

TRANSCRIPT OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW

Interview with Mr. J. Avery Wittenberger
Former Reporter at the Milwaukee Journal

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Interviewer: Dr. John R. Johannes

Tape Counter Number

- 000 - 152 Personal history as a reporter. Graduated from University of Minnesota Journalism School; worked in southern Minnesota, LaCrosse, then to the Journal where worked for 34 1/2 years almost exclusively on the court house run and county government. Retired at end of 1977. Most important change in county government during his time was the establishment of the office of the county executive. Used to talk about county government with Bill O' Donnell, who gives him a lot of the credit for the creation of the county executive. County had been regarded as a "hick" government; run by the county board. Ten to fifteen years before the office was established other moves had been made to consolidate administrative functions of the county. The metropolitan area had not been covered. Most departments at the county were generally self-sustaining (own accounting and purchasing, etc.) and were responsible to the county board; the feeling developed that there was a need for uniformity. Some functions were consolidated including budgeting system (Dick Harter). County Auditor (Frank Bitner) had handled the budget. Supervisor Willard Lyons was powerful as chair of Finance Committee. Lyons and Gene Warnimont basically ran county government. After budget office was set up, there was a movement towards centralizing the accounting system (by early 1950s or so). Also centralized purchasing. Eventually set up Department of Administration (Dick Harter first head).
- 153 - 350 Events "before his time" in county government. Establishment of civil service (about 1915). Dave Jennings as Chief Examiner of the civil service; Oliver O'Boyle ran the Corporation Council; Jerome Dretzka as Secretary of the Parks Commission; Bill Cavanaugh headed the Highway Department. People behind the scenes ran the government through the county board. Cumbersome system. County Park Commission was created (1936) with state authority and removed from control of local politicians. Commission got control over other things such as the zoo (new one built in late 1950s largely due to efforts of George Spidel). Parks Commission had considerable influence. President was Dineen, who was influential with Warnimont. County also got involved with the airport. In the 1950s county board decided to update Milwaukee's facilities. Maitland Field created as one of the small landing strips because some predicted people would commute to work by planes in the future. Lawrence Timmerman, conservative chair of the board who clashed with Warnimont, was one of two regular dissenting votes (other was George Herman) when it came to spending money. Herman opposed building the new zoo because it was too far out. Timmerman also was opposed to spending money to develop the airport. Consideration of building a new terminal in the 50s. Airport manager at the time was Stanley Piasecki who was "not a professional manager." Story about taking Timmerman for a ride on an airplane that sold him on the idea and made him the leader of the fight to get the new terminal (which was built).
- 351 - 604 Bill O'Donnell began serving on the Board in 1948 as the youngest ever to do so. Many key leaders in county government had died, and many changes were taking place. Structural changes in government; looked at the metropolitan system set up in Dade County, FL. Suburbs feared that such a system would mean they would be controlled by government in the central city. Upon returning from the trip to Florida, Supervisor Busby introduced a resolution in the County Board to declare Milwaukee County government a metropolitan government. This helped sell the idea. John Doyne, a member of the Board since mid-50s, had been Deputy County Treasurer after WWII and developed interest in County Government; was appointed (probably) Supervisor. Doyne was first vice chair of the Board and acted as chair when Timmerman was unable to chair. O'Donnell introduced resolution to seek state legislation to let the county set up an office of County Executive, which was eventually done (1958 by the time legislation was through; set up by 1960 election). Doyne was the first county exec. Some feared that the office would become strictly political. Question of salary for the

county exec and setting up the office. Wittenberger feels that the county was fortunate that Doyne was elected to the office because he set the standards for the office. The issue was whether the executive position would be administrative or political. (end side 1, tape 1 at 604)

Side two
605 - 693

Changes have occurred in the type of person holding office of Supervisor. They now are professional (lawyers). In his time few were college educated. Later on Supervisors who were lawyers often used the courthouse for legal business, with the excuse that the supervisor position was part-time. Supervisors did not have individual offices until later on; the expansion of staff occurred later also. Positions eventually relatively equal to aldermen.

694 - 989

John Doyne. Had genuine interest in making the office effective; thought county government was the most important of local governments. He was able to sell the idea of county government to the public, which was an early goal for him. Doyne was very personable, effective politician, well liked. "Trek with the County Exec" as a tool to educate the public; good public relations person who set a program of things to accomplish as soon as he was elected. Instrumental in setting up Dept. of Administration. Came up with program to set up Dept. of Safety. Conflict between Doyne and the County Board, especially Gene Grobschmidt. who had fought against establishing the county exec office in the first place. The difference was natural when exec tries to take over some legislative functions. Milwaukee County was one of the first counties to have an elected county executive. Questions about the constitutionality of some of the powers of the county exec. Rivalry got pretty personal at times. Power on the board gotten by "backscratching." Doyne was a good public speaker and got support of community for the office; did have friends on the Board such as Supervisors White, Busby, and O'Donnell. Doyne good at winning votes on the Board; well liked by those on the Board. Conflict over who had control over the department heads began with Doyne; got out of hand with O'Donnell. Big accomplishment for Doyne was the establishment of the medical center. Department heads did not give him much grief; they respected him. Dick Harter, Dept. of Administration were supportive. Tony Romano, Chief Examiner of Civil Service, used to get upset with Doyne on occasion.

990 - 1110

Bill O'Donnell. Wittenberger views him favorably; next to Doyne O'Donnell probably contributed as much as anyone to modernizing county govt. O'Donnell didn't necessarily aspire to the exec's office but proved himself by beating McCann. O'Donnell had integrity and was principled while not being as personable as Doyne. Felt that politics were needed in government. School consolidation issue occurred in late 1940s. The state legislature set up county school committees; Milwaukee committee included Walter Willing, Leroy Grossman. A citizens' committee was charged with consolidating outlying school districts and reduced the number from 35 or 38 down to 17 or 18. Mike Keys was Executive Secretary of the committee who helped them accomplish the reduction.

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Wittenberger filed at some times 10-12 stories per day. O'Donnell did have personal vision but by the time he was in office, the structure of county government was well established. He was expanding on the idea of making people responsible to his office instead of to the civil service. Wittenberger thought this expansion would make things too political. As a reporter he did not have much trouble getting access to officials once he had established himself (had to overcome reputation of his predecessor). Never felt any pressure from the Journal about how to handle stories or viewpoints. (end tape 1)

(begin tape 2)
000 - 108

Never knew of any reporter being told how to write a story. Knew where the Journal stood and what it was interested in and pursued stories that would get in the paper rather than topics that were less likely to get in; but there was no overt political pressure on him. Knew a lot of people in the courthouse; often the politicians were not the ones he could rely on for information. Department heads might try to keep some things quiet or not be willing to give out information. Good friend in county govt. was Al Boerner who became Parks Director. Often did not go through him to get information, and Al did not like that and said that any stories about parks were to go through him. Howard Gregg was next Parks Director and he was very cooperative. Some negative stories angered officials - one about a jobs study done by the county. Wittenberger got a copy of the study before Gene Warnimont's policy committee met to release it - Wittenberger wrote the story and Warnimont was quite upset (called city editor Murray Reed who backed up Wittenberger on the situation; Warnimont apologized

the next day).

- 109 - 255 Powerful people outside of county government were Norman Gill and Leo Tiefenthaler (spokesman for the City Club). Greater Milwaukee Committee and Rudy Schoenecker had influence from the business community. White and Busby supported public projects on the Board (e.g. Busby sponsored the legislation that built County Stadium, GMC and Schoenecker supported the stadium also). GMC also backed the zoo project. Schoenecker would speak to the Board formally; lobbying also took place more informally. Labor unions also affected county government, especially under O'Donnell who was a brewery worker and became a spokesman for unions when in office. Unions also worked on other members of the Board, mostly behind the scenes. "Urban Democratic gang" from the suburbs became more influential as time went on; eventually in some areas one would have to be a Democrat to get elected. Milwaukee County politics was generally pretty clean; what few scandals there have been were not associated with partisan politics. One scandal happened at the House of Correction before Wittenberger's time; another one occurred in the purchasing department in the early 1960s when the director had been getting payoffs from furniture and other suppliers of equipment for the county (director resigned). That episode began with a story in the Journal that Wittenberger had gotten by going through the records at the director's office while he was suspended).
- 256 - 438 Courthouse and the suburbs got along pretty well; not as much of a rivalry between county/suburbs as between county/city. County was getting all of the attractive responsibilities (stadium, parks) while the city was responsible for the things like snow removal and garbage collection. Sense that the city thought the county was becoming too powerful. County had no problems with Zeidler; some rivalry over the annexation issue. County involved with the "iron ring" of suburbs. Race was not an issue as such during Wittenberger's time. There was a quota system put on the civil service. First black on the County Board was Ike Coggs, who was succeeded by Cal Moody who represented more conservative blacks (labeled an Uncle Tom). Clinton Rose was elected in another district and was well liked. Terry Pitts also served on the Board. Race never a problem with county government. One big issue concerned the Medical Complex, and there were sharp disagreements on the Board relative to it. The main question was whether it should be downtown or out at the institution. Majority of the Board and Doyme felt that the institution was the best place for a county medical center. Most "major battles" involved where to locate something; e.g. the stadium, the zoo, to some extent the new airport terminal, children's home. Battles fought through debates in committees and on the floor of the County Board. County got to be notorious for "site fights."
- 439 - 532 County takeover of museum and metropolitan library system. Libraries were not a big issue; questions raised within the city regarding whether the city would be represented properly. Later on the museum became more of an issue because the city losing a main attraction. The city recognized that the museum was becoming a financial drag and that it was more logical for taxpayers in the whole community to support it. Transportation system was a major project, as was the county takeover of freeways, which dragged on for a while. It required state legislation and was a major undertaking for the county. Timmerman and Herman had the most reservations about it.
- 533 - 618 The biggest scandal of his time was removal of Nowakowski as a County Supervisor. After he was elected to the Board in 1964 there soon were significant changes in membership (about 8 new members). Nowakowski had been a State Assemblyman and won the chairmanship of the County Board in 1968 by promising new members choice committee assignments. (end side 1 at 606) He also had an affair with a young woman using the chair's office. Journal put a separate investigative reporter on it and the Sentine!'s efforts also helped get him out of office.
- 619 - 746 In Wittenberger's opinion, the county did become a metropolitan government during early 50s and up through the 60s. Suburbs would never have stood for a real metropolitan government, and Doyme was against it; it never became a real issue in the courthouse. The purpose of Busby's resolution declaring a metropolitan government seemed to be to head off any move to extend county government further. Zeidler had expansionist ideas; he was visionary person who wanted a more regional government and came up with a plan for one but idea never went over with the Board or suburbs. Most of metropolitan area still was within Milwaukee County at the time. Credit should go to Charlie Whitnall for his role in developing the parks system. Wittenberger feels

Milwaukee has one of the best parks systems in the country. Jerome Dretzka, Gene Howard also key. O'Donnell was instrumental in abolishing the Parks Commission which Wittenberger felt was a good group to have as protection for the parks system. County Board of Public Welfare effective in administering the welfare department and combining it with the institutions operation. Bill Coffey, Director of Institutions, was very influential with the County Board. O'Donnell continued Doyne's idea of increasing accountability to the exec's office and got rid of the Parks Commission largely because of this. Heads of Parks and Welfare appointed by the chair of the County Board at first and later by the exec with Board approval. Commissions that remain (e.g., Ethics Commission) no longer are very powerful. (side 2, tape 2)