "Jack" (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 11
Higher Education Capital Construction Fund, 19
Howard, Melvin B. "Bode" (Assembly), 17
Hughes, Howard, 32
Humboldt County, 17

Insurance Commissioner, 35
Interim Finance Committee, 20-21

Johnson, Frank, 31
Johnson, James, Jr., 1

Koontz, John (Secretary of State), 23-24

Lake Tahoe, 18-19, 36-37
Lander County, 12, 17, 22
Laxalt, Paul (Governor), 8, 19, 36-37
Legislative Commission, 21
Legislative Counsel Bureau, 20

Legislature, 8

- changes over time, 39-40
- conservatives in, 38-39
- Governors and, 8
- liberals in, 38-39
- staff of, 1
- typical daily schedule, 13-14
- women in, 14

“Lighter Touch,” 31

Lincoln County, 10, 14

List, Robert (Governor), 9

Lovelock, 14

Mackay School of Mines, 19-20

McCuiiston, Marion E. “Ted” (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 11

McDonald, Russell, 3, 17

McKissick, Howard R., Jr. (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly), 5, 7

Melton, Rollan, 31

Midmore, Joe, 10

Mineral County, 12

Nevada Revised Statutes, 2

- recodification of, 3

Nevada, State of, 36-37

New Hampshire, 33

O’Callaghan, Donal N. “Mike” (Governor), 9, 23

Parks, Bruce M. (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly; Senate), 12

Peabody Co., (George Peabody College for Teachers), 6

Pittman, Vail M. (Senate, President of Senate; Governor), 5

Presidential Primary Act, 39-40

press, relationship with, 30-31

Reagan, Ronald, 36-37

Reid, Harry (Assembly; Lt. Governor; U.S. House of Representatives; U.S. Senate, Senate Majority Leader), 11

Reno Evening Gazette, 16

Richards, Donell, 1

right-to-work legislation, 15-16

Russell, Charles H. (Assembly, Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, Governor), 5-6, 15

Ryan, Cy, 26

Sales and Use Tax Act, 1955
 passed by Legislature, 6-7
 referendum affirmed by voters, 7
 signed by Governor Russell, 7
Sawyer, Grant (Governor), 7
Senate Committees
 Finance, 21
S.B. 1 (every session) to operate Legislature, 16
S.B. 79 (1951). *See* right-to-work legislation
S.B. 202 (1951). *See* recodification of NRS
S.B. 171 (1955). *See* Sales and Use Tax
S.B. 453 (2005). *See* Secretary of State, notary public
school systems, consolidation of, 6
Secretary of State, Office of
 corporate records, 26-27
 microfilming and computerizing, 27
 elections
 punchcard voting machines, 25-26
 reporting returns, 25-26
 tabulating returns statewide, 25-26
 notary public law revision, 37-38
Smith, Louise Aloys, 14
Sparks, Nevada, 12
special sessions, 2, 21
Supreme Court, 2, 41
Swack, 2
Swackhamer, Mrs. Joyce, 4, 26, 38
Swackhamer, William D. "Bill" (Assembly, Speaker of Assembly; Secretary of State)
 Public Works Board, 23
 Secretary of State, 23, 24
 Speaker of the Assembly, 2-4
 TRPA Governing Board, 18-19, 24, 36-37

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, 18-19, 24, 36-37
Treasurer, 9
TRPA. *See* Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
Third House, 28-30
Twain, Mark, 28

United Press, 29
U.S. Army, 2
 Air Force, in Italy, 2, 4
U.S. Congress, 38
University of Nevada System, 19-20

Warren, Wallie, 10

Washoe County, 15

White Pine County, 5-6

Wilson, Woodrow (Assembly), 14

Wingfield, George, 10

women in Legislature, 14



**Get
Consensus** GROUP FACILITATION
COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING
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.