

TRANSCRIPT OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Lee Sherman Dreyfus
Former Governor of Wisconsin

June 12, 1995

Interviewer: Dr. John R. Johannes

<u>Tape Counter Number</u>	<u>Topic</u>
000 - 102	Joe McCarthy and military experiences. Was never a Democrat, but many of his friends were. People he associated with (Nelson, Hart, Zeidler, Reynolds, others). Grew up in an activist house; mother involved in politics (school board) and family always in public service. Not always interested in running for office; came to run for governor out of his interest in the Republican Party (father's opposition to Roosevelt). Story about the circumstances which led him to run for governor. Went right from UW professor to president.
103 -	Closeout speech for Trueax. Plane crash in Vietnam that killed Albertson, Bainsberg, LaFollette, several others. After that speech people began pushing him again to take the presidency. USAID was going to pull a contract from Stevens Point but people felt if he went there the contract would stay. Went to Point because of the Vietnam/USAID contract. Intended to go up, build the university, finish the contract, and return to teaching at Madison. Real joy was the students; taught every semester he was at Point. Experiences in Vietnam; meeting with their president.
230 -	Went up to Point tied to the students, which affected his whole presidency. Faculty complained about his bluntness in meetings. First one to turn student monies directly to the students. Built the role of student government and was connected to student leaders statewide. Was also chair of Army ROTC.
282 -	By the mid-70s, it was clear he had student support. Students expressed feeling that the system was no good - Agnew, Watergate, etc. He continued to argue that the US system is the best anywhere. In about '76 began to think about the governorship after meeting with Carter. Believed that a one party system was bad and that the Republicans were going downhill. Students moved him to run; went door to door, had little money for the campaign. Students' dedication moved people even in conservative areas of the state. Students voted and brought parents, relatives with them in '78. Some of the individuals who helped him and were later on appointed to his administration.
431 -	Schreiber's vulnerability was not a factor in Dreyfus deciding to run. There was a lot of sympathy for Schreiber in the primary. Polls indicated that Kasten would win but Dreyfus' support came from people who hadn't necessarily voted in the previous elections. Debates hurt Kasten; Dreyfus had the momentum. Issue of taxation; Schreiber's pledge to send \$20 back to all taxpayers while Dreyfus said he would simply not collect taxes for 3 months.
534 -	No coordination of Dreyfus' campaign with anyone else running for statewide office. No party money supported him. Running mate was a very conservative Republican, which helped. Rusty was very loyal even over the gay rights bill. Dreyfus liked the clash of ideas and felt it was beneficial to have opposing viewpoints. Campaigned on tax reform. (end tape 1, side 1)
612 -	Discussion of tax reform continued. Source of some of his ideas such as moving the DNR and closing some of the UW centers. Rationale behind moving the DNR was largely a location issue; individuals wanted to be in more rural areas and closer to forests, etc instead of Madison (but it

didn't go through). UW center at Superior was in trouble; wanted to make that a Spanish-speaking campus but idea was considered too radical. Natural Resources college created by him; also the sister college program with Central America.

- 679 - Transition in taking over from Schreiber was great; lots of ideas for change and excited about them. Had some old hands to help him get set up but did not like "private meetings" (story about his mother refusing to discuss the Milwaukee School Board with his colleagues in private). Press was always welcome in his office; some legislators and lobbyists refused to come into his office because of this. Only legal counsel had a private office. Never issued a press release in four years. Schreiber's people were cooperative in the transition but loss was hard on Schreiber (campaign was not personal).
- 742 - Experience of being governor was somewhat different than what he expected. Clash of ideas politically was different from clash of ideas academically; in the former arena some people would say anything and attacked each other while that was not true in a university setting. Issue of the recession and its causes; state's deficit; taxes. Special elections and his endorsements/role in them. Comparison of preparing university budget to the state budget; "guessing game" of budgeting. Controlling the Democratic majority in the legislature.
- 825 - Getting the income tax indexing through was easy - no one objected to returning the surplus. Realized the importance of not building up a surplus in the first place. Legislators are no match for lobbyists urging them to spend for special interests. Budget targets were based on revenue. In order to help get his policies through, he "went over the heads" of the legislature and reminded them who was in charge. Getting the sales tax increase through - went on live tv/radio to convince people that it was needed and gave out a number to call (his cabinet members were answering the phones) to express their opinions and almost everyone supported the increase. Some legislators resented this move. Convinced that the public needed information on that issue, which usually is not the case.
- 927 - Priorities as governor. Lots of time in meetings. Raised a lot of funds for the party but none for himself - got the party out of debt. Did a lot of budget work because of inflation, unemployment. Watched out for the university. Did not realize how little control he had over the budget as governor compared to being a university president. Wanted to cut the budget across the board to maintain equity but many objected (Maier, others). Got good cooperation from budget people of both parties. Governorship very time consuming; different governors had different ways of handling it. His wife found it hard and she was the main reason he did not run for re-election.
- 1030 - Spent more time on legislative matters than executive ones. Viewed his cabinet members like deans; expected them to be experts in their areas and know more about their areas than he did. His system worked well for him; argued with cabinet members but once a decision was made, the debate was over. Only real problems were in the Dept. of Industry; head was frustrated by the bureaucracy and eventually had to leave. Had smart people around him and considers this a hallmark of his administration. Impact of partisan politics; advice from Pat Lucey about approaching issues.
- 1154 - Didn't have trouble picking his cabinet; knew some people through the university and other connections. Selections were not partisan since he owed the Republican party nothing.
- 1185 - Best thing he did was to alter the direction in which Wisconsin was heading in terms of taxation and revenue. Knew that more problems would develop if nothing was done. Removal of business from Wisconsin was a concern. (end tape 1, side 2)
- (tape 2)
000 - Continuing discussion of getting Wisconsin's financial situation turned around. Feels he also

brought belief in the system back to young people. Progress made toward an understanding between governor-majority party; credit also to Democrats Jim Wehner, Tom Loftus, William Bablitch, and Tim Cullen. Dreyfus reluctant to use the veto power and did not want to create legislation with that power.

- 038 - Biggest mistake was that he did not realize how much legislative clout he had coming in, and feels he could have eliminated the inheritance tax right away instead of settling for smaller tax reductions. Backed off going for an elected public service commission. Wanted to build a minimum security prison in downtown Milwaukee; though it would be positive because of accessibility to the minority community (and incentive that the city was "right there"). Discussion of Wisconsin corrections system.
- 106 - Relationship with the legislature. A lot of time spent stroking egos. Dealing with personalities and members of both parties; not interested in working with some people. Wife not always helpful; ran the mansion by "her rules." General quality of the legislature was very good; concern was regarding the number of people in leadership positions without much economic employment experiences. Some people become arrogant and brash when they have safe seats, but most legislators really liked to "do good." Had problems dealing with people in his own party as well as Democrats; some difficulties with Ellis, Kleczka. Didn't have time to build personal relationships with many legislators outside of the leadership.
- 184 - Process of working with the legislature. Important to listen to his cabinet members and legislators so that he was aware of proposals, problems, and how to get support. Had people from his office talking to legislators, problems with the rumor mill. Did not really clear major proposals with the legislature before submitting them, but legislators were never surprised by his proposals (prior discussion, etc). Engeleiter and Gunderson were helpful to him. Legislative caucuses were not generally useful for him.
- 272 - Handling proposals from within the executive branch. Cabinet members always discussed ideas among themselves; had to present ideas to governor in a single page. No real problems among cabinet members or between his staff and the cabinet.
- 337 - Source of legislative proposals: many developed during the campaign, cabinet members and later legislators (who weren't being heard in their own camps) helped generate and develop ideas. Exact source of the idea did not matter to him, the goal was what mattered. Discussion of legislative strategy. Important that the goal more than the process be understood when legislation was proposed; did not matter who got credit or how things got done. Deciding when to compromise was purely political. Would rather have his proposals lose than have something he considered bad pass. Impact of election year on proposals.
- 451 - His approach to stroking egos and calming legislators down. Relied on his people in the legislature to keep him informed about who needed to be talked to, etc. Tried to be open and understanding but relationships take time to build. Wanted to change people's attitudes rather than engage in horse trading to get things done. Did not see governorship as a "superlegislator" position or keep track of wins and losses. Had to negotiate or trade things at times - specific things in people's districts, most often.
- 548 - Belief in transportation system and need to improve it. Got votes by doing fundraisers for legislators; appeal was not merely Republican. Did not like to punish legislators by refusing to go to their districts because he needed the support of those constituents too. (end tape 2, side 1)
- 619 - Sometimes got involved with plotting legislative strategy but did not trust his own experience (limited). Saw Tommy Thompson as a great political engineer. His staff worked with interest groups but he did not. Considered it important to have the real estate people on his side on the

sales tax issue (as property tax relief). Issues surrounding the acquisition of Marquette's medical college and later chiropractor inclusion in insurance.

- 686 - Did not really use patronage in appointments to help with issues; didn't make a lot of those appointments because he wasn't very control-oriented (cabinet members made most of the selections). Story about leaving Mike Early in the emergency government position instead of appointing someone new because Early was 11 months from full retirement. Made only one appointment in areas of judgeships, sheriffs, and district attorneys (three areas which he felt were most important to select the right people for) in four years because of political reasons; was done to take care of someone who had served the state. Sometimes got in trouble for appointing someone of the wrong party to a given position. Stayed out of legislative committee appointments.
- 756 - Sometimes used the veto as a bargaining device. Did not change the basic legislative attempt with line item veto, but sometimes played with numbers. Democrats did not pass bills designed to force him to veto them. On some occasions, though, poor legislation was passed with the knowledge that he would clean it up. Cabinet secretaries advised him on vetoes, also legislative relations and legal counsel. Political considerations were articulated by Bob Williams, Todd Robert Murphy, Lowell Jackson; on the Senate side Tiny Krueger and Walter Chilson. Also listened to Odie Fish (non-govt.).
- 830 - Issue of non-discrimination because of sexual preference. Tough to sell his non-Republican position to the GOP even though he thought it was traditionally a Republican position (true Republican would say that no one had the right to ask that question of someone). Objections over potential school teachers. Wanted gay rights groups to promise that they would not use the law to go after places like the Winnebago Childrens' Home (had married couples working in their facilities), but within 2 years gay rights groups were attacking Rawhide Boys' Ranch.
- 885 - Citizens' Utility Board was proposed by Democrats; Dreyfus signed it only to prevent them from going much further. Felt that appointees would burn themselves out. Story about potential lawsuit against Minnesota company polluting the Mississippi handled by a phone call to their governor.
- 927 - State bureaucrats. Wisconsin pays them better than most states but has fewer; state generally gets its money worth. Some do coast but most do not. The protection from politics can create encourage arrogance and some stop listening to the people.
- 954 - Reasons for not running for re-election: had accomplished or gotten started everything he went there to do, change to four year term, and impact on his wife Joyce (personal attacks, long weeks, being shadowed by the Jack Pickens people).
- 1007 - Got along with Maier pretty well. Maier's only agenda was getting more money. When Dreyfus challenged him to a debate, he backed off. Eliminated the direct line phone between them because it was a waste of money (not being used). Maier made a mistake by trying to pull one over on Dreyfus about a snowstorm within the first several weeks of his administration. Maier had figured Dreyfus was the new kid on the block and tried to get him to send in the National Guard to help with snow removal to save city money, but Dreyfus didn't fall for it (Mike Early explained what Maier was trying to do).
- 1064 - Relationships with other statewide constitutional officers. Relied on Bronson LaFollette and they got along well even socially. Got along well with Thompson in DPI; later Burt Grover came in. Grover was and is a close friend but they disagreed on funding issues. Sec. of State Vel Phillips was also a close personal friend. Rusty Olson also became a friend. Also got along well with Treasurer Charles Smith. At social gatherings with cabinet officials, politics was never discussed.
- 1152 - Most rewarding aspect of being governor was the simple honor of having the people elect him.

Wanted his legacy to be one of open, non-corrupt government and did not want to create a mess for future generations. Chance to put his stamp on the state's direction was important. Did not miss being governor after he left; has never had a problem walking away from power. Father convinced him that he had been given a lot of talent, but that he could not be proud of it and that he was responsible to do something with it.