



Nevada Legislature Oral History Project

THOMAS R.C. WILSON II
Democrat

Senate, 1970 – 1986

MAY 19, 2008
RENO, NEVADA

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MCDONALD CARANO WILSON LLP

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Interview conducted by
Dana R. Bennett

Filmed by
Gwendolyn B. Clancy

Transcribed and indexed by
Jean Stoess

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

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Thomas R.C. Wilson II. An oral history by Dana R. Bennett. 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.



Thomas R.C. Wilson II
May 19, 2008

THOMAS R.C. "SPIKE" WILSON

Thomas R.C. Wilson II, known to all as Spike, was elected to the Nevada Senate in 1970. He served for eight Regular and two Special Sessions, chairing a committee in each. Known for his elocutionary prowess on the floor of the Nevada Senate, the Democrat steered the Senate Committee on Commerce and Labor for three sessions and the Senate Committee on Judiciary for two. Mr. Wilson also served as President Pro Tempore in 1985.

An attorney, Mr. Wilson was interviewed in the conference room at the law firm of McDonald Carano Wilson in Reno, Nevada. In this interview, he reminisces about the legislative process, remembering both the heavy workload and the enjoyment that came with discussing public policy development. He recalls the professionalism of the Senate, the lack of strict partisanship, and the institutional memory of many of his senatorial colleagues. Mr. Wilson relished floor debates, which he remembers as intense and lively but rarely hostile. He specifically mentions Carl Dodge (R-Churchill) and Cliff Young (R-Washoe) as particularly energetic speakers. Mr. Wilson recalls what a regular day was like during a session in the 1970s, emphasizing the rarity of party caucuses and the importance of committee work. He speaks about the difficulty of balancing public policy with popular demands, noting that sometimes legislation angers constituents and lobbyists alike.

Mr. Wilson was involved in a great deal of legislation, serving on 12 different standing committees during his legislative career. In this interview, he discusses his involvement in the creation and implement of the Ethics Commission and provides many interesting details about the development of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA). He explains that he was interested in environmental legislation throughout his tenure, noting how Nevada and California elected officials worked closely to avoid partisan bickering and make effective changes to the bi-state compact concerning Lake Tahoe. He attended a number of small meetings to hammer out the details of this legislation. Mr. Wilson clearly has fond memories of his legislative service.

Born in San Francisco, California, Mr. Wilson attended Reno public schools. He is a graduate of Stanford University and Georgetown University Law Center. He was an artillery officer in the United States Army from 1957 to 1958 and has four children. He is currently married to Janice Pine whose father, Newton H. Crumley, represented Elko County in the Nevada Assembly from 1954 to 1958. Mr. Wilson is the grandson of Ira L. Winters who represented Ormsby County (now Carson City) in the Assembly from 1916 to 1918 and in the Senate from 1926 to 1942. Active with a number of Bar Associations and Trial Lawyer groups, Mr. Wilson is a former U.S. Attorney and Nevada delegate to the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws. He served as Chairman of the Nevada Commission on Ethics after his legislative service ended.

Mr. Wilson chose not to run again in 1986 after 16 years in the Nevada Legislature and did not return to the Legislature as a full-time lobbyist. He was inducted into the Senate Hall of Fame in 1999, two years after his grandfather's induction.

Dale Erquiaga
May 2009

Dana Bennett: Good afternoon, Senator Wilson.

Spike Wilson: Good afternoon.

Bennett: I have to ask you right off the bat to tell me about your nickname. You've been known as Spike Wilson all along.

Wilson: I think it was a family joke. My father was an advertising man, so he had a lot of imagination. I've had it since I was a baby because, I guess, I looked like one with blond hair and blue eyes. It followed me to kindergarten and beyond kindergarten. Why, there was no losing it.

Bennett: You had it all the way through your legislative career as well.

Wilson: Oh, sure. Family calls me that. Friends call me that. I try to ignore it sometimes, but that's a losing cause. [laughter] It's not my baptismal name, though.

Bennett: It's not. What do the R and the C stand for?

Wilson: Roland Cave. It was my father's name.

Bennett: Have you passed that down to your son as well?

Wilson: Yes, there is a third.

Bennett: Let's think back to your first day at the Nevada Legislature. It's opening day. It was Monday, January 18, 1971.

Wilson: Seems like a long time ago.

Bennett: It was unseasonably warm that weekend. There was some flooding up in the mountains, and this

was the first time the Legislature met in what the newspaper called the “plush new Legislative Building.” [Wilson: Yes, it was.] What were you thinking and feeling when you arrived that day?

Wilson: I was curious. I hadn’t held political office before, and I had not served in the Assembly, so my first session in the Senate was my first. Obviously, all the freshmen were watchful and anticipating and trying to get to know their colleagues. Many of the members—there were only 20 or 21—had been there a long time. They were very senior and had been around a long time. Good legislators—knowledgeable, a lot of history, a lot of background. So it was a learning experience.

Bennett: Who were some of the legislators who stand out in your memory who helped you learn the process?

Wilson: Oh, Jim Gibson, who was the Majority Leader. Mahlon Brown, who was before him in the year I entered. Carl Dodge from Fallon went to my old alma mater and had served for a long time. It was a group of older guys, mostly. In both parties, and I liked them immensely. They were great to work with. Some I knew; some I did not. But they were real professional.

Bennett: Let’s back up even a little bit more. Why did you run for the Senate in the first place?

James I. Gibson (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1966 to 1988. He was Majority Leader from 1977 to 1985.

B. Mahlon Brown (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1958 to 1976. He was Majority Leader from 1965 to 1975.

Carl F. Dodge (R-Churchill) served in the Senate from 1958 to 1980. Both Wilson and Dodge attended Stanford.

Wilson: I was interested in government. When I got out of law school, I was a federal prosecutor for about three years as an Assistant U.S. Attorney. I was the only one in the northern office here in Reno, so I was pretty much on my own. My buddies were the FBI agents and the Treasury guys and whoever else was doing federal investigative work. But I'd always had some interest in government, I guess, so it seemed a natural thing to do.

Bennett: Do you remember much about your first campaign?

Wilson: Not a lot, just that it was a lot of door-to-door, a lot of personal contact, a lot of going to events. I was running against a much older, a much senior incumbent, and so I just worked. I did the door-to-door thing, and I think people like to be asked for their vote. It was a matter of shoe leather and shaking hands and trying to get publicity when you can or advertising, that sort of thing. I enjoyed the campaign. People were very nice, very receptive, very inviting, interested to talk. They wanted to know who you were and why you were doing this crazy thing, running for the Senate, not having been in the Assembly. But I enjoyed it. It was a positive experience.

Bennett: Was there any particular reason that you ran as a member of the Democratic Party?

James M. (Slats) Slattery (R-Virginia City) served in the Senate from 1954 until his defeat by Wilson in 1970.

Wilson: I was registered as a Democrat. Of course, the Democratic Party was probably more conservative then than it is today. I think that's changed some, but it just seemed the natural thing to do, and I was comfortable with it. I must say, I did not find a great deal of difference in the Senate between those who were Democrats and those who were Republican. We didn't have party divisions. We did not have party caucuses. I don't recall in the entire 16 years I was in the State Senate ever having gone to a party caucus. We didn't have them. The Assembly, I think, did from time to time, but not nearly like they do today. But, you know, there are only 21 in the Senate. Who needs a caucus? You don't discuss and deliberate by party. It was, I think, non-partisan. I think everybody there approached it that way. There wasn't a consciousness of party affiliation. It wasn't relevant. You had to make up your own mind. It didn't matter whether somebody was of your party or of the other party. It was just free of that, and I think much the better for it.

Bennett: You were a chair your first session?

Wilson: I guess I was, yeah. I've forgotten which committee it was, but they must have been short-handed. [laughter]

Bennett: It was the Senate Committee on Ecology.

Wilson: Oh, I guess so. They wanted to put the environmental bills in one committee and decided to have a special committee for those. I'd forgotten about that, but I enjoyed that a lot. I was active in developing environmental legislation all the way through my time in the Senate. It was interesting work and, I thought, worthwhile, and we had a good time with it.

Bennett: What were some of the environmental issues that you and your committee worked on?

Wilson: We had to develop clean water and clean air acts, and there were a number of others the topics of which I now forget. I got involved in the TRPA negotiations and the development of a new compact because the old one was failing, which is a separate subject, and we can talk about that. It took an awful lot of time. But there were a lot of things going on environmentally, and I think we had maybe a dozen bills that were developed that session. I don't recall all of them now that addressed one thing or another.

Bennett: Looking back over the bills that you introduced, you were interested in Tahoe stuff fairly early. Tell me about the development of that issue over your tenure.

Wilson: The initial compact was a good effort, and it survived for some years, but it was becoming apparent that it wasn't adequate, and it really needed to be changed. I became interested in it

S.B. 254 (1975) makes substantial changes to the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact.

S.B. 323 (1979) limits gaming in the Tahoe basin. Both passed.

because Jerry Brown was then Governor of California and he was advocating federal control of Lake Tahoe. Most of us in Nevada who are a little stronger on states' rights and independence felt that there had to be some alternatives to a federal agency. Why couldn't the states step to the plate and do the job? So we were interested in a state solution. We had difficulty developing any kind of a bill; the politics were resistant, I guess, at the time. I know that they had a meeting of a delegation from the California Legislature and from the Nevada Legislature, and I went to it. It accomplished nothing. There was no agenda. Nobody had planned it. I don't know who was responsible for the meeting. It was earlier in my career in the Senate, but it did more harm than good because there was no dialogue, there was no road map, there was no agenda, there was no way really to move the subject forward, and it accomplished nothing.

*Edmund Gerald
(Jerry) Brown (D)
was California
Governor from 1975
to 1983.*

I had gone down to a Stanford football game and went to a reception at a woman's house who was on the Santa Clara County Commission. Her name was Gerry Steinberg, and I hadn't met her before, but we went to her house before the game, and she said, "Why didn't you guys agree on something and accomplish something at that meeting?" She was active at Tahoe and had a place there. I didn't have an answer for her. Then I went to the Stanford-Cal football game in the

Stanford Stadium, and there was an airplane circling the stadium, trailing a banner that said, “Save Lake Tahoe. Write Your Congressman.” I thought, “Well, if it’s come to this, it must be dire.” [laughter] Anyway, we were frustrated. I just thought there was time to try and do something. One of the Assemblymen from California who was very actively involved was Victor Calvo. He was a Stanford alum and was Gerry Steinberg’s friend; that’s where it came from, I’m sure. Anyway, I called him; and we got together and chatted. John Garamendi joined us, and we started talking. The point was: is there something we can accomplish? We thought there was. So I went back to the legislative leadership. I don’t recall our being in session then; maybe we were. But in any event, I started meeting with the California guys, got Joe Dini involved, and we met at my home in Reno. We met in Truckee. We met at Tahoe. We met at Gerry Steinberg’s house at Tahoe. We met in a lot of places. And so we put together a new compact.

At the time, John Garamendi (D) was in the California Senate. He is currently Lt. Governor of California.

Joseph E. Dini, Jr. (D-Lyon) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 2002.

Bennett: What were some of the issues that you had to deal with in putting together that compact?

Wilson: It had to be workable, and it had to be balanced. Both states have sovereign control over the portion of the lake in those states. And there are local governments—the counties, maybe a city or two—but there had to be a basic overriding principle of how to protect the environment,

which is unique at Tahoe in that basin so that local ordinance and law are consistent with it. It has to be enforceable. It was not hard to do; I mean, the chemistry was good. We just sat down, and I had staff from the Nevada Legislature—from LCB—and the California guys had staff, too. The chemistry was good. Joe Dini and I represented Nevada. We just did it. It got ratified by the legislative leadership, and we just went forward. It worked out, ultimately.

Bennett: There was a special session to ratify that. How did you get the Governor to call the session that was necessary?

Wilson: It wasn't hard. I had gone to Bob List, who was then Governor, and told him what we were doing because I wanted him on board, and he was. He was very supportive. I told him I thought we would have to have a special session. We didn't want to go through the games of a regular or normal session. This had to be a specific session for this item only. The timing was important. We had insisted that California go first. We weren't going to go out on a bill before they acted on it. They were in session most of the time, so it was logical for them to proceed. So what we did was meet and agree and compromise and develop a bill that was jointly, we thought, satisfactory and acceptable to both states. Then California went first and processed it, and then Nevada did. He had to call a special session.

Nevada Governor Bob List (R) called the Legislature into special session on September 13, 1980. At about four hours, it was the second shortest special session in Nevada history.

Bennett: Did California process the bill in ultimately the same format you had agreed to?

Wilson: Yes. The two delegations had agreed on a bill; and California passed it. Then it was time for Governor List who had committed to have a special session if they had approved it. He did, indeed, call it, and so we had a special session. That was the only thing on the calendar.

Bennett: Did you run into any obstacles or challenges that had not been anticipated?

Wilson: Oh, there was some resistance to it. People are wary of bi-state agreements, and you obviously give up a certain level of sovereignty when you do that. It is, after all, an agreement. You're required to abide by it. But it was essential, and we did not feel that it should be controlled federally. We felt the states had a responsibility. We didn't have the only responsibility because we had only half the lake. The same with California—they had their half of the lake. It was imperative that the policies be consistent and that the goals be the same. Victor and John were great. It was a good relationship and very constructive. We both had staffs. It was congenial, and everybody wanted to get there. And we did. So California processed it and passed it. It seems to me Jerry Brown didn't really sign it right away. He really wanted, I think, federal control;

but he ultimately did, and then Nevada had its special session.

Bennett: Did the compact have to be approved by Congress at some point?

Wilson: Yes. After both states approved it and the Governors signed off on it, then it had to be ratified by the Congress. And it was.

Bennett: Were there any issues that arose then?

Wilson: Not that I'm aware of. They were probably relieved because they didn't have to legislate on Tahoe themselves. [laughter]

Bennett: That's probably true.

Wilson: I imagine the Nevada delegation was relieved [chuckles] and perhaps the California delegation as well. But we were pleased to have it done, and I think it's working well. I hope it is. I hope it's adequate. Those things are tested in the long term, not the short term, but I'm hopeful.

Bennett: You were involved in another issue that's tested in the long term, and that's the Ethics Commission and the development of ethics legislation. How did that come about?

The Ethics Commission was created in 1985 by S.B. 345 co-sponsored by Sue Wagner (R-Reno) and Wilson.

Wilson: I don't recall that there was one reason for it. I think there was a general awareness that questions of ethics in government are sensitive. People are accountable for them, and I think we felt that the subject matter really needed some standards and some definition. I think the

public's confidence in government requires that, whether it's at the city level or the county level or the state level, or federal. And I think there was increasing appetite among legislators that we really ought to address it.

Bennett: Now you had a unique opportunity to experience your own legislation as it was implemented because you were Chairman of that commission for quite some time. From that perspective would you have done something differently with the legislation?

Wilson chaired the Ethics Commission from 1989 to 1996.

Wilson: I don't think so. I think it worked pretty well. You know, there's no mystery, really, to defining right and wrong or what's appropriate or what's not or what's a special interest or a personal interest as opposed to a public interest. It's really pretty simple, and it's not a complicated subject. It's strange that things sometimes go awry, and people get those things mixed up. Hence, I guess, the need for an Ethics Commission. It had a fair amount of business. I don't recall offhand the cases that we had then, but I recall we had quite a few. I don't think any of them were terribly difficult to resolve. Most of the standards for ethical behavior in government are rather obvious. I mean, you might not define them right away, but you know it when you see it, and you know it when it's wrong, and you know it when it's right. So it wasn't terribly complicated. But it seemed necessary, and people were uncomfortable, I

think, by some behavior and felt that it was needed. I think it was necessary, and I think it, in the end, proved to be very valuable.

Bennett: So there wasn't any particular action that occurred?

Wilson: I don't think so. There may have been incidents at the time, and I don't recall them now, but I think there was a growing awareness that it was necessary, which suggests that there were some transgressions. But I also think that legislators felt that they were accountable to their constituents and to the public on questions like this. It was a sensitive subject. It has a lot to do with public trust in its government—in our case, in its Legislature. How do you develop that trust, and how do you keep it? Well, this is not a bad way to do that. The system imposed some accountability for conduct; attempted to define some standards; administered them well, hopefully; and made available some penalties to the extent that the standards weren't met. And that's accountability.

Bennett: How did you decide which issues to bring to legislation—which things should be turned into bills and which perhaps shouldn't be?

Wilson: It's one of those subjects that you know it when you see it. [laughter] I don't know. It's defining what the public interest is or needs—priorities. You never have, at least in the Legislature, a

dearth of bills. There are always lots of them. I'm not saying all of them are worthy, and sometimes the idea's a good one, but the bill's not well done. But legislators are pretty close to their constituents. They know what public opinion is and what government may need and what services are necessary and which ones are not being provided well, especially in a state as small as Nevada. Even though our Legislature is relatively small, there's pretty close contact with the constituencies in the various counties. So legislators know—it's not hard to find out. Ethics legislation was not difficult to pass, which led me to believe that the public was sensitive to the subject, and so their legislators were as well because we didn't have a lot of trouble selling the idea or making it work or just designing legislation to try and define standards and means of judgment of what is ethical and what is not, or appropriate or not, or what the misuse of office is or not. The public knows it when it sees it either way, and I think legislators, for the most part, do as well. It's easier to recognize than it is to define, oftentimes.

Bennett: Did you hear from your constituents on an ongoing basis, or did it peak during the sessions?

Wilson: I don't recall. There was great support for it, obviously. The public wanted standards and wanted them to be enforceable and wanted legislators to be accountable. I think they were pretty

satisfied with the legislation, and I think they were pretty satisfied with the way the ethics commission worked after it was created. I chaired it for a while after I left the Legislature, and it was pretty busy.

Bennett: Let's back up a little bit to the Legislative Building, which was brand new in 1971. Was it as plush as the newspapers claimed, do you recall?

Wilson: I don't recall that. It's a lot more plush now than it was when we were there [chuckles], I do know that. I don't lobby, so I don't get down to the Legislature very often. I'll go over and testify on something when necessary or asked to, but I don't hang out there during legislative sessions. So I haven't seen a lot of the inside of the building in the years since I served. But I did have the feeling when I was down testifying on something this last session that it was *pretty nice*. [laughter] It was less Spartan than it was when we were there in the earlier days. It's a nice building; it really is.

Bennett: Did you have your own office?

Wilson: Yes. Every legislator had an office. It wasn't very large. It was a work space is what it was. Then there was a little alcove for a secretary, and the secretary usually served two or three people, but it was very comfortable, and we were thrilled to

be there. There was room for everybody, and it was very functional.

Bennett: In one of the newspapers, that first session, a columnist talked about how the building was locked, all the halls were locked, the elevators were locked, and people weren't allowed to roam. A legislator could, essentially, go from chamber to office and back without ever running into a member of the public. Do you recall that? It must not have lasted long because now that's certainly not the case.

Wilson: No, and it wasn't then. I don't recall the doors being locked, and I don't recall the offices being sealed off. I think people could wander the halls as they wanted to.

Bennett: So that must not have lasted long.

Wilson: If it ever started. I wasn't aware that that ever happened. I was there the first session, and I just don't recall that. Whether it was designed to do that and that's what was discussed, I don't know. But I don't think it happened because I don't recall it. Anybody could knock on a legislator's door. The halls were open; the elevators ran; there were stairs. Yeah, you could lock your office door, but it was always open unless it was after hours. I just don't recall that.

Bennett: That must not have lasted long. What was a regular day like in the Senate?

Wilson: They were pretty busy. We had morning committees, and some of them would begin pretty early, 7:30 or 7:00, depending on what the load was. I don't recall when we went into general session, but probably 10 or 11. The shovel work is done in committee. Everybody's assigned to a committee, and it's pretty busy. You're in hearings, so from committee hearings in the morning, you went to your session and then had lunch at some point. Sometimes, there would be afternoon sessions, and there got to be more of those as the session went on. Then you had afternoon committees. The basic work is done in committee. That's where the bills are developed. The amendments come out of the committees. You can have floor amendments, but the general flow of the work is they have public hearings and take testimony and take a vote and decide to pass it up for approval or process, or not. That's pretty busy. Committees work hard. Committees do the heavy lifting.

Bennett: Were any of those committees particular favorites of yours?

Wilson: I spent a lot of time on Judiciary. I also chaired the committee that had jurisdiction over natural resources and environmental questions. That was an afternoon committee. In a number of sessions, I served on Senate Finance in the mornings, which meant I couldn't sit on Judiciary. I enjoyed the committee work. That's where the heavy

lifting is done, where you really vet a bill and decide whether to amend it or approve it, and that sort of thing. You take testimony. It's *very* productive. You can get a lot done in committee. Those hearings were back-to-back until we had to go into general session. It's where the bills were tested and amended, and sometimes, they didn't come out of committee.

Bennett: Do you remember a particularly tough issue that you worked on that was a frustration?

Wilson: I don't, offhand. The process worked pretty well. It didn't mean that you were always at ease with all of the decisions or comfortable with the conclusions. Some of the subjects were pretty complicated. You hoped what you were doing was in the public interest. You hoped that you knew enough to be able to design a bill that would be effective and fair. We got a lot of help from people who knew more about a given subject matter than those sitting there. That's why you have people come in and testify. But on the whole, I think the system works pretty well because the bill is tested. You test it in committee. When it goes to the floor, there are questions on the floor, and you have to be able to answer them. If you can't answer them, you put the bill on the desk until you can, or it may even be voted back to committee for additional work. So there's a lot of scrutiny in committee and then on the floor. Then it goes to the other house, and

it goes through the same process. Whether the bill starts in the Senate or the bill starts in the Assembly, it has to pass muster in the committees of each house and on the general file on the floor of each house. Then, of course, it goes to the Governor, who may or may not agree, or may want the bill changed as a condition of signing it. There's lots of scrutiny. There's lots of opportunity for public input. You take a lot of testimony during that process. It's invaluable because you learn a lot about the subject. You may not know a thing about it when you start, but you're going to know something by the time you actually have to vote on the bill. It works pretty well. You're not always right, but I think most of the time you are. You hope the judgment is balanced that everybody used. But there is a lot of check and balance. People agree and disagree. You test somebody's view or somebody's answer or something in the bill, and by the end of the trail, where it goes through both houses and goes to the Governor for review, it should be in pretty good shape.

Bennett: You served during the terms of three different Governors. What was your interaction like with Governors O'Callaghan, List, and Bryan?

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

Wilson: Easy. Very good and enjoyable. I knew them well and liked them very much. The styles were all different, but I enjoyed all three very much. Mike O'Callaghan's now deceased. I still have a

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

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

very good relationship with Dick Bryan and Bob List. I enjoyed all three. They were quite different; they all had their own styles. They enjoyed their jobs. I served with Dick Bryan: I was in the Senate while he was there. I enjoyed them a lot.

Richard H. Bryan (D-Clark) served in the Nevada Senate from 1972 to 1978.

Bennett: How about your interaction with legislative staff? That's certainly changed over the time that you were in the Legislature. When you started there in the early '70s, it was a small staff, and by the end, it was much larger.

Wilson: I have a lot of respect for the legislative staff. They are *very* good. The Legislative Counsel Bureau and the Fiscal Division and the Research Division—they're excellent. Great sources of information, always gave good advice, very, very helpful. When we were working on the Tahoe compact, I asked LCB to assign Fred Weldon. He'd been helping us with it. He was *invaluable*—spent a lot of time and made a great contribution to the development of the new compact agreement. He was indispensable.

A longtime member of the LCB Research Division, Fred Weldon was Deputy Chief Research Director from 1985 until his retirement in 2004.

Bennett: Think about some of the other legislators that you served with. You mentioned a couple of names earlier—Mahlon Brown and Carl Dodge.

Wilson: Carl Dodge was there when I started. Warren "Snowy" Monroe was there. Mel Close was there. Dick Bryan was there. I enjoyed them all, and it didn't matter what party they were. That's changed a little now, I think. People are a little

Warren L. (Snowy) Monroe (D-Elko) served in the Senate from 1958 to 1976.

Melvin D. Close, Jr., (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1970 to 1982.

more sensitive to party, and I think the Legislature is the worse for it. I don't think it's terribly relevant. You ought to be able to make up your own mind, without regard to party platforms, as to whether it's good public policy or not. The State operated that way for years and years. Government's been the better for it. It has not been the better for it with *any* level of partisanship at any time, in my view. I don't have patience for it.

Bennett: What made an effective legislator, and who exemplified what you thought to be a particularly effective legislator?

Wilson: Oh, gosh, there were a lot. Carl Dodge, Jim Gibson, Dick Bryan, John Foley—there were a lot. I liked and respected them all. If I start listing, I'd be omitting ones that I don't want to omit. But I really found them to be very principled. There are only 21 in the Senate, and it was very collegial. We had no consciousness of party. It wasn't relevant. Somebody was known to have judgment and wisdom or knowledge about a subject, or he or she did not. It was very collegial. It was not competition in any sense. People were trying to make good public policy. You do that by testing a bill, and you want to hear what everybody has to say. Sometimes it's helpful; sometimes it's not. It's like anything else. I think people were pretty conscientious that way. I think they were sensitive to the merits of

John P. Foley (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1970 to 1974.

legislation, of what made a good bill and what did not. They were pretty serious about it. You knew them pretty well when you were working with just 21, and we didn't care about political party, as I said. It really was on the merits. Is it good legislation or is it not? And why? How do you make it better if it needs improvement? It was great fun!

Bennett: What are some of the fun memories that stick out in your memory?

Wilson: The TRPA does just because it was different. Normally, there is a bill pending, and you have a hearing in committee and then it goes to the floor, and you debate and discuss it on the floor and take a vote. It goes to the other house and repeats. The Tahoe compact was much different, of course, because it was very high-profile, much more complicated. It involved interests and competitions between the two neighboring states, but it went very, very smoothly. We had a joint session to talk about that. It did not go to committee. We just had a joint session. [chuckles] We filled the Assembly Chambers with both houses and anybody else who wanted to listen. It was packed. We presented the bill and talked about it. That probably took half a day. Got a lot of questions from the floor. Then the bill went to the respective houses, and there it was reviewed and discussed and all of that. A lot of interest. It was different because here, we had

a bill, only one bill, and each body had to decide it generally in its own chamber.

Bennett: That was a relatively short Special Session, wasn't it?

Wilson: Very. Yeah. It was done in a day.

Bennett: Just in a day?

Wilson: Yes. There wasn't a lot of running room. There was a lot of work and vetting done with the bill during the negotiation phases between Joe Dini and me from Nevada and John Garamendi and Victor Calvo for California. They were great to work with. They really were. It was a great relationship. Victor is now retired from the California Legislature, and John Garamendi, I think, is Lieutenant Governor now.

Bennett: I think you're right.

Wilson: Yes. He's had a number of state offices since we worked with him. But they were very good to work with and great fun to be with, too.

Bennett: During a regular session, what was life like outside the building?

Wilson: Don't know. I didn't see much outside the building. [laughter] I would commute down from Reno and would be in committee and then on the floor. I'd have lunch somewhere, and then in the afternoon, the same thing. There weren't evening committee meetings until later in the session when we were really pushed to get things

wrapped up, and we were behind. Occasionally, there'd be a social function, something at the Governor's Mansion or a reception at a hotel or something. But it was pretty much a long work day, with an occasional social event. Those from Las Vegas lived around Carson, and I would commute to Reno.

Bennett: It had to have made for some long days.

Wilson: Well, it did, yes. But it wasn't bad. You'd have time to think driving in the car. [chuckles] It wasn't too bad. It was quiet time.

Bennett: How did your legislative service affect your family?

Wilson: There's no change in the routine in the earlier part of the session because that's an eight-hour day. As the session goes on and we're doing evening work, it becomes a longer day. You don't work weekends all year, but you do later. It's one of those things that starts easy and finishes hard [laughter] in terms of its demand on time, at least. It does get pretty demanding towards the end. There's a lot to do, and you've got a limited amount of time. You don't want to have a special session to finish your business. You want to do it in the allotted time, and we did, for the most part, I think. And it works pretty smoothly. There's a structure to it all. Debate is really useful. You can learn a lot, if you listen. Some do, and some don't. [laughter]

Bennett: You were known as quite the orator on the Senate floor.

Wilson: Oh, I don't know about that. It was always fun to talk policy, and I probably talked for too long, often, I suspect. I don't know. I didn't ask anybody if I had. I wouldn't want to. [laughter]

Bennett: Did you talk extemporaneously?

Wilson: Yes, for the most part. There were only 21 in the Senate Chambers, and you want to talk to them, and so you do. It's great fun. Even disagreements are great fun. It should be substantive, but sometimes it's also entertaining and fun. And when it is, of course, it's not just a relief—it makes for a good time. People oftentimes have good questions on the floor and good reservations. It's not unusual when a bill's being exposed for the first time to a dialogue like that, and it's being considered by a group that's larger than just the committee. You get differing viewpoints and different perspectives, and sometimes you say, "Let's put it on the desk. We're going to go talk about it in committee." And you do. For the most part, it improves the bill. You never have enough time. Oftentimes, there's a turn down the road that you haven't anticipated; the bill may affect something in one way or another that you hadn't thought of. So you have a chance to improve it, which is a good thing. It avoids mistakes.

Bennett: Looking back on the legislation that you worked on, whether you introduced it or it was part of committee work, is there anything now from this perspective now and think, “I probably shouldn’t have done it quite that way”?

Wilson: I don’t know. I’m sure there are a lot of bills that I would react to that way if I were to revisit them, but I don’t recall. I’m not saying none of them could not have been better. I don’t recall reacting to a bill after the fact. I’m sure that bills were improved in the next session. You pass something, and later you decide you want to change it, for good reason. So you adjust it the next session. It’s a learning process.

Bennett: What was the role of lobbyists during your tenure?

Wilson: I found them to be pretty professional while I was there. Most of them had had a lot more experience watching the Legislature than I had. They’d been around a long time and knew a lot of law, knew a lot of legislation, knew a lot of public policy. They were a pretty professional bunch. Those who were not—and there weren’t many—were known not to be that effective or that professional. A lobbyist would misrepresent at one’s peril. They have to be absolutely honest with a legislator. It’s more a judgment question than anything else. Lobbyists are advocates. They’re not paid to judge; they’re paid to

convince. So you take it that way. Lawyers advocate all the time; they're not always right [laughter], so why should a lobbyist always be right? But they're also pretty knowledgeable, pretty good people with pretty good balance and a pretty good sense of public interest. Certainly, they have a good sense of what helps their clients and what damages their clients. Their clients are, for the most part, business, but there are also public interest groups and that sort of thing. Lobbyists are sensitive to the people who hire them, whether it's an environmental group or a business group or a trade group or whatever. So they have to know that business. They have to know their client's interests and what affects those interests. They can be helpful that way because they can be a source of information. They have to be a *valid* source of information, or it affects their credibility. A lobbyist who is credible is one who tells you the good and the bad about a bill and how it helps or hurts his client. If the lobbyist does not disclose or is not frank, then it affects the lobbyist's reputation and that affects how effective the lobbyist can be. So it really is a question of character. Lobbyists' representations have to be pretty accurate, pretty balanced, pretty fair, and have to acknowledge the good and the bad, a weakness in the bill, and what's necessary to cure the weakness. You know the lobbyists who are sensitive to those

obligations; you also know the ones who are not. It affects the effectiveness of the lobbyist, frankly. Most of them are very, very good and very up-front, very honest, and talk openly and honestly. They know that their currency is their reputation, which is their honesty. It's the only currency they have. The same is true of legislators. That's the only currency they have, too.

Bennett: Are there any particular lobbyists who stand out in your memory?

Wilson: Yes, I liked a lot of them. I'm reluctant to name any because of those whom I will overlook, so I'm not going to do that. [chuckles] But I found them to be very professional, for the most part. I don't know how it's been the last 20 years since I was there; it may not be quite the same. I can't judge it because I don't lobby so I don't spend much time there. I'll go down to testify on something, but that's all. So I don't know if it's changed. But I assume the same thing still applies.

Bennett: What did you do between legislative sessions?

Wilson: Practiced law. [laughter]

Bennett: Were you able to keep up on your practice during sessions?

Wilson: No, no, no. The sessions were full-time, and my firm was very good that way. There really wasn't

time for me to practice during the sessions; we were really busy. You might not be in session, but you were bookin' after dinner, reading. You had to because you only had a certain amount of time. There was an awful lot of work going through the Legislature. You had to give it your time, and so you had homework. [chuckles] So, no, I didn't practice any law for the most part while I was in session—maybe on the weekend on some project or something, but not to any great degree.

Bennett: Were you involved much in interim studies or any other legislative work?

Wilson: Yes. Interim studies were invaluable things because there are only four months for a regular session. There are some subjects that require study and development, and you don't have time during the session. It may be a longer-term thing and you want to give it more time, so you defer it. In another session, you appoint an interim committee, usually with both Senate and Assembly represented, and you have public hearings and staff assigned, and you try to educate yourself. Then you make reports to the Legislature when you finish your work. It's very valuable. It helps a lot. Some questions are pretty complicated, and it gives you a chance, where it's necessary, to have hearings in different parts of the state and not just require people to come to Carson. That's helpful, too. But it depends on the

subject and what kind of work it's going to require. There is a Legislative Commission of both Assembly and Senate members that administers policy between sessions, and they manage the committees and that sort of thing.

But there are always interim committees. You don't have time during the session because you've got to legislate in the here and now for the four months that you're there. There are subjects that require more study than that and require a two-year float until the next session to really be prepared, really vet them. You can then take those to different communities—whether southern Nevada, northern Nevada, or the rurals—and have public hearings where it's necessary. It depends on the subject. It's very valuable.

Bennett: One of those subjects that came up towards the end of your tenure was the MX missile. That must have taken quite a bit of the Legislature's time both in session and out of session.

Wilson: We didn't have a lot of jurisdiction over that because it was a federal program on federal land, so it really wasn't anything that we could affect very much. They—the federal agencies and especially the military—will do what they have to do where they have to do it. So we didn't have a lot of influence over that sort of thing. What

Introduced by Wilson, S.B. 175 (1981) allowed the State of Nevada to acquire capital improvements made for the MX, a defense system proposed during the Cold War.

was going to happen was going to happen.
[laughter]

Bennett: It must have been a bit frustrating with your interest in environmental issues.

Wilson: Yes, there are competing issues. You have to do it somewhere.

Bennett: How did your campaigns change once you were an incumbent? Or did they change?

Wilson: I guess the first one was the toughest one just because I wasn't known. I probably had to campaign less, I suppose, because I was an incumbent, but I still did. I think I did door-to-door and did the things that I needed to do. Maybe I didn't have to do them quite as intensively as I did the first time I ran. I had to run against an incumbent when I did run the first time. But it was easier. I was better known and that sort of thing, so it wasn't quite so strenuous, although I had to campaign.

Bennett: When you look back over your time in the Nevada Legislature, how did the institution change from the early 1970s to almost the end of the 1980s?

Wilson: You know, I'm not sure. I don't know that there was that much change. I think people took the job pretty seriously. There were only 21 of us in the Senate. That's not very many. You get to know them pretty well. It was a lot of hard work.

I think everybody, for the most part, tried pretty hard to be up on what the bills were about and what the problems were and how they might be changed, what made good public policy and what didn't and why. The sessions were always very busy, but it wasn't just something that was frenetic. Sometimes, the judgments are hard. You have to balance them. Sometimes, they're complicated. I don't mean politically complicated, although that sometimes is the circumstance as well, but what is good public policy? When is it not good, and why? That sort of thing. That's really what it's about, and how do you test it? That's why you have committee hearings, so people can come in and talk. Interim committees have to do the same thing. The job is to study a bill or a subject and decide whether to design legislation to deal with it. So you have public hearings and take input from whoever wants to give you information. It's very valuable. You can ask a lot of questions, and you learn a lot if you listen.

Bennett: You brought some copies of floor speeches with you today. Let's talk about the purpose of the debate on the floor and what you found when you looked back at these old journals.

Wilson: It was kind of interesting. I didn't have active recollection of any of those occasions. I came across these just thumbing through some of the old session books, but what struck me was not

Wilson refers to copies of his floor speeches that begin on pages 137, 265, 280, 492, 599, 979, 1160, 1234, and 1278 of the Journal of the Senate 1983.

the intensity of the language because it's not that it was intense as much as it was purposeful. The language in discussing legislation on the floor was extremely active. It was not a relaxed social conversation. It was a pretty intense conversation. I don't mean adversarial or hostile at all; I mean that it was all business, but pretty expressive. The language was very active. It had a lot of energy. I don't mean anybody was shouting. I mean that it had energy because of the subject matter and the interest in it, and you can sense that as you read it. Going back and looking at it for the first time in a long time, that's what I sensed about it. The language was pretty energized. I don't mean emotional, but I mean it had a lot of energy and a lot of purpose and was pretty expressive.

Bennett: There is a reason that speeches are recorded in the *Journal*, isn't there?

Wilson: Yes, if you're determining what the legislative intent is behind a bill. Legally, you're limited to determining that from the four corners of the document itself. Having said that, sometimes that's not clear, but you certainly get a sense, a feeling for the issues, maybe which ones have priority and which ones don't, in terms of what people are saying preliminary to a vote. The discussion in committee and the discussion on the floor are really talking about a piece of legislation and whether it is good public policy or

not good public policy, and why. The language that's used, the illustrations that are described, the definitions that people use to define what they're trying to convey and say, what they think the legislation does and does not do, are all germane to what the legislation means and ultimately what its value is and whether it's sound and valid. So all those become relevant to what the Legislature intended to do when it passed the bill that it did.

I haven't seen those for years, and going back and thumbing through a few of them, I was surprised at how direct and intense—I don't mean hostile or angry; I just mean that the words have energy. They do for a reason because they're used to describe public policy and what a bill will do, and what the reasons for the bill are, and that's important stuff. But I found that the language was energized for that reason because it had a serious purpose. We were talking about whether to pass this bill or not, or whether we amend it or not, or whether it made good public policy or not, and why. And whether past legislation was valid or needed to be changed, and what was wrong with the past legislation that had been enacted, and why this might be a good idea or not. But I sensed a real energy to the process because it was the process of communicating.

We only had 21 in the Senate; the Assembly had double that, which isn't all that

many people, 42. When a bill comes to the floor for discussion and debate, depending on the bill, there's a lot of discussion about it. Sometimes, it is pretty interesting; sometimes, it's emotional; sometimes, it's passionate; sometimes, it's angry. It depends on the subject. It depends on what the bill does or does not do. What energizes it, I think, is what's really being discussed—what the values are. The values are what government and civilization are all about.

Bennett: So looking at these again must have reminded you of some of the other energetic speakers in the Senate.

Wilson: Oh, sure. Carl Dodge was a great one. Cliff Young was, too. Carl was from Fallon and was a lawyer but didn't practice law. He was very powerful verbally, really good, fun to listen to, incisive, sharp, cutting with his logic. It was fun. One of those things I enjoyed most about the Legislature was listening to the debates on legislation just because it was *so much* fun, pro or con. It was great fun, and talking public policy was great fun, why it was good policy or why it was bad policy, and all of that. It was very instructive. You learn a lot. It's not just getting together to disagree and shout. You do learn a lot, and you find yourself listening to the reasoning and listening to why past legislation may have failed or why other legislation may have succeeded—listening to what the values are that

Clarence Clifton (Cliff) Young (R-Washoe) served in the Senate from 1966 to 1980.

are involved in the piece of legislation. What does it do or not do? That's kind of complicated sometimes.

Bennett: What do you think would surprise most Nevadans about their Legislature, something that they may not know?

Wilson: Unless they've spent time there, and almost all have not, I think what they would be most impressed by is what I was just talking about in terms of the concern that it reflects. Legislators express why legislation is necessary. Why is it good or bad, or if it's not good, what makes it good? If it has failed, why did it fail? What does it say about our values as a society? What does it say about our business and commerce, and whether it succeeds? The legislation that's introduced and processed and the debates in the Legislature really reflect what a society is about, and in a deeper sense maybe what a civilization is about. What are those values? What are we trying to do? What are we trying to protect? What is vulnerable, and why is it vulnerable, and why does it need to be protected? Why should something be changed? It really has a lot to do with who and what we are, individually and as a country.

Bennett: So the 15 years that you were in the Nevada Legislature, from 1971—

Wilson: There were four terms, yes.

Bennett: That's about eight sessions, seven sessions?

Wilson: Eight sessions. 16 years. They're biennial, not including special, so 16 years would be eight normal regular sessions plus special sessions.

Bennett: So during that time frame in Nevada history, what do you think the Legislature was reflecting about Nevada, its commerce and its values, and some of the issues that were crucial to the State during that time period?

Wilson: There were the basic things of wanting commerce and business to grow, and education to improve and be adequate, all of those things. What's good about its economy and what is not; how do you protect this environment from use and abuse; how do you protect the quality of its natural resources and conserve them; what's a reasonable balance; how do you control air pollution and at the same time don't adversely affect the economy—all of these things. It's a great study in differing values, some of which compete. Some don't compete, but some do. I can't think of an example offhand, but oftentimes it's making choices simply because some issues and some values compete. You try to find ways to balance them, and I know this sounds a little abstract, and I can't think of a specific example [laughter] so I'm generalizing terribly, but all of that's in the mix.

Bennett: Certainly, the Tahoe experience was the balancing of conflict.

Wilson: Yes, it was. You're balancing the free exercise of property rights, on the one hand, with restrictions on what you could do with your property in order to protect the natural environment within the basin. So you have conflicting interests that you have to balance and have to decide which ones to protect and which ones to compromise so as to be right in the long run. You hope you are. It's always controversial because there are always people and interests on each side of issues that compete. So everybody isn't happy, but you have to go through that process. That's the nature of the process. You do a lot of balancing. You do a lot of choosing. You do a lot of weighing. What's in the public interest long-term?

Bennett: When you look back on your tenure, is there something that you think perhaps you might have done differently?

Wilson: I can't think of one specifically, but I'm sure there are probably a number of things I would have done differently were I able to define them at the moment and tell you why. [laughter]

Bennett: That's probably true in most situations.

Wilson: Yes, you always have limited information and not enough time. Sometimes, you would like to be able to consider something for a longer time with more information than you're able to get.

Sometimes, you can come back and change the law after the fact simply because you have second thoughts about your judgment the first time. You might change it, not eliminate it. But it depends. Sometimes, legislation doesn't work quite the way it should. Sometimes, it's not balanced. Sometimes, it's not totally fair. You try and learn how to recognize those problems before they occur. Sometimes, you have to wait until they occur to recognize them.

Bennett: Why did you leave office when you did?

Wilson: I had done it for 16 years, and I thought that was long enough. I had thought about leaving it after 12. I enjoyed it! It's a work that you enjoy. I worked hard at it, and it took a lot of time. So you balance. But I thought, after 16 years—I really began thinking of it after 12—that I'd done it long enough and didn't want to keep doing it just to keep doing it.

Bennett: Did you find that you missed it?

Wilson: I didn't, right away. I don't know that I did. I didn't go back to lobby; I did not want to do that. I occasionally went back to testify on something, but it was time. It really was. I know some folks stayed for a long, long time. I didn't mind the work. It requires a lot of work and a lot of energy. It was just time.

Bennett: Senator Wilson, thank you so much for your time today.

Wilson: Thanks for yours. I enjoyed the visit. You made me think of things I haven't thought about in a long time. [chuckles]

Bennett: Good. I enjoyed the conversation as well.

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**Get
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GROUP FACILITATION
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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.