

California State Archives
State Government Oral History Program

Oral History Interview

with

JAMES R. WRIGHTSON

Journalist, 1948 - 1985

August 10, 15, 25 and September 15, 1988
Pasadena, California

By Carlos Vásquez
Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

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None.

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PREFACE

On September 25, 1985, Governor George Deukmejian signed into law A.B. 2104 (Chapter 965 of the Statutes of 1985). This legislation established, under the administration of the California State Archives, a State Government Oral History Program "to provide through the use of oral history a continuing documentation of state policy development as reflected in California's legislative and executive history."

The following interview is one of a series of oral histories undertaken for inclusion in the state program. These interviews offer insights into the actual workings of both the legislative and executive processes and policy mechanisms. They also offer an increased understanding of the men and women who create legislation and implement state policy. Further, they provide an overview of issue development in California state government and of how both the legislative and executive branches of government deal with issues and problems facing the state.

Interviewees are chosen primarily on the basis of their contributions to and influence on the policy process of the state of California. They include members of the legislative and executive branches of the state government as well as legislative staff, advocates, members of the media, and other people who played significant roles in specific issue areas of major and continuing importance to California.

By authorizing the California State Archives to work cooperatively with oral history units at California colleges and universities to conduct interviews, this program is structured to take advantage of the resources and expertise in oral history available through California's several institutionally based programs.

Participating as cooperating institutions in the State Government Oral History Program are:

Oral History Program
History Department
California State University, Fullerton

Oral History Program
Center for California Studies
California State University, Sacramento

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Claremont Graduate School

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

The establishment of the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program marks one of the most significant commitments made by any state toward the preservation and documentation of its governmental history. It supplements the often fragmentary historical written record by adding an organized primary source, enriching the historical information available on given topics and allowing for more thorough historical analysis. As such, the program, through the preservation and publication of interviews such as the one which follows, will be of lasting value to current and future generations of scholars, citizens and leaders.

John F. Burns
State Archivist

July 27, 1988

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer/Editor:

Carlos Vásquez
Director, UCLA State Government Interview Series,
UCLA Oral History Program
B.A., UCLA [Political Science]
M.A., Stanford University [Political Science]
Ph.D. candidate, UCLA [History]

Interview Time and Place:

August 10, 1988
Wrightson's home in Pasadena, California
Session of one and one-half hours

August 15, 1988
Wrightson's home in Pasadena, California
Session of two hours

August 25, 1988
Wrightson's home in Pasadena, California
Session of one and one-quarter hours

September 15, 1988
Wrightson's home in Pasadena, California
Session of one hour

Editing

Vásquez checked the verbatim manuscript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spellings, and verified proper names. Insertions by the editor are bracketed. The interviewer also prepared the introductory materials.

Wrightson reviewed the edited transcript and made a number of changes, none of which altered the content of the interview, but which extracted repetitive or extraneous material.

Papers

There exist no private papers which the interviewer was able to consult for this interview.

Tapes and Interview Records

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives at UCLA along with the records relating to the interview. Master tapes are preserved at the California State Archives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

James R. Wrightson was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on February 13, 1921. He attended public schools in Baltimore, then studied for two years at Western Maryland College in Westminster. He married schoolteacher Dorothy Blanche Davidshon in 1942 and had two children, Neal Robert and Beth Anne. Although raised in the Methodist church, Wrightson found his ideals best represented by the work of the Society of Friends (Quakers).

During World War II, Wrightson was drafted as a conscientious objector and spent the duration of the war in public service camps run by the Quakers. He came to California in 1945 when he was transferred to a fire-fighting camp in the San Bernadino National Forest run by the United States Selective Service. After being released from conscientious objector detention, he worked for the National Farm Labor Union in early efforts to organize California's farm workers.

He began his professional journalistic career in 1948 by going to work for the Altadenan, a small community newspaper in Altadena, California. From 1950 to 1952 he wrote for the Delano Record in Delano, California, then moved to the Taft Midway Driller. After a short stint at that paper, he worked for the Tulare Advance Register until 1955 when he went to the Fresno Bee. As their Sacramento correspondent, he covered the state legislature for the Bee until 1966 when he became the Los Angeles correspondent for the Sacramento Bee. In 1971 he became associate editor of the Sacramento Bee in Sacramento and in 1982 opened a bureau for that paper in Los Angeles. He retired from full-time journalism in 1985.

During Wrightson's long journalistic career, he covered local as well as state issues which involved legislative action in Sacramento. His interview reflects a local journalist's view of state government.

[Session 1, August 10, 1988]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Mr. Wrightson, could you give me [some] of your family history?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. I was born February 13 [1921] in Baltimore, Maryland. Baltimore is on the Potomac River, which goes into the Chesapeake Bay.

I went to public schools. I had no brothers or sisters; I was an only child. Our family was of modest circumstances. We were never poor, but we were never rich either. I never wanted for anything. I never felt deprived. But on the other hand, we weren't part of the social elite in Baltimore, Maryland.

VASQUEZ: Tell me something about your family history, for as many generations as you care to.

WRIGHTSON: I'm not a great fan of genealogy. When my father died, I gave our family Bible away to the church he [attended]. I don't even have it, and he had kept it for years. He said that the

Wrightsons were shipbuilders in Scotland, and they came over to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and then went to Baltimore. I don't know if that's true. My family upbringing was modest, middle-class, very middle-class family.

VASQUEZ: What was your father's name?

WRIGHTSON: George [R. Wrightson]. He worked at the Gas Electric Company [Consolidated Gas Electric Light and Power Company of Baltimore], in the executive offices. He never told me, really, much of what he did there. He worked in the corporate office. I know he did because he got his pension from there. But he was very secretive about what he did there. I know he prepared stock reports and annual reports, but I don't know what he did. And he never talked about his work at home. I never knew how much he made.

VASQUEZ: How about your mother? What was your mother's name?

WRIGHTSON: My mother's name was Ethel [M. Rathell]. She was French, and her family came from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Her mother's name was [Annie] Warner; she was English. She was a very intelligent woman. She wound up in the

diagnostic clinic of Johns Hopkins [University] Hospital as the registrar.

In other words, people came there to be diagnosed from all over the world, and she would set up the appointments so they wouldn't be taking barium the same day they had the blood test, or whatever. She was very interested [in her work], and the doctors thought a lot of her.

When she died of cancer in the hospital, the doctors from Johns Hopkins--she wasn't in Johns Hopkins--came over and just held her hand and fed her crushed ice and all. They liked her so much. She was quite influential in my life, I think.

VASQUEZ: How so?

WRIGHTSON: She probably gave me a lot of my morals and a lot of my feelings for other people and urged any intellectual or literary leanings I might have had.

I graduated from high school at Forest Park High School, which was all white and at least about a third Jewish. I mention that because my impression of the Jews there was that they were achievers. I think when you're in a school

where there are achievers, you do better than when there's a school where they're all nonachievers. I mean, our classroom was [snaps fingers] like that. It was a very good high school for me. It had about 3,000 people in it.

VASQUEZ: Were you a good student?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, I was. But I don't think I had an outstanding record. I was probably a B student. I was sick for a while in 1936. I had bronchopneumonia. I started to take a commercial [business] course and found I didn't like it. I had to switch to an academic course and go to summer school to make up those things.

When it came time to go to college, I applied for a state scholarship and won one. So I went to Western Maryland College with a four-year scholarship, all expenses paid.

VASQUEZ: What were your favorite topics in high school, and what major did you choose in college?

WRIGHTSON: I chose to major in history and biology. I was extremely interested in biology and leaf collecting and botany and so forth. I took a lot of walks in the woods and did a lot of birding [bird-watching], and so forth.

I really wanted to be a botanist. My father opposed that. He wanted me to go into banking. As a senior in high school, I had a chance to go on a Harvard University summer research project, that you went on for nothing, to do some botany. I forget where it was. My father prohibited me from doing it and, instead, got me a job at the Federal Reserve Bank in Baltimore saying that you didn't get anywhere in botany, you didn't get paid, you know. [He] had no sympathy with that kind of thing. He was completely business-oriented.

So, I majored in biology and history at Western Maryland [College], doing fairly well. Although, the war was coming, and my social views interfered a lot with my studies. I spent a lot more time with social causes than I did on my studies.

VASQUEZ: Tell me about the social views you held then.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I was very influenced by a guy who went to a Quaker high school and then to Johns Hopkins [University] in Baltimore. He's still in Baltimore. His name was John Cannan Hecker, and he and I were fairly good friends. He was a

couple of years older than I was.

He's completely changed. He's very conservative now, but he was quite a liberal [then]. Did you ever hear of Broadus Mitchell at Johns Hopkins? They wrote his obit [obituary]. He just died. He was a sort of a socialist and ran for mayor there. Anyway, he [Hecker] influenced me quite a bit in my social philosophy, as opposed to my father's social philosophy.

VASQUEZ: How would you characterize your social philosophy at the time?

WRIGHTSON: It was liberal, certainly. Well, you didn't use the word then, but you were caring. I was very much against racial discrimination. In high school I was for equality. I remember arguing with other high school students in Baltimore.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember a particular cause or incident in those days that you were involved with?

WRIGHTSON: Well, they had some lynchings on the Eastern Shore. The Baltimore Sun was very much against them, and a guy named H. L. Mencken, as you know, wrote some things condemning the lynchings and calling residents of the Eastern Shore

"rednecks." They burned some Baltimore Sun trucks on the Eastern Shore, newspaper trucks. And that was a sort of conversation in Baltimore, certainly around [Johns] Hopkins and places like that. I was very much against the lynching.

VASQUEZ: With what religious training were you brought up?

WRIGHTSON: I was a Methodist and went to church very religiously. I was taken to church and I went to church on my own. I became much more religious than my parents, much more. And that led to my conscientious objection.

VASQUEZ: Could you tell me about that, how your social views led to conscientious objection?

WRIGHTSON: It was mostly from reading. I read Tolstoy, and I read some of the anarchists, Bakunin and so forth, and I had what you'd now call a simplistic view. I believed that war was wrong and you shouldn't participate in it. The only way to stop war was to not participate. And I stuck with it. I stuck with it in college. I took the first year of ROTC [Reserve Officer's Training Corps] because they told me I had to

since I was there on a scholarship. But the second year, I refused to do it.

VASQUEZ: Did that affect your scholarship?

WRIGHTSON: No.

VASQUEZ: What were the social costs or educational costs, if any, of holding these social beliefs of pacifism? Would you characterize it as pacifism?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. I'm not afraid of that. The costs were probably internal turmoil for myself. I didn't study as well. A lot of things that I was learning in college seemed unimportant compared with the social milieu.

VASQUEZ: What year was this?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it was 1939 or '40. Hitler was walking into [other countries.] There was a nationwide group called the Committee to Save Democracy by Defending the Allies. The professors were all for that, but I was not. I started going to Quaker meetings because this fellow, Cannan Hecker, did, although I belonged to a Methodist church. They [Quakers] were very much against the war.

VASQUEZ: What was it you found attractive about the

[Society of] Friends, other than their antiwar position?

WRIGHTSON: I liked the meeting. They had a silent meeting. You sat silently for an hour, and people got up and spoke extemporaneously or spontaneously as the spirit moved them. They said some very profound things. One of the things I remember was a guy getting up and saying--it was an older man--"My idea of Heaven is millions of problems, some solvable."

[Laughter]

VASQUEZ: So that stuck with you?

WRIGHTSON: Well, and also, I think, Clarence Pickett. He established the American Friends Service Committee, he said, "to give a thirsty man a cup of cold water." And that kind of simplicity got to me. I grasp the simple, always have, because I try to get through the maze.

One thing that worries me contemporarily in Los Angeles is the hype here. It's just terrible. It's just awfully hard to get through. If I had any virtues as a reporter-- and I think I had some, because I kept the job-- it was to get to the bottom of things, to get it

down as well as you could.

VASQUEZ: This is what you found attractive in the Quakers?

WRIGHTSON: Well, yes. It was fundamental and simplistic, I guess. And so was Tolstoy certainly simplistic. But it was basic and sincere. It had credibility to me. That, combined with the Sermon on the Mount, you know, that Christian upbringing. I was in a school and a family where they were quite conservative. Gandhi was moving in those days, too. There was a whole movement that way.

My father was very much against [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt, and so were his friends. I was not. I even thought it was good that he ran for a third term, because it broke precedent. And I thought that was good. Anyway.

I was never a bomb-throwing revolutionary. I never thought of joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Of course, I could not if I was a pacifist. But I was never sympathetic to the Communist party, because I saw them at work at certain places in the peace movement and they

manipulated it terribly.

VASQUEZ: What was it that distanced you from the Communist party, what did you dislike?

WRIGHTSON: Well, they manipulated groups.

VASQUEZ: In what way? Can you give an example?

WRIGHTSON: Well, they tried to get resolutions through peace groups, sending bundles to Russia or something. I didn't think they were really pacifists. I thought they--I didn't use the word then--but they subverted the group. For example, remember when Russia attacked Finland? There was a guy, a big Communist party front guy. Granville Hicks. He asked for twenty-four hours to think it over, and they kicked him out, boom. You couldn't think it over. And that influenced me. When a man asked for twenty-four hours to search his conscience, and they wouldn't even give him that. So I had no sympathy with the Communist party, ever.

I never thought that that was a great society. Early on, I read James Burnham. His theory was that society is kept free by various opposing or conflicting crosscurrents.¹ In

¹. The Managerial Revolution. New York: John Day Company, 1941.

other words, you have the NAM [National Association of Manufacturers] for this and on the other side, you have the American Civil Liberties Union or the Socialist party, which was stronger in those days. These things kept each other at bay and lubricated the freedom. There were enough crevices for people to get into, so they could be free.

VASQUEZ: You felt American democracy gave room enough for all of these tendencies?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. I never doubted it.

VASQUEZ: Did you finish your four years of college there?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, no, no, no. The Japanese attacked on December 7 [1941]. There was terrible, terrible war hysteria, which affected me very, very much.

VASQUEZ: In what way?

WRIGHTSON: I saw people change overnight. People [were] warlike, they wanted to go get the "Japs." They wouldn't buy Japanese things and took the Japanese to those relocation camps. Not that early, but they did.

VASQUEZ: How much of that do you think was nationalist

fervor, and how much of it do you think was anti-Japanese racism?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I wasn't here, you understand. I was in the East, so it was nationalist fervor there. I had probably never seen a Japanese person in Baltimore. I didn't know where they were. It was out here, and I don't know.

VASQUEZ: But back in Baltimore, it was nationalist fervor more than racist?

WRIGHTSON: Well, there wasn't a lot of fervor for interning the Japanese back there.

VASQUEZ: But I'm saying about "going out and getting the Japs," fighting back.

WRIGHTSON: Oh, that. I think that was nationalist fervor. I think Roosevelt [portrayed it as] just [being] stabbed in the back and all. I think they bought all that. You almost saw the same thing when the Russians shot down that Korean airliner [KAL Flight #007].¹ That was close, that kind of: "Look what they did to us,

1. Soviet military planes shot down a Korean commercial airliner on September 1, 1983, with 269 persons on board. An intense anti-Soviet media campaign ensued in the United States which led to the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles.

and they knew better." Now, I don't think the Japanese attack was the same as that, but [there was] the same kind of resentment and fervor.

VASQUEZ: What was your position at the time?

WRIGHTSON: On what?

VASQUEZ: On the upcoming war, the attack by the Japanese. What was your thinking on that?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I was amazed by it, of course. I wondered, "What happened?" And I didn't understand exactly why it happened.

VASQUEZ: But you still opposed going to war?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. In fact, one of the professors said the day after Pearl Harbor: "Now, is there anybody in this class who would not?" And I said, "I'm sorry. I still feel the same way."

VASQUEZ: Do you remember who that professor was?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, his name was [Theodore] Whitfield. He taught history. He was a very bellicose man.

VASQUEZ: Were you inducted or drafted?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I then quit college and went to Newark [New Jersey] and lived in the same settlement house with seven nonregistrants [for the armed services].

VASQUEZ: Where was that settlement house?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the address was 37 Wright Street. I think they incorporated it under the name Christian Community [Inc.]. I forget, but they were incorporated. They had to. We lived there and shared all things in common. We worked in bakeries at night, washed windows, contributed our money and established a co-op. We lived right in the black section of Newark at 37 Wright Street.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the names of any of the other people that lived there in the settlement house with you?

WRIGHTSON: Sure. [Do] you want them?

VASQUEZ: Please.

WRIGHTSON: David [T.] Dellinger, Charles Swift, [Donald] Don Benedict, [William] Bill Sutherland. Well, then somebody--maybe it was me--but somebody influenced a lot of people at Western Maryland. We had about six or eight conscientious objectors from there, and they all came to Newark after I did. Their names were [Olin] Harper Lacompte, Bryce [D.] Jacobsen, Isaac [B.] Rehert, a woman named Phoebe Robinson. Her father was a minister in Washington; her mother

was head of the International League for Peace and Freedom. Carolyn Schmidt. We took in a lot of transients there, alcoholics, and fed them and so forth. You don't want their names, or do you?

VASQUEZ: No.

WRIGHTSON: There were other women in the house [like] Mary Lou Sharpless. She married Charlie Swift. Betty Dellinger. David had married her. [Marjorie] Marj Benedict, that was Don Benedict's wife. A woman named Frances Ransome. Her father was a professor at the University of Oklahoma, I think. Oh, and the other person, had been my roommate at college, his name was James [B.] Snodgrass.

VASQUEZ: How long were you in this settlement house?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I got there in April during a snowstorm. I think it was 1942. All of us from Western Maryland left the settlement house and established another settlement house in Harrison, New Jersey, which is right near Newark. You have to understand, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] kept coming in and cleaning us out. People who didn't carry

draft cards [would be] arrested and put in jail, kept there three days, and then let you go and so forth.

People were going to jail. Like Jacobsen went to jail from there, and Rehert went to jail from there. They were nonregistrants. So the personnel moved around, and people came through. Of the people who came through at Newark, there was John Haynes Holmes, a reverend and a very well respected man. Frank [M.] Olmstead was president of the War Resisters' League. Dorothy Day was at that settlement house. They [the FBI] kept raiding us. I met my wife there, Dorothy. She came over from New York City. She had worked at the War Resisters' League in New York.

VASQUEZ: What was her maiden name?

WRIGHTSON: [Dorothy B.] Davidshon. She and I met [when] she came over and lived at that settlement house and worked at the War Resisters' League. She and I got married. We took a place in Greenwich Village while I was waiting for induction. I decided to go to camp. For a while I didn't register. Well, I registered but I wouldn't

fill out all the forms. The district attorney in Baltimore filed a complaint, and I was arrested by the FBI.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be?

WRIGHTSON: What year? I think it was '42. It hurt my parents so badly, and my father, it almost killed him. It was in the Baltimore papers. You can't imagine. I mean, you can't imagine. So I said, "All right, I'll go to camp." So I went to camp.

VASQUEZ: To what, basic training camp?

WRIGHTSON: No. CPS [Civilian Public Service]. I let them induct me. I went to Baltimore, went through the induction, and was sent to a camp in Big Flats, New York. It's right near Elmira [New York]. And my wife came there. She took an apartment, and I stayed in camp. She worked as a waitress or wherever she [could]. In a library, too, I think. I worked on the CPS project--I didn't do much kitchen work or anything--until 1945.

VASQUEZ: Tell me a little bit about life in camp, what kind of work you did, what kinds of people were there, what kind of indoctrination, if any.

WRIGHTSON: No. Quakers were not indoctrinated. I mean, Quakers ran that camp. Do you understand the setup of the camp? The three historic peace churches, the Brethren [Historic Peace Church], the Mennonites, and the Quakers--ran camps. They administered them, and Selective Service took care of the discipline. They [the peace churches] also bought the food and everything. Okay? Finally, the government established camps which were much harsher. And the Quakers had a Quaker camp. Usually, there were wealthy Quakers who could afford to take off and be the camp directors. There were no uniforms in the camp, of course. There were no walls or bars. We were not paid. Did I tell you the Quakers bargained that away for us?

Well, when the draft came, the Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Brethren went to Roosevelt or whoever and said, "[Some of] our young men are not going to go. In World War I they had tortured people in jail and tried to make them sign up. We don't want that to happen again." And the war hysteria wasn't that much when the draft started. If you remember, they appointed

Clarence [A.] Dykstra head of Selective Service. The hysteria hadn't started when the draft started; the hysteria started after Pearl Harbor. The draft was . . .

VASQUEZ: It seemed innocuous enough to people?

WRIGHTSON: To most people, not to me. I thought it was the first step. No, I thought it was a terrible thing. I wanted to resist it from the beginning. I thought it was a terrible first step.

There was a guy named Paul Comely French, the head of the National Service Board for Religious Objectors, which had been formed. They negotiated with the government. They said, "Just to show how sincere we are, we'll run the camps, pay for the food, and these people will work for nothing. They won't get any money. They won't get \$30 a month [as those drafted into the army did]. They won't get anything. To show our sincerity, while other people are being killed and shooting each other, we'll do this work of national importance under civilian direction for nothing. That's our contribution."

VASQUEZ: What kind of work did you do?

WRIGHTSON: We weeded beds at a nursery there, or [planted] pine trees. You spent all day on your knees weeding. There was a feeling of the Quakers selling us out.

VASQUEZ: What were your feelings at the time about that?

WRIGHTSON: I had come from where I thought I was doing important work in the slums, and I thought this work was punitive, although not terribly punitive. Look, if you didn't want to fight and were afraid to go, this was a good deal. I mean, you were out in the mountains, and all you had to do was weed all day, if that was your attitude. It was not mine.

But if you were socially conscious, you didn't want to be there. I mean, just like right now, suppose they picked up people for whatever. You wouldn't want to go up into the wilderness and cut logs. You have a social consciousness to move people ahead. And that was hard for me, because I was weeding and so forth. I didn't get along too well with the project superintendents because I was not a willing worker. I worked, but I wasn't a farm

boy.

On Thanksgiving Day they had us come out and--I think the weather was about zero [degrees]--throw rocks into a truck from a road. We all knew could have been done in an hour by a skiploader, but they had us do it. Well, when you're free labor, it's ridiculous to call a skiploader. "These guys can do it." That's the trouble with cheap labor.

VASQUEZ: Now, how was this labor you were doing nationally significant?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it would have been done, anyway. I mean, it wasn't breaking little rocks out of big ones, really. The forest service had a somewhat punitive attitude, mostly because they went into the community every night. And people would ask them, "Well, how are you doing with those bastards? Are you really putting it to them? My son's over there, you know, what the hell." So that rubbed off a lot.

VASQUEZ: So it was a parceling or contracting out of your labor to the forest service?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. The forest service sort of ran the camp. Well, ours was a Soil Conservation Service.

[There were] different ones. This was soil conservation. They had a project, and the project was going on. You raised small pine trees. You weeded the beds. They would plant them and they grew. And you went out and cut wood. You lived in a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp. You understand, these were all CCC camps.

So, we did that. I worked every day. I never got sick or made out I was sick or anything like that. General [Lewis B.] Hershey was then the head of the thing. I thought it was military control. And I thought that that was a denial of what we started out to do. They had Selective Service people come around to the camps and discipline or whatever they did.

Anyway, a bulletin went out that the western forest in California, Oregon, and Washington was essentially in flames. I don't know whether the Japanese had floated their first balloon, but for some reason. I applied for that.

VASQUEZ: Before we go into that, tell me a little more about the dissent in this camp. Was there ever

organized dissent not being paid for labor?

WRIGHTSON: No. There were a lot of letters written to and printed in pacifist publications.

VASQUEZ: Were there ever groups, discussion groups?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: What kinds of discussions would take place in the camp? What kinds of topics? And would people there ever try to indoctrinate you?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, no, no, no. There were socialists in that camp. Anybody who got a 4-E draft classification was there. There were a lot of religious fundamentalists. There were Father Divine people there. There were a lot of Holy Roller blacks in that camp. There were a lot of Jehovah's Witnesses there, and the only reason they didn't want to fight the war was because it wasn't Armageddon. I saw a Jehovah's Witness grab the project superintendent by the collar during an argument on the project saying, "I'm going to punch you out. I'm not one of them. I don't believe in pacifism!" [Laughter] He never said he didn't believe in violence. He just didn't believe that this was the war he should fight. It was his religion. He was

religious.

Of course, it was one big camplife discussion group, in a way, because there were socialists and fascists. There were accountants, teachers, and college professors [there].

VASQUEZ: What was the age spectrum?

WRIGHTSON: I guess the oldest was about thirty-eight and the youngest was eighteen or nineteen.

VASQUEZ: How old were you at the time?

WRIGHTSON: I was twenty, I guess. No, twenty-one, wasn't I? Yes, I was twenty-one.

VASQUEZ: What impact did the discussions or experiences in that camp have on your social thinking or perceptions?

WRIGHTSON: Well, you understand, I had been in a much richer, more dynamic atmosphere at Newark with the nonregistrants. So this was much less than that. These people had had jobs in society. They were not the pacifist revolutionists that David Dellinger and these other people were. You understand, this was very tame. A lot of those people were there [because they were] religious fundamentalists, because it said in

the Bible, "You shall not kill." They had no sense of politics, none. There was a minister from Philadelphia there, a white minister with his black flock. He'd gotten a conscientious objector status for about six or eight of his black followers. They were all in camp. He drove a car; they rode bicycles. They still contributed, whatever they did. They went out and washed cars. It was quite a milieu. Max [M.] Kampleman, who was on the U.S. arms control negotiating team, was in that camp. He wrote a newsletter from there.¹

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the name of that newsletter?

WRIGHTSON: No. There were mainline Quakers there.

VASQUEZ: So it was really quite a conglomeration of people.

WRIGHTSON: Yes.

VASQUEZ: Three thousand people, did you say?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, no, no. Three thousand were in my high school. Oh, no, no, no. I don't remember how

1. Max Kampleman, an assistant to Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota and later in the Ronald Reagan administration, was on the United States Arms Control Commission.

many were in that camp. There were four or five barracks. Oh, no. It was not Manzanar. It was no Japanese relocation camp. We didn't have that many people. [Laughter] There weren't that many conscientious objectors, for God's sakes. And they weren't evacuated. We were there voluntarily, in a sense, because we'd chosen that category. We weren't there voluntarily, because we'd go to jail if we didn't. But, you understand, it was completely different than the Japanese. We were never moved out. We came to camp on our own volition. Nobody took us in a truck.

VASQUEZ: And your wife worked in town?

WRIGHTSON: Yes.

VASQUEZ: Did you ever have any children?

WRIGHTSON: Not then, no. I didn't have any children until I started to work, until I was at the Tulare Advance Register.

VASQUEZ: Let's get into how you came to California.

WRIGHTSON: Well, they put out the word that they needed firefighters. So I thought that was more significant than what I was doing there. So I applied for that. I got it, maybe, because I

was a disruptive influence in camp. I'm not sure. I can't be that objective.

VASQUEZ: What makes you think you might have been disruptive?

WRIGHTSON: I was always raising questions with them about what they were doing. I accused the Quakers of whoring with the government and that kind of thing. When Quakers came to the camp to talk to us, to see how we were doing, I would question them about the morality of administering the camps. We had Quaker--I forget his [first] name, Blake--and he'd come to camp late. He was a wealthy mainline Quaker and went to Abercrombie and Fitch to be outfitted for this camp experience he was going to have.

We were talking about work of national importance on the project at one time, and I'd been in camp maybe a year or something. By the way, I had no hope of getting out of the camp. I thought the war would last forever. I believed the [George] Orwell thing. I thought we would be fighting forever someplace. I just thought we'd never get out. I just thought the war would never be over.

VASQUEZ: You thought it would be a permanent state of affairs?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, I did. I was Orwellian, in that sense. Anyway, he [Blake] was on the project and was saying, "Well, you know, we have to do this work of national importance," and so forth. He was trying to mediate. And I remember that I said to him, "Well, where in the hell have you been? Why didn't you volunteer in 1942? We've been up here four years doing this kind of crap while you sat in Philadelphia. And then when you did come, you went to Abercrombie and Fitch and outfitted yourself. Some of these guys don't have pants. They're wearing old CCC pants. If you're so interested in this work being done. . . ." I said, "You must have taken every exemption you could get before you were drafted."

Some of these guys didn't take exemptions. I didn't take any exemptions. I could have gotten certain exemptions, I think. I could have stayed in college, you know.

VASQUEZ: Being an only son, was that an exemption?

WRIGHTSON: Whatever, I don't know. I never thought of

it. But I really gave him hell and really humiliated him in front of everybody. It really was a humiliating experience. He'd never been talked to that way. And I think that got back to the camp administration. I think he went in and said, "Oh, my! What's this man doing here? He's not loving. He's not Quakerly."

I needled some of the administrators on things that they did, little things. And I took things on myself. There was a Jehovah's Witness who had a lot of headaches. He really had headaches and they didn't believe him. He was really suffering, and they sometimes wouldn't give him sick leave, the administration wouldn't. I went to them and said, "Look, this man really, you know, has migraines." Well, a lot of the people in the camp should have been medically released, anyway. Some of them were mentally unstable. Some of them were sick. They got sick. We had a guy with undulant fever [brucellosis], and it kept recurring. He should have been out of there. If he'd been in the army, he'd have been out like that. [snaps fingers]

VASQUEZ: So there was a punitive tinge to this in some cases.

WRIGHTSON: The Quakers couldn't get them out. The Quakers wanted them out. Do you think they wanted a guy with undulant fever walking around in the camp that they had to take care of? No. I don't think the Quakers were punitive. Surely, the government was punitive. Absolutely there was a punitive aspect to it. There was no question about it.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the name of the camp director?

WRIGHTSON: Sure, one was Wynn Osbourne. The next one was Tom Potts. Pottstown, Pennsylvania, is named after his family. The next one was [Clarence T.] "Mike" Yarrow. I think he's a professor at Swarthmore [College]. He established the Telluride School at Pacific Oaks [College] here [in Pasadena]. I knew him afterwards. And then the Glendora camp became a government camp.

VASQUEZ: Let's move on to the firefighting and your coming out to California.

WRIGHTSON: Well, when I got here I sort of had a reputation sent with me. They sent my jacket [records] with me. So, I was sent to what they called

spike camps. They were in the San Bernardino National Forest up at Mount Baldy.

VASQUEZ: What did "spike" stand for?

WRIGHTSON: Well, [there was] the central camp, and there were [surrounding] "spikes" [in the mountains]. They had a "pumper" [fire engine] there. They had a crew of about six or eight. You stayed there for the fire season, which lasted 'til November. At that time the smog wasn't as bad. They had lookouts and phoned if there was a fire. You were the first suppression crew. So we did that, and they always sent me.

That was okay because my wife lived in South Pasadena. It was okay because I didn't want any part of the administration. At this point, I thought the administration of the camp was immoral.

VASQUEZ: Why did you think that?

WRIGHTSON: Because they were holding people there against their will, and it [the Quaker church] is a historic peace church. I mean, these men were held at the camp against their will. They would have been jailed if they left, and the Quakers

were running it.

VASQUEZ: When you got out here to California, how did you adjust to the new environment?

WRIGHTSON: I had no trouble, I was in camp. The same people were out here. I mean, the same radicals from New York and everybody else was out at this camp. Not the same people that were at Big Flats, but the same type of people--accountants, lawyers, college professors--were out here.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

WRIGHTSON: There was a place called Jenks Lake in the San Bernardino National Forest where I was sent.

VASQUEZ: How long were you in the camp?

WRIGHTSON: I think four and a half years or something like that. See, what happened was that when the war was over, you got out on points. Well, we didn't have any "points," you understand. We'd had no combat. There was nothing to let us out. I mean, there was no reason. So they did it on the basis of age, generally. Well, I was still young. The camp was then peopled by eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-, twenty-one-year-old people. The other guys were getting out.

They'd had four, five years, or whatever. So the Quakers withdrew at that point from the administration, when the war was over.

VASQUEZ: Who took it over then? The government?

WRIGHTSON: The government.

VASQUEZ: What agency?

WRIGHTSON: Selective Service. They had a tough mess sergeant. And they had a tough guy running it. They were punitive at every turn. And it really was a lot like a prison camp. There were two guys, conscientious objectors, in the Glendora camp, one named [John] Behra--his father was a high official in the forest service in Washington--and a guy named [John] Atherton, whose father was a minister in Illinois. They got into some kind of a scrape with the administration, and they [the government administration] tried to send them to Mancos, Colorado, which was a very tough government camp. It was almost a prison camp. The camp at Glendora, California, was up in arms, so we all went on strike. We refused to work, about fifty of us. It's all in the L.A. Times; not sympathetically, but it's in there.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, it would be the end of '45. So some people lived in the camp; I moved out of the camp and lived with my wife in South Pasadena.

VASQUEZ: What was the outcome of the strike?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it lasted three years, the whole thing. A couple of us went to Washington, collected money to pay for our legal defense. We got [Abraham Lincoln] A. L. Wirin as our ACLU lawyer right away. We went to Washington to collect money to pay the cost of the court case.

They [the FBI] picked up the ringleaders, eight ringleaders. They didn't pick me up on that. Then, they picked up eighteen more, and they tried eighteen more. I was one of them.

VASQUEZ: What were the charges that you were tried on?

WRIGHTSON: Violation of the Selective Service Act--refusal to work.

VASQUEZ: After being in camp all these years.

WRIGHTSON: Well, we knew that. We didn't think the government was going to roll over and play dead. We were outraged. That's why we struck.

VASQUEZ: So when the Selective Service came into the camp or took it over from the Quakers, it just got

that much more repressive and punitive, is that right?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, although they'll deny that, you understand. They think we still had it easy. And it was not horrible, by the way. I have no horror stories to tell of that camp. I just don't have any; there were none.

So then I spent two years on the strike collecting money, went to Washington, and negotiated with the chief, a guy named [Nate] Ellif, the chief of the Justice Department--the chief [Laughter]--so he would postpone the trial and dismiss the case. We wanted the government to dismiss the cases on the basis that the camps were under civilian control and we were being held illegally anyway. And they wouldn't do it.

Then they dismissed some cases, all but about eighteen, and the people they dismissed complained that they were dismissed, because we wanted to stay together. But they dismissed them in the interest of justice, and there's nothing you can do about that. We were tried and were given. . . . I'm not sure of the sentence. It was anywhere from eighteen months

to two and a half years. We had a jury trial and we were convicted. The trial was in Los Angeles. Oh, and we picketed the jail when our people were in there. We walked up and down in front of that jail down there.

VASQUEZ: What was the treatment the Los Angeles press gave you or gave the case?

WRIGHTSON: Not so good.

VASQUEZ: No one in the press was sympathetic?

WRIGHTSON: No.

VASQUEZ: Who were your supporters? Who were the people that would support you? You said you moved around raising money.

WRIGHTSON: Allan [A.] Hunter, for example, who was with the Hollywood Congregational Church. He just died a few years ago. I can't remember who the donors were. There was a man named [Dr. Edwin P.] Ryland, who had been the head of the ACLU. He was the head of our committee. We set up a committee, we printed leaflets, and we had a strike headquarters which we paid rent for up on Colorado [Boulevard] in Pasadena. We had people working full time there [who were] not paid. They were strikers. They worked washing dishes,

and so forth. I did the same thing. I washed dishes during that time and worked at whatever I could.

VASQUEZ: What was your wife doing at the time?

WRIGHTSON: She was working at the South Pasadena Library and in the settlement house in Pasadena. It was a Mexican settlement house on Raymond Avenue in Pasadena. [She] did two things.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the name of that settlement house, by chance?

WRIGHTSON: I think it was called the Pasadena Settlement House [on Raymond Avenue]. It was run by wealthy Pasadenans for Mexicans. She had learned some Spanish.

VASQUEZ: Were these Mexican fieldworkers from those parts?

WRIGHTSON: No, no, no. I don't think they were. They worked on the railroad and so forth. It was a girls' group. She took them in a truck to Laguna Beach, for example, because the people in Pasadena owned a place in Laguna Beach. The women who supported the settlement house all went to Mexico and bought Mexican costumes. They were trying to preserve the Mexican culture here for these children, these girls. They

taught them, and they had Mexican dances.

VASQUEZ: So they were young girls?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: Was it like an orphanage?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, no, no. They had parents. Oh, they didn't live there; Dorothy went around and picked them up at home. Because those parents were strict. They weren't letting their daughters walk to any settlement house. You picked them up in the truck and brought them home.

VASQUEZ: So then they had educational and cultural activities?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. This was no gang. These weren't gang people or . . .

VASQUEZ: Or delinquents?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, hell, no. They were working people. They weren't on the fringe of any law. No way. They were poor, but they worked. Well, it wasn't a settlement house; nobody lived there. They just ran these programs out of it. Oh, I don't think they had any undocumented [people]. I don't know, but we didn't even think of them in those terms.

VASQUEZ: Now, what happened when you finally got . . .

WRIGHTSON: Oh, during this time I also worked to get the Japanese back. Remember, there was a big flap about resettling them, and people didn't want them back. I worked with the Quakers on that a little bit.

VASQUEZ: So you continued to work with the Quakers, despite your differences?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I had differences with the camp administration, not with the Quakers completely.

VASQUEZ: When did you become interested in journalism?

WRIGHTSON: Well, you want to skip the farm labor business?

VASQUEZ: No, no, I would like to go into that.

WRIGHTSON: Well, it's after that, if we're going to do it in sequence.

VASQUEZ: Go ahead.

WRIGHTSON: After the trial, I went to work for the National Farm Labor Union. They were on strike. They had a strike of the Di Giorgio Farms, a great big organization in Arvin, right near Bakersfield. I was the assistant to a man named Henry E. Hasawar, who died just a while ago. He was the western representative. We organized and went out on the picket line every morning at 5:00 A.M. We raised money from other unions. I

lived in Bakersfield at the El Tejón Hotel, commuting down here where my wife was living, for nine months.

Then we were losing the strike so badly that I left and I was out of work for a while. I cleaned lots in Pasadena. I was a lot cleaner. I did anything I could. I washed dishes, I was a pot wrestler, whatever. And then the Altadenan ran an ad that they needed somebody. Well, I had written press releases for the union. I'd done that.

VASQUEZ: Before we get to the Altadenan, let's talk a little bit more about the strike in Arvin. What were the issues that the strike was over?

WRIGHTSON: Union organization.

VASQUEZ: And the makeup of the workers was what, Mexican?

WRIGHTSON: Okies. They brought Mexican nationals in, braceros they were called. Oh, I could tell you some stories. You don't want to hear those stories. And that was the significant social thing.

I don't think anything significant happened in the camps, by the way. I'll tell you that flatly. We just stayed there, okay? And argued

among ourselves. I think there was no significance to that at all.

VASQUEZ: They warehoused you there?

WRIGHTSON: Well, that's a word you could use. But, anyway, that wasn't significant, I don't think.

VASQUEZ: What was significant about the Arvin strike, in your estimation?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it was one of the first attempts to organize farmworkers in California, for one thing. And they picked on the biggest grower in the [San Joaquin] Valley, for a second thing. Who knows what stepping stones were laid? But I think when César Chávez got there. . . . Do you know César?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: Well, you talk to him about it. He'll tell you [about] when he got there. Maybe the strike even hurt the movement. You know, when you lose a strike, it can hurt the labor movement as much as help it, so I don't know that.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of the people, the principals that were involved in leading the strike and the organizational effort?

WRIGHTSON: Ernesto Galarza, H. L. Mitchell, who was

president of the National Farm Labor Union. He was in Memphis, Tennessee. There was a guy named Wallace [D.] Henderson. He was international vice president of the Winery Workers Union in Fresno [California]. You understand, this was an AF of L [American Federation of Labor] organization, before the AF of L and the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] had gotten together. Wallace Henderson became an assemblyman and later became mayor of Fresno. There was a guy named [R. E.] "Rabbit" Randall, who was William Green's [head of the AF of L] personal representative out here. He came to the meetings. There was a guy named [Daniel V.] Flanagan, who was the regional representative of the AF of L in San Francisco. There were guys from the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters Union. They had a lot to do with it [the strike], and were from the local Teamsters Union [Local 87] in Bakersfield. The Plumbers Union, the Steamfitters Union, they all contributed. We used the AF of L offices there. There was a guy named Harry [L.] Hollins, who ran the labor paper there. I think he's still alive. His

wife worked at the Bakersfield Californian.

VASQUEZ: What was the most significant experience that you had in the course of that strike?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the president got shot in the face, for example.

VASQUEZ: The president of the union?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. His name was [James A.] Jimmy Price. We hired a guy named Louis De Anda, a fighter pilot in the war who spoke Spanish. He worked for Hasawar as an organizer. I remember being out on a truck when the braceros were coming in. They were bringing braceros in, and we were on a truck with a loudspeaker. He was telling them in Spanish, "Don't go to work. They're your brothers."

VASQUEZ: They were bringing them in as scabs?

WRIGHTSON: Well, yes. You could see them moving in, and they'd move back when he'd say, "Don't do this." They'd move back. Hell, they were from Mexico. They didn't know anything about a strike. What the hell did they know? It was a very touching scene. But they went to work. I mean, they were in a truck. They couldn't go anyplace else. What could they do, get off? They had hired out

in Mexico or Texas.

VASQUEZ: At the time, the Bracero Program was in operation.

WRIGHTSON: I think it was, yes.

VASQUEZ: Was that one of the biggest hurdles that you had in this strike?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. And the other was the attrition, because [Joseph] Di Giorgio was almost ready to settle. He owned so much. He would have settled. He owned wineries where they had the Winery Workers Union. He wasn't that antiunion. But the organization called the Associated Farmers [of California, Inc.], headed by a man named [Robert] Bob Schmiser, was very much against any [union].

They saw what the unionization of farm workers would do, you see. I bet César Chávez had a lot of trouble with the Associated Farmers too. Those were our real enemies. The Di Giorgio Corporation was in San Francisco. He wasn't that antiunion. As I say, he had winery workers who were organized.

The strategy of the union wasn't to organize every little farmer that had sixty acres or eighty acres, fight to the death. It

was to organize the big farmers. That's all we really needed. If we got those 2,000 or 3,000 people, we could have run the union. I mean, we didn't have to go to every little farmer. We made it clear when we spoke in these towns. We did a lot of speaking. Farmers would come to it, and they'd chase us, too. But we told them, "We're not interested in a little farm. We're not going to organize you. We're not trying to organize your workers." But, of course, they knew once Di Giorgio paid a living wage, they'd have to come up to it. I mean, they weren't foolish. That was a significant experience. It was in the labor union.

VASQUEZ: Were you an organizer?

WRIGHTSON: No, my title was assistant to the western representative. I did some organizing. We wrote leaflets. We held strike meetings. I went and visited other unions to raise money.

VASQUEZ: Did you ever do any press releases, that sort of thing?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. I was doing the whole thing, all the press releases. We got quite good coverage on that.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember groups or individuals, prominent

individuals, that were especially supportive of that strike?

WRIGHTSON: We had nothing like César had. We never appealed to the Hollywood crowd. We didn't have that much class, I guess. We appealed to the AF of L unions. We had a caravan come from Los Angeles all the way to Bakersfield bringing clothing and food, a whole caravan. And we had a parade in Bakersfield. That's the kind of thing we organized. But we depended on the AF of L unions to do it. The AF of L craft unions, they, of course, were all craft unions, the carpenters, the plumbers, the steamfitters, the printers. That's who we had.

And they contributed because it was a strike, that's all. They had no sympathy with the farm workers, but their union did. It was a strike, they were in it, and that's where Randall, William Green's representative, would come out to the union and say, "You know, we're backing the strike, and you've got to get with us." Who knows what significance things have in history?

VASQUEZ: Right. What was the reason that you think you

were defeated in that strike?

WRIGHTSON: Di Giorgio had more money, and he just held out.

VASQUEZ: Was the Bracero Program a significant factor?

WRIGHTSON: I think it was.

VASQUEZ: Do you think the AF of L went as far as it could have gone, given the circumstances? Did it support you enough?

WRIGHTSON: Well, we didn't feel a lack of support. We had to work for it. I mean, you had to do it, but we weren't let down by the labor movement, I don't think. They'd get tired over the long strike, like the Hollywood writers' strike. Once you get into long strikes, people drop off. The Teamsters and so forth were not going to contribute money forever for this thing. And I don't think their hearts were especially into helping farm workers get more money. I don't think they cared. But it was an AF of L-sanctioned thing, so they went. I think you can blame the Bracero Program fairly, I think. I mean, what the hell, if he could get workers from Mexico, he didn't need the [strikers].

VASQUEZ: So then you left that strike and went to work for the Altadenan, is that it?

WRIGHTSON: Well, yes. I saw an ad, I went up, and I interviewed. They hired me. It was a weekly. It was up on Lake Avenue in Altadena, north of Pasadena. I wasn't the editor; I was a reporter. I wrote stories for them.

VASQUEZ: Who was the publisher or editor?

WRIGHTSON: Harry W. Smith. He's still alive. No, he died early this year. He and his wife. She was the copublisher. Her name was Helen [R.] Smith. They had graduated from the University of Missouri in journalism, which is the best journalism school in the country, as you well know. They wanted to do something, and so they put out this paper. I forget what the circulation was, I just don't know. It may have been 5,000, it may not.

VASQUEZ: What kind of assignments or stories do you especially remember writing?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I told you about the one where they brought [Willard B.] Goslin in . . .

VASQUEZ: You told me off tape. Why don't you repeat it?

WRIGHTSON: They [the Pasadena Unified School District] brought a well-known and very liberal guy here from, I think, Wisconsin or Minnesota, named

Willard Goslin, to be superintendent of schools. This was one of the best school districts in the country. It was very well respected. The conservatives in Pasadena fought him, there was a lot of controversy, and he was finally fired. I covered that because the Pasadena school system covered Altadena. And for doing that, the Smiths submitted this story to the Publishers Association contest, and I won a prize for the best [story in a paper with a] circulation under 50,000, or something like that. That was an interesting thing. I covered that.

I covered the news when Pasadena tried to annex Altadena, I covered those annexation things. I covered the sheriff's office, of course. You know, Altadena was policed by the sheriffs. I covered the Rotary [International] and the Kiwanis [International] clubs. I wrote features.

VASQUEZ: Had you ever taken any kind of formal training in journalism before this?

WRIGHTSON: No, never at all. And I was not interested in ever being a journalist.

VASQUEZ: What did you learn at the Altadenan as a journalist?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I learned to cover meetings, for one thing, because I covered a lot of them. When I ran the news bureau here for the McClatchy newspapers, I used to kid the guys on the desk that I only covered things that happened in rooms. They'd say, "You know, there's a riot there." I'd say, "No, I'm sorry. If it doesn't happen in a room, I don't cover it."

[Laughter] But that's what I was covering: Things that happened in rooms. I learned to do that.

VASQUEZ: How long were you at the Altadenan?

WRIGHTSON: Three years, I think. No, I think '48 to '50, two years. When I won that prize, one of the publishers from the Delano [Record] came down and offered me a job at the Delano Record, which was a twice weekly.

VASQUEZ: This is at the Delano Record?

Yes, it was. George Keyzers, was the editor-publisher. I went up there, took my wife, and we went to Delano. I was called an editor there; he was the publisher. I got a little

more money a week and I became interested in the San Joaquin Valley, then, as I was saying to you before, the social climate. Of course, I knew the San Joaquin Valley because I had worked in Bakersfield in that strike. But the social climate was about, I'd say, in 1925, and this was 1948. I mean, it really was, especially in the small towns.

VASQUEZ: When you say the social climate was twenty years behind the times, give me some examples of that.

WRIGHTSON: Well, the Southern Pacific railroad actually bisected the community. The Filipinos, Mexicans and blacks all lived on one side. The police were all white, and they answered the white calls first, for example. There was an intellectual elite in the town, the librarian and the schoolteachers.

VASQUEZ: Were they mostly white?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. There was no black participation. There were some Jews in the town. One guy named [Benjamin] Lazarus ran a glass store. And the Jews were very close. My wife is Jewish, and the Jews were a very close-knit organization with each other. There were a lot of Filipino

farmworkers, but they were all on the other side of the track.

In Delano they had a Voice of America station. CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] ran it. They sent people from CBS up there to run it. And those people quickly became town leaders. They established a little theater there. They were classy people, essentially.

But the town was run by the insurance men and the real estate dealers and the banker. I got to know those people. I got to know the banker and a couple of lawyers they had there.

VASQUEZ: How about the ranchers, the large ranchers?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. They ran it, too. But they weren't in town that much. Yes, they did run it. [William] Perelli Manetti, [Martin] Zenenovich. They're still up there. They're packers. And, of course, my job took me to Shafter and the little towns around there, like McFarland.

VASQUEZ: What were some of the more prominent stories or events that you covered in Delano?

WRIGHTSON: Well, one was when they were just putting the laterals in for the Friant-Kern Canal. That year [1951], the Friant-Kern Canal was opened.

They put green dye in up at the dam at Shasta, and people floated down as far as they could. They had a group from the Bureau of Reclamation float down and had a little celebration in each town.

The Bureau of Reclamation put in the laterals, pipes to the farms from the canal. They leaked terribly, and the farmers were very much against the Bureau of Reclamation. There was a guy named [Richard C.] Bloke, a regional representative, who was a liberal, nice guy. When he came through, they had a party for him. He almost got into a fight with one of the farmers. It was a very bitter thing. And I covered that.

One day I went out and went to one of the farms. They had these huge laterals, maybe as wide as this table, and they were leaking. When they leaked, they leaked. I went to the meeting. It was called the SSJMUD, Southern San Joaquin Municipal Utility District. I went to those meetings in Delano. I covered that. The farmers griped about that. There was a Bureau of Reclamation person there, and they were all

fighting about the laterals leaking. I was writing farm news, and I realized that I had to write about that because that's what they were doing there. And I became very interested in that. So I went out. The Bureau of Reclamation had a truck full of manure, and they were throwing manure in the weirs. You know what a weir is?

VASQUEZ: No.

WRIGHTSON: Well, it's a big standpipe that lets air into the system. They were throwing in tons of manure. Well, I found out that that was an old system for stopping leaks. The straw and the manure stopped the leaks. Well, here was a story of a many-million-dollar system that they were fixing by throwing manure into it. That was a hell of a story. So I wrote that. The bureau didn't like it, but I did it.

There was nothing wrong with that, but it just showed how desperate they were to stop those leaks. I covered that. That was a significant story. I wrote features on what was happening around Delano and covered the city council there, of course. There were seven

whorehouses in Delano. We didn't write that story.

VASQUEZ: Who did they cater to?

WRIGHTSON: Filipinos and farmworkers. The snazzy ones, I guess, were in San Francisco or Bakersfield or Fresno, I don't know where.

VASQUEZ: What kind of fallout did you get from that sort of thing?

WRIGHTSON: I didn't write it. You couldn't write that in our paper. No, I went to the police station, and there had been a robbery there, and the sergeant said, "Jim, that's a house. I don't think the chief wants it in the paper." And I said, "Well, we'll see about that." So I went back, and sure enough, the chief called the publisher and said, "We don't want that in there. Somebody was robbed in a whorehouse. You don't want that [published]."

VASQUEZ: So your publisher squelched it pretty much?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. Nobody cared. They didn't care if there was a murder on that side of the tracks. They wouldn't even care. They never went over there--I mean, except to get workers. So they didn't care.

VASQUEZ: Did it bother you any that things like that would be kept out of the press at the time?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, but I didn't really see what good it would do to put it in anyway. I mean, journalistically, if it had happened, you would run it. I mean, you were reading the Zev Yaroslavsky thing today, weren't you?¹ Well, I know [Bill] Boyarsky. They got those memos, they had to run them. I mean, they didn't have to, but you do. Journalistically, you do it. It wouldn't be fair not to be written.

But the publisher made that decision. It didn't worry me that much. I mean, who cares whether somebody was robbed? There were seven whorehouses, but I had no way of knowing that. I didn't go to all seven of them and see them. That's what I heard, and there probably were.

VASQUEZ: How long were you at the Delano Record?

WRIGHTSON: I was at the Delano Record from 1950 to '52. And then, I wanted a job on a daily newspaper,

1. Refers to memos from political consultants Michael Berman and Carl D'Agostino to prospective mayoral candidate Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky imputing Mayor Tom Bradley's intelligence among other controversial comments. Los Angeles Times, August 10, 1988, Section I, p. 1.

so I went to Taft [California] and worked at the Midway Driller. I was hired by a man named [Melvin R.] Mel Lilly. The paper paid very well. It was owned by a man named [Walter] Keen, who also owned all of the slot machines in town. We didn't do any police news there, either. I think I was getting something like \$125 a week, which was a lot. I [later] took a cut to go to Tulare. Well, I didn't start at that [amount]. At six months, I got that. But it came like that. [snaps fingers]

VASQUEZ: How long were you there?

WRIGHTSON: One year, I think. But during that time I covered the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower [presidential] election in '52. One of the oil guys had a private plane and flew me into Fresno to cover Eisenhower. I was on the [Vice President Richard M.] Nixon train when the fund thing broke.¹

VASQUEZ: Did you write that up?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I wrote it, but we had a UPI [United Press

1. During the 1952 presidential campaign, Nixon was accused of keeping an \$18,000 slush fund set up by a California group.

International] wire in there, and they were first. By the time I got back from Bakersfield, they had it. But I think they used my story. Yes, I believe they did.

VASQUEZ: What did you learn about journalism at the Delano Record and at the Driller?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't think I learned an awful lot at Delano. I learned makeup. I did all the make-up on that paper; laid it out and did the dummies. So I learned that.

At the Driller, well, Lilly taught me to write sparsely and to get to the point right away. At the Driller I covered the '52 earthquakes, too. There were two of them, one in Tehachapi and one in Bakersfield, and I covered those. I don't think I learned an awful lot, although Lilly was a professional journalist.

VASQUEZ: Now, you then went on to the Tulare Advance Register?

WRIGHTSON: Right.

VASQUEZ: Tell me about that.

WRIGHTSON: Dorothy and I felt we wanted to live on the coast, so we applied to the Ventura Star Free

Press. We went over there one day, and they interviewed me. The next thing I knew, I got a letter from Tom [R.] Hennion of the Advance Register, saying that his sister paper--Scripps [John R. Scripps Newspapers] owned both of them, owned seven papers--had my application, and he wanted to know if I was interested in coming over. So I went over.

You understand, I'd had no journalistic training, so the only way I could do it was to work up the ladder. I mean, I didn't want to go to Taft, but it was my first daily. You understand, I had to get on a daily, and that was the only daily I could get on. This [Tulare Advance Register] was another daily, but it was [part of] a chain. And it was a bigger, better paper, obviously, than the Taft Midway Driller.

So I went over, and he hired me. I took a little cut in salary, and we went over and lived in Tulare. From there, he sent me over to Visalia [California], the county seat, to cover the board of supervisors. A friend who was there was [Thomas A.] Tom Kirwan, from Stanford [University]. He'd come from the Stanford

journalism school. He was a young guy. He's still a friend of mine. I still write to him. He went to Fresno to work at KFRE, the radio station, and then he went to the [Fresno] Bee-- after I had gotten to the Bee, anyway. But he's still a friend of mine.

And Hennion is still a friend of mine. Hennion taught me a lot about journalism, about ethics, and what should be in a [news]paper.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Session 2, August 15, 1988]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Mr. Wrightson, the last time we had followed your career through a series of smaller newspapers that you had worked with, the Altadenan, the Delano Record, the Taft Midway Driller, the Tulare Advance Register. Now, you never had formal journalistic training as such. Did you do anything on your own to prepare yourself for this career?

WRIGHTSON: Well, while I was working, I read other [newspapers]. It is my theory you don't need a journalistic education. It's something you practice, not theorize [about]. If you read a paper, there's an education every day. Look at the [Los Angeles] Times today. How did they cover the convention? What elements did they have in the story? You don't have to have somebody tell you that. You look at the story. I was lucky though. I was practicing it at the same time I was learning it. And I read papers.

If I covered the school board, I read other stories and saw what I'd left out and what I

should have done. I'm very sensitive to my mistakes and try not to make the same mistake twice. It really worries me. I always say that the first is on me, but the second one we don't make. So, I always did that.

I learned a lot from colleagues. I talked about journalism a lot. The people at the Tulare Advance Register, [like] Tom Kirwan [who], as I told you, had graduated from Stanford. He was Phi Beta Kappa, a very intelligent man. And he'd studied journalism under [Chilton R.] "Chick" Bush [who], I think, was a professor at the journalism school. It was his first job; he was very, very interested in journalism, and was willing to talk about it, you know.

We looked at and talked about stories. Not that we figured we were learning, but we were just interested in what we were doing. And we were working for Hennion, who was not a slob in any way. So the better it was, the better he liked it. I mean, if we had been working for somebody who didn't care or who butchered the stuff, there would have been no use learning. I

think I said, "I don't write as well as I know how to already."

We were interested in news stories, we were interested in what we were doing, and we were interested in the community, the community theater, and so forth. We were interested in Tulare and the whole county. It was interesting. We were all big city guys, sort of. Kirwan was from Burlingame.

The complexion of the city council and the board of supervisors in Tulare was country people, which we had not known. They were really interesting to us. We had a supervisor [Sydney Cruff] in Tulare County that had worked on the roads, and had then bought himself a piece of land. He was a rich farmer by the time he got on the board. But he was an interesting guy. I mean, you read about self-made men, but he really was. He was a pretty good guy. But we had no kinship with him except, say, honesty and so forth. And a lot of other people were that way. One of the guys ran a gas station. That kind of thing. We hadn't known that. They were a different group. Like here you've got

[Peter F.] Schabarum and all these high-powered guys. But these guys in these towns, even around here, they might own a small business, they might own a stationery store, they might own a gas station. They're a different breed of cat. They're not like these guys here.

VASQUEZ: Being from the East Coast, how did you perceive politics in California in this period in the fifties when you were working on the small papers?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I couldn't compare it, because I was so far out of the mainstream on the East Coast. Politics were just different to me.

VASQUEZ: Well, how would you characterize what you saw in Tulare and Taft and some of these small towns at that time? What was the political tenor at the time?

WRIGHTSON: I don't know how to cast that. It was sort of conservative. It really wasn't liberal. These guys were conservative guys, of course. They were farmers, small businessmen.

On the other hand, we were involved in things like zoning changes and area plans which didn't lend themselves to that kind of a

political thing. I felt that these boards were fairly clean. I don't think there was much of a lobbyist influence, although it was a different era.

For example, if a supervisor took two tickets from, say, a guy selling road oil and went to a football game, we thought nothing of that. We noted it. And there was a guy for the billboard company, I remember who gave the five Tulare County supervisors each a gift. I wrote that up. I said they all got packages, and the supervisors were very sore at me. Each had a little package from the billboard company. I wrote that up, and Hennion put it in the paper. He wanted that in there.

But, generally speaking, I don't think it was a lot of big money flowing around there at that time. We were concerned, for example, that they were cutting through for the [Highway] 99 Freeway. I went to a lot of freeway meetings [Laughter] where farmers were worried about severance. You know what severance is, [it's where] they cut their land in half. We were very concerned about that on that level. A

local paper should be, by the way, and we were.

VASQUEZ: What was the quality of the political representatives from that area, the senators and the assemblymen, do you remember? Did you know any of them at the time?

WRIGHTSON: I forget who they were. I forget the guy from Tulare. I don't know. But I didn't have much to do with them, because they were in Sacramento. Probably the publisher would be the one who had to deal with them.

VASQUEZ: Did you have much to do with the Sacramento politicians as such?

WRIGHTSON: Only if they came there. I remember a guy named [Assemblyman] Luther [H.] Lincoln, who was the Speaker of the Assembly. He came to Tulare to a luncheon. Another guy named [Assemblyman James W.] Silliman from Monterey, he came down and spoke. I covered them. But they didn't live in Tulare. Now, if the guy had lived in Tulare, we may have done something. I don't remember who the assemblyman or the senator was.

VASQUEZ: But he was not necessarily someone that was a major figure in local affairs or someone that you would cover?

WRIGHTSON: No.

VASQUEZ: How long were you in Tulare then?

WRIGHTSON: I think from late '52 to November 1955.

VASQUEZ: Now, why did you decide to go to the Fresno Bee?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the Fresno Bee came to Tulare, you understand.

VASQUEZ: What were your sources, apart from public hearings, when you were covering the supervisors in these areas?

WRIGHTSON: Second-level people: clerks, secretaries who were very good friends, court reporters, people very close to court reporters. I like those people. They're dissidents many times, and I always looked wherever I covered for the unhappy people. If I went to a convention, I looked for the people on the fringe of it who weren't having a good time, because I thought you got more that way.

VASQUEZ: Did you?

WRIGHTSON: I got some good stories. I can't brag. I mean my coverage wasn't so brilliant that it was picked up, but I thought it was successful enough to keep it up. It's harder to do it that way, because once you get out of the mainstream,

as you know, you have to check people out. You have to cross-check and triple-check what some dissident tells you. If some dissident secretary tells you something out of the office, you can't use that. I mean, you can use it for yourself, but you have to check it three ways. You have to finally ask the supervisor, "Well, did that happen? What did?" But I like that, and that's the kind of reporting I did.

VASQUEZ: You were about to tell me how you went to the Bee.

WRIGHTSON: Fresno paid a lot better. The Sacramento Bee, which owned the Fresno Bee, had a Guild unit [American Newspaper Guild, AFL-CIO], but they didn't want one in Fresno, so I thought they paid Fresno [Bee employees] more than the Guild scale to keep the Guild out. So one day, Tulare sent me to Fresno to cover something.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be, do you remember?

WRIGHTSON: Nineteen fifty-five. I stopped off at the Bee feeling very guilty about it, because I liked Hennion, I really liked that paper, and I was doing well. But they couldn't pay much. They didn't have pension plan or anything. They had

no perks. It was a revolving door. A lot of reporters went in and out of there. Oh, and my friend, Kirwan, had already gone to KFRE, a station in Fresno.

I stopped in at the Bee in Fresno. I saw the assistant to the managing editor, Orville [D.] Shelton. We called him "Diz." He said, "Well, let me see some of your clips." And then I saw a man named [William L.] Lockwood, the managing editor.

When I first went to Tulare, I thought there was a future because it was a chain. I thought I'd go from there to Ventura or to Bremerton. But they didn't do that kind of transfer. Once you got a good man, you kept him. And the papers were fairly independent of each other, except financially. They had a lot of top editors: Frank Orr and a lot of top editors in that Scripps chain. I think they owned Bremerton, Washington, and the Watsonville Pajaronian, the Ventura Star Free Press, the Redding Searchlight and so forth. They owned about seven papers. The Scripps' headquarters was in La Jolla [California]. The Scripps's son

did a lot of yachting, so he didn't have much to do with the paper. The Ventura was the flagship paper. But the editors touted that you'd run your own paper. They were independent. They could endorse whom they wanted. Like Hennion, for example, was sort of a liberal. He came out against [Senator Joseph R.] Joe McCarthy, and all the auto dealers stopped advertising. He was not fired for that. I mean, they'd say, "Okay, we'll back you on that."

VASQUEZ: Was he pretty much a loner in that respect in those days? That's the kind of political climate I was trying to get at. In these local, rural communities, was there much dissidence to the red scare and the red-baiting?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, but he wasn't carrying the flag; he just wrote the editorial. And the dealers withdrew their ads.

VASQUEZ: At the local level, were things like the Lions clubs and Kiwanis and what have you--service clubs--were these principal loci of activity where people connected in business and in politics?

WRIGHTSON: Absolutely. Let me just point out something

that just occurred to me. In Tulare and Visalia and even Fresno, and certainly in Taft, you're awfully far from Sacramento. You're farther than you are down here, in a way.

VASQUEZ: In distance as well as [outlook] . . .

WRIGHTSON: And you don't hear [as] much [about the legislators]. And when you read it, it doesn't make that much difference. You just don't--you're not involved in Sacramento politics that much. Now, the [California] Farm Bureau [Federation] may get interested in a bill and take you up there on a bus and have a busload of people to protest a bill, something like that. But like the insurance fight that they're having now. . . .

VASQUEZ: How about the water issue in those days? That was already building up as an issue.

WRIGHTSON: They had the Friant-Kern Canal; this was long before the California Aqueduct. The farmers were prosperous, you understand. Can I tell you the difference between the east side of the San Joaquin Valley and the west side?

VASQUEZ: Please do.

WRIGHTSON: In the east side, there are smaller farms and smaller cities. Like there's Reedley and

McFarland and Delano and Pixley and Shafter. You understand? Once you go to the west side, there are 2,000-acre farms, and there are very few cities. There's Coalinga and Three Rocks. But out on--we're looking south--on this side of the valley, just vast tracks of land. On this side there are smaller farms. It's a whole different [scene]. I mean, these guys rule: Harris and Boswell, I forget some of them. Oh, we also covered some of Hanford in Tulare. Not much, but we went over there. That's where Boswell is. Boswell farms are over there. But, they rule big fiefdoms, and they get five million dollars back in. . . .

VASQUEZ: Subsidies?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. And they have their own lobbyist in Sacramento. They have their own planes, you don't see them publicly. They don't go to the Rotary Club. They may send their manager there. So, there weren't a lot of big farms near Tulare. There was the Tagus Ranch, which was pretty big. Remember Tagus Ranch?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: Remember the [movie] The Grapes of Wrath was

made there? And that Hewlitt Merritt owned it?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: Well, we covered some of that. And there were some big farms there, but not like the west side. And that was a thing apart. I mean, the local papers didn't have much to do with those farmers because the farmers were remote, you hardly saw them.

VASQUEZ: But did you feel their influence--their political influence, their economic influence?

WRIGHTSON: Well, in things that affect them, hell yes. If they wanted to start an abattoir and it came before the supervisors, hell yes. But otherwise, they didn't care. Harris, of the Harris Ranch, he has his own plane. You know, he has a home in Oceanside in a very exclusive place where you can't even get in. Nobody sees him that much. I saw him because he was [Senator] Pete Wilson's northern California campaign chairman or something. And I flew in the plane with him and Wilson. But nobody in Hanford did that.

The social atmosphere was sort of backward. But, it was less backwards than Taft

and Delano, certainly. Taft, of course, was a union town. They were oil workers. And a union town is different than a nonunion town.

VASQUEZ: In what way?

WRIGHTSON: Well, in the first place--this is a personal opinion--people who belong to unions have more dignity than regular farmworkers. When you belong to a union, you belong to a craft, and you go to union meetings and you carry a card. But if you just work in the fields, you're no place. They shift you around, and you don't know where you are.

That's why I was interested in organizing these people [the farmworkers]. Because it would have made a lot of difference, if we could have organized those farmworkers. It really would. They would have had a profession. They would have had something to negotiate. Look at César now. He's fasting. They're spraying McFarland with pesticides. Those people are dying. They've got the highest incidence [of death] in the county, and nobody can do anything about that.

VASQUEZ: And they're organized.

WRIGHTSON: Not that much. Sure, they are. I mean, he's there, thank God. But, they don't have any kind of union like a Teamsters or the [International] Longshoremen's [and Warehousemen's Union] or even the type of those to say, "No, we're not going to work in there. You're not going to get anybody to pick that crop if you spray it with that." Well, they don't have anything like that. I don't think they ever will. I don't know.

But anyway, that's a different atmosphere. And in Taft, the guys worked an eight-hour day. They worked three shifts. They all came into the tavern at night. And they were oil workers; they were highly paid. You know, oil workers always got paid pretty well. And some of them lived in camps, but a camp was a very well run thing by Standard [Oil Company] and Richfield [Oil Company]. It was not a camp. They called it a camp, but there were frame houses with irrigated lawns. They were nice places to live.

VASQUEZ: Very different from where farmworkers have had to live?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, absolutely. No comparison to that. There were none.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember any particular issues or stories that you covered out of Taft that had to do with labor?

WRIGHTSON: No.

VASQUEZ: What was the image of the McClatchy papers at that time statewide?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I wouldn't know statewide, but they were very liberal papers. They were liberal Democratic papers. But see, the problem with Fresno--it's the same problem with Riverside. You can write the best story in the world in Fresno and it never gets out of Fresno County or Tulare. Whereas, if they write the same story in the [San Francisco] Chronicle, they'll pick it up and put it in the New York Post.

So, the McClatchys, they owned a radio station [KERN] in Bakersfield. They owned the Fresno Bee. They owned the Modesto Bee. They owned the Sacramento Bee. They owned a radio station [KMV] in Sacramento. They owned a radio station [KWG] in Stockton and a radio station [KMJ-KNEV] in Reno [Nevada].

That was the extent of their empire at that time. And they liked it that way; they didn't try to mess around. That's what they did. They took care of their own, and they didn't ask for much else. There were a lot of Republicans, of course, in Fresno, and they always ran against the Bee when they ran for public office. Everybody ran against the Bee and called it an outsider and a carpetbagger and so forth. But the Bee had been there a long time.

They would start a Fresno paper, somebody would, but they never got off the ground because the Bee knew how to run a newspaper. They really did. They paid well. They did know how to run a newspaper.

VASQUEZ: Was it also a paper that saw a lot of journalists go through that went on to be noted journalists.

WRIGHTSON: No. People stayed there. No. In the first place, they didn't hire big-time people. If you came down there from the [San Francisco] Chronicle, they'd say, "Well, you're not going to like it here."

[Interruption]

VASQUEZ: They didn't hire big-time journalists at the Bee?

WRIGHTSON: If you came to Fresno, they would probably tell you--I can imagine I know he would--"You're not going to like it here. This is a small town [compared] to being in San Francisco. This is not big-time journalism." They would tell you, "If you want big-time journalism, go someplace else." And when people did come there for big-time journalism they didn't stay. They would tell them, "This is not your paper. We don't. . . ." Now, this is in Fresno. I think they did the same in Sacramento.

When I finally got there, I think they did--and it's not true today, of course. See, the thing about the Bees was they considered themselves a paper record, and we used to call it a "vacuum cleaner" operation. When you covered a supervisor's meeting, you covered every item on the agenda, and you sat and wrote it up. Twenty inches, thirty inches was nothing for a supervisor story, and you had every item that they took up.

Like I told you, I used to go to court

arraignments, and we covered every arraignment in that court that day. Every single one. I mean, if a guy was picked up for vagrancy. . . . We ran every obit. We ran an obit [obituary] on everybody who died. If his nickname was "Rags" something, found on the west side, and he got to a mortuary and got to the coroner, we wrote that up. We had an obit board. And one of the first things you did was call all the mortuaries and call the police. And no matter who you were you got a little obit.

VASQUEZ: What were the differences that you most remember in going from Tulare to Fresno?

WRIGHTSON: Salary!

VASQUEZ: Apart from salary.

WRIGHTSON: I want to tell you, that was a big thing. They had regular raises. We moved into a much nicer house in Fresno. I bought my first home in Fresno. The Bee had a cafeteria, for example, where you could eat. The Bee had a credit union where you could borrow money for a vacation if you needed it. I'm not sure, but I think they gave you so much when you had your first child. It was a very paternal organization.

[Tape recorder off]

You covered everything. There was a good spirit among the reporters. They were older men, a lot of them; they'd been there a long time. And they'd come from little towns. There were a lot of them from Montana. The city editor was George E. Popovich. The managing editor was William Lockwood, he was an ex-colonel, a retired colonel. The assistant managing editor was Orville Shelton.

Sacramento had a lot of control over that paper. If Sacramento sent you something on the teletype, you ran it, if it was written in Sacramento. They had good coverage of the legislature because we had a bureau up there. Sacramento had a bureau, and we had one person-- the Fresno Bee sent somebody. It could have been George Baker, Sr. It could have been [Charles E.] Chuck Hurley. I succeeded a guy named Roger Ellingson. We talked about that, didn't we?

VASQUEZ: No, we're going to get into that now. Why don't we get into your assignment to Sacramento from the Bee. How did that come about?

WRIGHTSON: I was there at the Bee a couple of years before that happened, you understand.

VASQUEZ: Of course. You went to Sacramento for the Bee in 1961, is that correct?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, I think that's right. Well, I had covered local politics and politicians that came to Fresno. Now, Fresno was a bigger town than Tulare. And we had a guy named [Bernie F.] Sisk who ran for Congress and lived in Fresno. I think [Charles B.] Garrigus was running [for the assembly]. And we had a guy named [Assemblyman Bert] DeLotto, who had been a member of the board of supervisors. And I covered the board of supervisors in Fresno.

Bert DeLotto was a personal friend and is a personal friend of mine. He calls once in a while.

Anyway, we had a city editor, Popovich, who retired, and a person named Gordon E. Nelson took his place; he had been assistant city editor; he had covered the legislature in Sacramento; he was the Sacramento person for a while. And he didn't last long because he was too much his own man. He opened a public

relations office in Fresno, and a man named Charles Hurley, who'd also covered Sacramento, took his place.

Sacramento was sort of a jumping off point; you worked there and then you came back to the desk. But nothing was promised, nothing was promised. The Bee didn't promise. There was no track. I mean, assistant city editors didn't become city editors necessarily. So, Hurley didn't like the job that Ellingson was doing.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember why?

WRIGHTSON: He said Ellingson was error-prone. So, he removed him and gave me that job.

VASQUEZ: You got up there in '61.

WRIGHTSON: Well, at the same time, after that was done--I think the next year maybe--Ellingson went to work for the governor [Edmund G. Brown, Sr.]. He was the assistant press secretary for Brown. And Hurley quit and went as the press secretary for [Alan] Cranston, who was controller, I think, at the time. The Bee didn't like that.

When I got the job, Diz Shelton took me aside and said, "Look, you're not supposed to

pick the plums up there. You're going to be offered a lot of jobs, and you're not supposed to jump ship. We're not sending you up there to further your career someplace else. And I want to know if your idea of getting up there is to leave the paper. We want somebody up there on an ongoing basis." And I was very happy to go, and I said, "No, I like this paper." And I had no big ideas; I didn't think I was going to jump to the New York Times, anyway. It was okay with me. And I liked Fresno; it was a good town. You know, it wasn't Carmel, or it wasn't Santa Barbara, but it was a good town.

So, the situation was that they sent you up to Sacramento and most of the guys lived in a hotel there, but I wanted my family with me. So, I took my family up. We would go up on, like December 28, or the week before Christmas, and rent a house. And the Bee paid for that. And then we'd drive our car up with whatever we needed--we'd get a furnished house. And they would move some things. I think when we had the second child, they moved a crib. When we had enough to move, they moved us. They paid

that. And we would rent that house. And we'd rent it from January 1, when the legislature met in those days.

Now, the legislature didn't have an annual legislature. They met from January 1 to, I think, in June. Sometimes it went over. So, we would go there, and we'd rent as near the Capitol as we could. We didn't live in a luscious house in [William F.] Land Park, but we had a decent place. The Bee was not stingy. They weren't like Time magazine or the L.A. Times, where you travel first class, but they were unstinting. In other words, you had to check how much you paid. In those days, you couldn't pay \$1,500 a month, that was out of the question. But, \$600 and \$700. . . .

The situation was, and I was made to know, that I was not supposed to cover the legislature as such. I was to cover items of interest to Fresno and Modesto. I was representing both papers. Other reporters had gotten a big head up there and wanted to cover the big picture. They had gotten in with the other reporters from Sacramento and started covering things and had

neglected their roots. I still worked for the Fresno paper, still sent a time card to Fresno every week. I worked by the hour, and I took overtime. They didn't exploit that. I mean, when I had overtime, they paid it in Fresno.

The [Newspaper] Guild was strong in Sacramento then, by the way. It had a strong guild. I was told to stick to Fresno and not to get a big head. I mean, that was laid out, almost in those terms. You know, "You're from here. And don't forget who's paying you and what you're supposed to do. Don't get up there and get. . . ." And they were down-to-earth enough to tell you that without hinting at it, you understand. They didn't tell you over an expensive dinner. I mean, they didn't take me to dinner to give me the assignment. There was none of that in the Bee. They just did it. They called you up and said, "We want you to go to Sacramento. Will you go?"

So, I took that seriously and covered Fresno and Modesto [Laughter] and wrote [about] bills and covered my legislators. And you were supposed to cover your legislators, from [Senator

James A.] Jim Cobey from Merced. . . . You had certain counties. You had Fresno, Merced, Madera County, Kern, Tulare. What is Stockton in? [San Joaquin County]

VASQUEZ: So you mostly covered local issues?

WRIGHTSON: Absolutely.

VASQUEZ: Let me ask you about some of the people that were there at the time that you got there. Well, there was, first of all, the Capitol News Service that [Edwin C.] Ed Capps, I think, wrote for. How did that operate?

WRIGHTSON: I don't know.

VASQUEZ: You had no idea?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I mean, I saw him around. I thought it was a schlock operation, but I don't know.

VASQUEZ: For the Sacramento Bee, you had [Herbert L.] "Pete" Phillips?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. Now, he had a great influence on me.

VASQUEZ: How was that?

WRIGHTSON: Well, he was a very principled newsman. He was a very aristocratic man. Do you know anything about Phillips?

VASQUEZ: A little bit, yes.

WRIGHTSON: What do you know?

VASQUEZ: I've read some of his writing like his book on California politics, which is sort of a mainstay.¹

WRIGHTSON: Okay. Do you want me to talk on Phillips at all, or do you want to let that go?

VASQUEZ: No, I would like to flesh that out.

WRIGHTSON: He had been in the Marine Corps. He walked very erect. He had a little mustache and dressed impeccably, but he was no fop. He had no children. And this was his second wife, because his first wife had died. He never played around, and he was completely dedicated to the work.

He had been city editor of the Sacramento Union, and he had worked for [William Randolph] Hearst at the [San Francisco] Examiner. He'd covered Sacramento for Hearst at the Examiner. And he'd gone head to head with Walter Jones, who headed the Sacramento, Capitol bureau of the Bee under old C. K. [McClatchy], and gave me to

1. Big Wayward Girl: An Informal History of California. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968.

think that he had beat Jones in a hell of a lot of stories. But he was the Examiner's man in Sacramento, and he covered kidnappings and everything. He had a lot of stories. You know, the whole thing.

He was a very particular man. Like there was a place called Bedell's. It was a restaurant. And I think there was more done there than Frank Fats. Anyway, at lunch he had a table reserved, and he held court there. Nobody could sit there except newsmen. Any visiting newsmen. But once you quit journalism and became lobbyist, or once you quit and became secretary to a state official, like Hurley and Ellingson did, you could not come back and sit at that table.

VASQUEZ: How about somebody like [John F.] Jack Burby?

WRIGHTSON: No! Jack wasn't a newsman at the time. And to Pete the journalist was like the Jesuit; once you left the field you were out. Once you left the monastery, I mean, he looked on you as a flak. He said, "He's a flak now." And journalism was a high profession. He was interested in how the legislature operated and

what it was all about.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

WRIGHTSON: And he ran the bureau. I mean, he really ran the bureau. And at the bureau at the time we had Al Lyons covering the senate, Alfred E. Lyons.

VASQUEZ: I've got them right here.

WRIGHTSON: Oh, you got them all? Richard Rodda. William [K.] Lythgoe, is he there? Clark Biggs, is he there?

VASQUEZ: Tom Arden?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yeah. Tom Arden.

VASQUEZ: Robert Handsager?

WRIGHTSON: Well, he was a photographer. [Laughter] Okay. And that was the bureau, and they were very tightly knit; they didn't have much intercourse with the other reporters.

VASQUEZ: What was their attitude towards you covering Modesto and Fresno? Were they helpful?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, terribly helpful, especially Arden. A little condescending. Not Arden, though. They would laugh about Fresno, you know, and Modesto. And I had to cover the water hyacinth

growth in Turlock. But that didn't worry me.

In fact, it never worries me to cover something that people are interested in that's important to the people around. I mean, rather than cover this political convention in New Orleans, I'd much rather cover something here in town that's more interesting to all the people-- less interesting to me, maybe, but much more interesting and has much more effect on people. So, it didn't worry me.

And I was glad to do it. I never thought-- I never felt demeaned by it. They used to laugh and say, "You got to cover the water hyacinths." And I attended the Agricultural Committee that nobody else wanted to attend. I did that. And when a Fresno bill came up to the committees, I'd hand it over to Rodda.

Rodda was a very good friend of mine, by the way. He mediated between Pete, who was quite austere, and the rest of the staff. He was Pete's assistant, and he sort of mediated. If you got in trouble with Pete, he'd talk to him, or you asked him what to do. Pete was fussy at times.

So, anyway, we would go to these luncheons. And Pete would have a martini, which he had with Beefeaters [gin], and everybody would buy a round. He would buy the first round every day. And then, you were supposed to-- somebody'd buy the second. Or, if they didn't have a second--they didn't have one every day--you bought the next day or something. And he had utter contempt for people who wouldn't buy their round who were there every day. Now, if you were visiting, that meant it was okay.

At that table, it was journalist talk. The man didn't tell dirty stories, he talked about the legislators and asked people about them. He was very interested in baseball; he was interested in boxing; he knew sports. He was very well educated. He was from Knights Landing. He would talk about classical things; he was a very intelligent man.

And he had the ear of Walter Jones, who was the editor. He went over every morning--he reported to the Bee at 7:30 or 7:00--and went in and had a conference with Walter Jones about what was going on. And he really took care of

his staff. He got them raises, he protected them. Like one time, when I was representing Fresno, I happened to mention in front of Pete, "My stuff isn't getting in the paper there." He said, "What did you say?" He picked up the phone and called the managing editor and said, "This stuff has got to go in. This man is working hard, and you make room for him! You do it!" [laughter] He'd call them and say, "You do it! You get that in there!"

WRIGHTSON:

So, you were in Sacramento when there were a lot of very prominent journalists. Earl "Squire" Behrens was the editor for the Chronicle. Behrens, right. [Richard C.] Dick Bergholz. Jack McDowell. Who was the guy from the Oakland Tribune? He was there. Don Thomas, who went to work for the L.A. Times finally as an editorial writer. Oh, who was the nice guy from the Chronicle? And who was the other guy? Jack . . .

VASQUEZ:

Jackson Doyle, yes. I knew him. He was pretty friendly. In those times, we went to lobbyists things. Pete's rule was if the whole press corps was invited, you could go. But, he

WRIGHTSON:

VASQUEZ:

discouraged individual luncheons between you and lobbyists. And he told me when I came up, he said, "You know, we don't socialize with [lobbyists]"--apparently, my predecessors did-- "We discourage socializing with your sources. We don't do that." Apparently, Ellingson did, and some of them did. And he said, "We don't do that. I don't do it. I don't invite them in my home. I don't do that." So, I didn't. It was a good rule, because a lot of guys were co-opted. I mean, Thomas was very close to his sources, but every man has to do what he has to do to cover [a story].

VASQUEZ: What did you learn about the legislature when you first got up there? Was there any particular eye-opening experience that you had about how the legislature worked or how the lobbyists worked?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I was working very hard on the Fresno/Modesto thing. And the lobbyists really didn't do much to me. I mean, I didn't get the liquor. I was an adjunct, you understand; I wasn't really a member of that bureau. And for most people, I was the Fresno/Modesto guy, and

that was okay with me. I was amazed at the lobbyists. Do you want stories, or what?

VASQUEZ: Something that gives me a sense of what you saw there.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I'll tell you, there was a senator named James [A.] Cobey. I became pretty good friends with him--I don't mean socially. He was a straight man. He was honest, and he was a lawyer. You know, he became a judge. He lived in Merced. He brought a secretary with him. Anyway, as usual, I had a lot to do with secretaries and staff members, as everybody does. You get more from secretaries and staff members than you do from the senator, because he's protecting his flank. So, I was talking to Jane.

Oh, and some of the senators had an open door for the lobbyists. Like [Senator] Hugh [M.] Burns would see the lobbyists first, say. A lot of them would. And Cobey would not. He'd make them sit in a line and wait until he'd seen constituents or whatever. So, the lobbyists had a lot of trouble with Cobey because he didn't play the game. He also gave me tips, like when

the milk lobbyists had a big bash up in Reno or Tahoe he would tell me. Well, he wouldn't go, but he'd tell me they had this bash, and he'd try to get me a list of who was there. Or I'd try to get the list.

So anyway, Jane brought her mother up. She wasn't married. And she and her mother would do what I did. They'd get a little apartment while Jim Cobey was up here. They had a little dog, a little cocker spaniel. And this cocker spaniel was killed by a car. So, Jane was there, and the lobbyists were sitting around, and she got a phone call from her mother saying they killed Spike, or whatever its name was. And she started to cry.

The lobbyists asked, "What is wrong?" She said, "My dog was killed. . . ." That afternoon they had a purebred cocker spaniel delivered to her house. Now, you can't get in with a secretary any better than that! [Laughter] Right? What is she supposed to do, send the dog back? I mean, what is she supposed to do? You can't hate a guy who does that. Right?

They wanted to know what you wanted. If

you wanted dirty jokes, they'd tell you dirty jokes. If you wanted to discuss Plato, they'd find a guy who could discuss Plato. If you wanted to discuss sports, they'd give you tickets to sports. And they'd open doors for you. They'd take you to lunch. They'd do everything. And Pete knew that, and he warned us: We didn't do that.

Gordon Nelson became a lobbyist for Burns, or worked for him. And there was a lobbyist named [James D.] Garibaldi who was very close to Burns, very very close. They called him "Judge." But, do you know where he was a judge? He was a justice of the peace in Madera County or something.

Anyway, there was a place called Antonino's where people ate. It was an old house, and it was a nice place. So, I had lunch with Gordon Nelson. And Garibaldi was there and said hello across the table. So, afterwards, Garibaldi called him aside and said, "I'd like to buy your lunch, but that guy works for McClatchy."
[Laughter] "He won't do it." [Laughter] He apologized to Nelson for not buying his lunch.

"I'd like to pick up that check, but I can't. He works for McClatchy, and they won't do that." And it made you feel proud. It really did. I mean, you could not be bought, and it was nice. And none of us were [bought]. We were very loyal to the McClatchys, we really were. I felt very loyal to the McClatchys.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of the more prominent lobbyists at the time that you remember?

WRIGHTSON: Garibaldi, Don Redman for the truckers, I guess there was [Vincent D.] Vince Kennedy. I'm not sure. He was the liquor lobbyist. I'd have to get a list, because I didn't have that much to do with them.

VASQUEZ: So you covered mostly local news or legislation that had to do with . . .

WRIGHTSON: Fresno and Modesto.

VASQUEZ: And that's pretty much it? You stayed away from the big picture?

WRIGHTSON: Well, Rodda and I would cover things together. He'd take the big picture, and I'd take the Fresno/Modesto angle. I went to those things. I covered the assembly. I covered the votes. See, when a person would vote, we'd go ask him

how he voted. And we had a story on why our guy voted that way in the Bee.

VASQUEZ: Tell me your impression of some of the people in the legislature at the time.

WRIGHTSON: Generally good. Well, I liked the senate.

VASQUEZ: Why?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I always described the senate as a chess game, where the pawn moves certain ways, and the rook moves certain ways, you know? The assembly was a handball court. It could come off of any wall, it was like keeping eleven ping pong balls down with ten fingers. There's no way you can do it. So, I liked the senate because you could keep track of them. There weren't as many. And I knew Cobey, and my guys had a lot more influence.

Burns was president [pro tempore], and Cobey had a lot of influence. And [Senator Walter W.] Stiern of Kern County. And who was the guy from San Joaquin County--Senator [Alan] Short. Burns stayed in Sacramento most of the time. The guy who brought down Burns was [Robert] Bob Fairbanks--who was here Saturday night for dinner--of the L.A. Times. He found

out that Burns and his chief clerk, or whatever it was, Alex [Christen], had an insurance business in Phoenix and so forth. He wrote that story.

Anyway, Burns was my senator. Since he was senate pro tem, he was also Pete's source and Rodda's. So, anything I got from Burns I gave to them. And I got a lot from Burns. With Hurley and Nelson and all, for Christmas, he'd give them a basket of different wines-- complete. Well, he got that from the winery lobby. They'd give him anything he wanted.

When I came up, he figured me out completely. I didn't want wine, I didn't want dinners, I wanted the news. So he told his secretary, "When Jim comes in, put him above everybody else." And he used to say, "I'm sorry, but Jim's here from the paper, and I'm going to see him first." [Laughter] And he'd close the door, and he'd tell me what was going on.

This guy was a very conservative guy. He used to be called the "Merry Mortician" when he first came up there. You know, he owned a

mortuary in Fresno. Anyway, I got along very well with him. I can see why everybody else did. I'd come back to Fresno. . . . Burns was a Democrat. They didn't like him, you know. The CDC, the California Democratic Council, always opposed Burns. And I said, "He ain't that bad."

When Garrigus and DeLotto were up there, they could get anything through, because he'd get it through. Like, if you wanted air conditioning for Fresno State, Hughie would get it. I'd go in to [see] him early in the session and I'd say, "Well, what's the session look like, Senator?" And he'd say, "Well, I think we'll get something on seat belts, have a big argument on this, but it's not going to go anyplace. Well, I think we'll do something on this, this, this, and this and this." And I had a story. Sometimes they'd give it to Pete or Rodda, see. But I could write my own Fresno version.

So then, when a bill would come up I'd say to him, "Senator, what about this bill?" He'd say, "Oh, don't worry about it. It's not going to go anyplace. No, it's not going to do

that." So, I wouldn't write it up sometimes. Or, I'd write the introductions, and then I wouldn't write it in the committee. And the editor then was George [F.] Gruner, he was the city editor. He'd say, "Hey, we got a UPI story that this one came before the committee." I'd say, "Don't worry about it, George. It's not going anyplace. It's not worth writing, it's not going to go anyplace. You're just going to scare people." And he'd say, "Well, you know. . . ." I'd say, "Don't worry. Hughie told me it's not going to." So, then it would go through another committee, and it would pass another committee. "Don't worry about that bill." And sure enough, it'd get killed in committee. He [Burns] never missed.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember any particular piece of legislation or any type of legislation that he was consistently able to put down or kill in committee, [legislation] that might have scared people, that might have excited the electorate?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I don't know. He was in with the insurance lobby and the liquor lobby, and there were so many bills. I mean, it was he and [Senator

Randolph] Collier who were at the gate there. It was called the Government Organization Committee. They met on Wednesday night and decided what was going to go through. And if they didn't like a bill, they'd get it assigned to their committee. A very powerful group.

But there were some good senators, like [Senator Joseph A.] Rattigan, Senator [Albert] Rodda. Al Rodda is Dick Rodda's brother. You knew that, of course. [Senator Edwin J.] Ed Regan, [who] became a judge. I'd have to see the names, but there was a whole group. Cobey was a good senator. Stiern was a good senator.

[Senator] George Miller [Jr.] was in the Finance Committee. And I was impressed. I was impressed over there. I remember they had some bill they called the "Little Red School House" bill.¹ It was anticommunist. No communist could speak at a school. I remember George Miller got up and said--you ever hear him speak? "This is a dog. This bill is a dog, and you know it. And if you go home and tell your

1. S.B. 706, introduced by Senators John F. Thompson and Leland M. Backstrand, which prohibited the use of public school property by anyone deemed "subversive." The bill died in committee on June 16, 1961.

constituents you voted against communism because of this bill, you're lying to them, and you know it." He had a flare for things. He was very liberal, but he voted with the oil interest because they were in Contra Costa County. And he said so. He seldom, if ever, opposed Standard Oil or the utilities.

He got along with Burns. I mean, even though he was a liberal. Burns didn't mind if you were a liberal per se. Burns was a very astute man. He could figure people out. "What's this guy all about?" I mean, he figured me out right away. The first thing he told me when he saw me, he said, "You know, I've got a Lincoln Continental here that needs the oil stirred up. I never take it. Why don't you drive back to Fresno on the weekends?" [This was] before my wife came up. He said, "Why don't you drive it back to Fresno? It's got a SB1 on it. Nobody's going to worry. You can go as fast as you want." At that time the [California] Highway Patrol wasn't picking up senators, you understand. Now they do, of course. "No, I

couldn't do that." I think he said, "Well, your managing editor did when he was up here."

[Laughter].

VASQUEZ: Tell me your impression of the lower house, the assembly.

WRIGHTSON: The guys I covered were. . . . I forget who was from Modesto at the time. Oh, that old, old senator. Oh, what was his name? He was about ninety when I got there.

VASQUEZ: [Senator] Ralph [M.] Brown?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, it was. Let me see, you had this fight between the north and the south, mostly over water, but over a lot of things. The only way they could get anything done was to get somebody from the San Joaquin Valley, and those people had a lot of power. Much more than their constituency gave them. Okay? They really did.

VASQUEZ: Why?

WRIGHTSON: Well, because they were swing votes on everything.

VASQUEZ: And Ralph Brown represented something like that?

WRIGHTSON: He represented Modesto.

VASQUEZ: But I'm saying he represented a compromise in north-south [conflicts].

WRIGHTSON: I'm sure he did. You check with somebody. Oh, yes. Sure he did.

VASQUEZ: That's the way he got to be speaker.

WRIGHTSON: Sure, sure. Absolutely. And [Jesse M.] Unruh took his place, of course. And there was [Assemblyman] Robert [T.] Monagan, who became speaker, and [Senator] Alan Short of the Short-Doyle Act.¹ I covered them. And Stanislaus County where Modesto is, that was Ralph M. Brown Senator Hugh [P.] Donnelly, that's the guy I'm trying to think of.

VASQUEZ: What about him?

WRIGHTSON: Well, he was about seventy years old at that time. And you couldn't get much from him. I mean, he wasn't a drunk or anything, but I couldn't get much from him. But I did so much with Burns. I mean, [Dick] Rodda once said, "We keep up with. . . ." Jack [S.] McDowell and those guys used to drink with Burns 'til 2:00 in the morning. And Rodda used to say, "Well, you're keeping up without the drinking. You

¹. Community Mental Health Services Act. S.B. 244-245, 1957 Leg. Sess., Cal. Stat. 1989 (1957).

don't have to go out and drink 'til 2:00 to get this stuff. He's giving it to you." I did get a lot of stuff. I mean, a lot of what was going on, nothing secret.

VASQUEZ: What was the relationship at the time between the assembly and the senate? Was it a friendly one? Was it a cooperative one? Was it a hierarchical one? What do you remember?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes, because Burns was so powerful. They had to get along with him. I mean, they really did. I mean, like Teale, [Senator] Stephen [P.] Teale was a very powerful senator. He was a doctor.

VASQUEZ: An osteopath, I think.

WRIGHTSON: Yeah. Cobey, [Senator Stanley] Arnold, and these guys were from small counties, Modoc and so forth. [Senator] Fred [S.] Farr, from Monterey, was a very well respected guy.

VASQUEZ: Which of the two bodies, as you remember, would initiate more change-oriented legislation or more important legislation?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I think the assembly would completely. I don't think there's any question about that. As I say, one was like a chess game, the other like

handball. I don't think there's any question but that the assembly [did].

VASQUEZ: Who were some of the movers that you remember in the assembly? By '61 you had a series of young, liberal assemblymen being elected, and then with the Democratic sweep of '58 you had a whole body of people beginning to form little coalitions and little affinity groups in the assembly.

WRIGHTSON: I forget how it was. But Unruh had his "Seven Bastards," or the seven people. Jesse was from Los Angeles.

VASQUEZ: [Assemblyman Jerome R.] Jerry Waldie was around him.

WRIGHTSON: Well, Waldie, [Assemblyman John T.] Knox, [Assemblyman Robert W.] Crown, [Assemblyman Nicholas C.] Petris, DeLotto. . . .

VASQUEZ: How about [Assemblyman Thomas M.] Tom Rees?

WRIGHTSON: Rees, right. Absolutely, Rees. [Assemblyman] George [E.] Brown [Jr.] wasn't in that. He was an ultraliberal, and he didn't get there.

VASQUEZ: How about [Assemblyman James R.] Jim Mills?

WRIGHTSON: Right. Absolutely. That's right. Now, Jim was a little bit flaky at times.

VASQUEZ: In what way?

WRIGHTSON: Well, like one time, he tried to get the District Attorney of Sacramento County [John M. Price] to charge Hale Champion, who was Brown's director of Finance, with something relating to the Lockheed [Corporation]. . . . They wanted to use a big computer system that Lockheed had put in to solve urban problems. And Mills tried to get some case filed against him. And I thought Unruh put him up to it. And I talked to--I forget who Unruh's assistant was, because he had been Ralph Brown's assistant. I forget the guy. [Jack Crose] He is in the public relations business in Sacramento. He'd been a Modesto Bee reporter, by the way. And he said, "We didn't do it. That's off the wall. We didn't know about that." Mills was a very intelligent guy, but he was a little flaky.

But he was liberal, he was a Democrat. It was interesting. San Diego [County] is very right-wing but they elected Mills. Hell, the San Joaquin Valley guys were all pretty liberal. I mean every one.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that happened, or how did that happen?

[Interruption]

Have you had an opportunity to read James Mills's book on the Brown-Unruh years?¹

WRIGHTSON: No.

VASQUEZ: Because he comments in one chapter, on this incident with Hale Champion and how Jesse Unruh was very upset by it, saw it as real temperate act.

WRIGHTSON: Oh, he did say that? I'm surprised, I didn't know that. I mean, I found that out on my own.

VASQUEZ: I think Pete Phillips refers to Unruh's group of people as the "Cub Scout Den," at one point. Other people have referred to it as the "Praetorian Guard."

WRIGHTSON: Well, that's when he became the speaker. But before that he played havoc with the Republican speakers, he and his guys. By the way, they were pretty high-type guys. The other guy was from Beverly Hills, [Assemblyman Anthony C.] Beilenson.

VASQUEZ: Anthony Beilenson?

1. A Disorderly House: The Brown-Unruh Years in Sacramento. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1987.

WRIGHTSON: Yes. Wasn't he an assemblyman? Sure he was.
Wasn't he?

VASQUEZ: He had followed Tom Rees up there.

WRIGHTSON: I thought Beilenson was in the assembly. Maybe not. Maybe I'm wrong.

VASQUEZ: He was, but later.¹ So, how did that group operate before Jesse Unruh became speaker? How did they cause havoc with the Republicans? Tell me about that.

WRIGHTSON: Well, they knew more about the process, and they were led by Unruh, and they'd play like a basketball team. You know, one would [pass] it to the other, and they knew what they were doing. You could see them operate in the assembly.

VASQUEZ: So they knew the governmental or legislative process pretty well.

WRIGHTSON: Yes, and understood it. Some people came up that never did understand it. You understand, they never did know what was going on.

VASQUEZ: How did they function, on a personalistic level

1. Anthony C. Beilenson served in the California State Assembly from 1963 to 1966 and in the senate from 1967 to 1976.

or issue by issue?

WRIGHTSON: Well, those people usually weren't issue-oriented anyway, and they would just serve the constituents, that's all. I mean, they'd introduce bills that would never get through. There were some people, and I don't know which I could name, but they never got a bill through. As they used to say, "He couldn't get a resolution to his mother on Mother's Day." I mean, some of these people just couldn't get anything through.

And all they did was show off for their constituents. They brought them up, or they brought the buses up, or they had them in the gallery, and so forth. But they weren't on good committees. They didn't have enough prestige to get on a good committee. They just didn't count for much.

VASQUEZ: Unruh brought in people that knew the process and worked as a team?

WRIGHTSON: Well, he didn't bring those guys in, because he didn't have enough influence to get them elected then.

VASQUEZ: But I'm saying, into his inner circle he brought

them in, once they were there?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, but if you were a liberal, you were very attracted to Unruh, because he was, in a sense, a very attractive guy that way. He knew what he was talking about, and he would talk to you. Yes, he did bring them in. Yes.

VASQUEZ: Was there any attempt, as you remember, by the Republicans to try and offset that by counterorganizing?

WRIGHTSON: I don't remember any. The Republicans were [Harold K.] Levering, [Charles J.] Conrad, [Joseph C.] Shell. For example, there [was] a guy named Don [A.] Allen [Sr.]. He bragged that he never, after his freshman year, introduced a bill. He just voted "no" on everybody else's. And he got along fine. He was from Los Angeles. The big Republicans were Conrad and Shell. Oh, Carlos Bee was one of Unruh's guys, too. Forgot him. [Don R.] Mulford was a big Republican. [Assemblyman Myron H.] Frew, from Tulare County, he never handled a big piece of legislation in his life. And sometimes I don't think he knew what was happening. I think it was some [committee] education meeting, and. . . .

You know how they sit in banks there? And what was her name? Who was the woman from . . .

VASQUEZ: [Assemblywoman Dorothy M.] Donahoe?

WRIGHTSON: Well, yes, Dorothy Donahoe. She dumped a glass of water on Myron and said, "Wake up."

[Laughter] He was voting wrong, and he didn't know what he was voting on. He couldn't keep up. I mean, he just couldn't keep up with it.

So, I think she dumped a cup of water on him.

"Wake up, will ya?" Apparently, they had made some agreement when they got there. Oh,

[Assemblyman Philip A.] Phil Burton was big.

Now, he was not an Unruh guy.. And he was terrifically influential.

VASQUEZ: What did his influence rest on?

WRIGHTSON: Everyplace, just everyplace.

VASQUEZ: What did it stem from, his town, his district, his connections, what?

WRIGHTSON: His district, one. But in the first place, he had a little machine in San Francisco--the Burtons. See, there was not much machine politics in California then. Burns did not have a machine. Burns got elected in Fresno because nobody ran against him mostly. But there was no

machine politics. I don't think L.A. did. These guys from L.A. didn't stick together at all. They voted all kinds of ways.

Burton had a kind of machine up there that got him back in. He worked terribly hard. He never ate lunch, he'd eat a peanut butter bar and a Coke. And he was always working. He opposed Unruh and got away with it. His wife, Sala Burton, sat right behind him and would sort of advise him and talk to him. And he'd talk to her. She was a very sharp woman. Did she succeed him [in Congress] after he died? I don't think she did.

VASQUEZ: Yes, she did.¹

WRIGHTSON: She did make it? Well, anyway, she was a CDC girl. I covered the CDC a lot in Fresno. I meant to tell you that.

VASQUEZ: Let's do talk about that. But let's finish with the legislature. One of the things that was taking place about this time was the beginning of a movement by Jesse Unruh to make the

1. Sala Burton was elected to fill the vacancy caused by her husband's death and was seated on June 21, 1983.

legislature more independent of the executive.

WRIGHTSON: Absolutely right.

VASQUEZ: Were you aware of that, number one, and how did that manifest itself at the time?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it manifested itself because instead of old guys, like, say, Burns, there were a lot of bright, young guys coming. You can't compare Waldie with Burns. He was a bright, young guy. And these guys brought assistants with them, and they hired assistants, and we dealt with the assistants. And they were bright, young people. They knew what they were doing.

[Kenneth J.] Ken Corey, for example, worked for Garrigus. Yes, consultant for the Education Committee. Nobody can call him dumb. He was a brown bagger when I used to talk to him. [He's] a millionaire now. Don't ask me how. He says his mother loaned him money. I asked him that in an editorial conference when he was running. I said, "How did you do it? You were a brown bagger not too long ago, and now you're a millionaire. How'd you do that?" He said, "Well, I have a little insurance business," you know.

But the point is, there were guys like that who were really sharp. Crown was a very sharp guy. He wasn't married. And these guys didn't have their wives with them, either. They all went out at night. They went to the gym, and they worked out. They devoted full-time to playing and legislation, and they were friends. They got together.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that being socially active and being able to move around [in the] evenings helped them in their politicking?

WRIGHTSON: Sure.

VASQUEZ: Some people say there's more stability if you have your family up there. Other people say that most legislative business took place in bars or in restaurants, rather than on the chamber floor.

WRIGHTSON: It's a different kind of stability. There is more stability, in that sense, because your wife says, "You can't go out with the lobbyists and stay 'til 4:00 anymore. Where were you?" But on the other hand, when you're totally immersed in the process, you're immersed in the process.

Like newspapermen, if you work all day and

go to a bar with other newspapermen and talk over stories, things happen. I mean, you think that way. If you go home and your wife says the plumbing leaked and the kids got out of hand, you're discussing different things than if you met with colleagues. And these guys all met at Posey's, and they met at Frank Fats. They met at Bedell's.

Now, you understand, it wasn't an annual legislature, and these guys did not have their families with them. They stayed up late. Some lived at the El Mirador Hotel. Unruh used to hold court there. There was a guy that sang there named "Biggie" Kanai, who was supposed to be Hawaiian. And Unruh used to sing. I mean, he'd get up and sing late at night and sing songs derogatory to the CDC and all. They were all over there that night. They weren't a bunch of drunks, either. I mean, they were drinking, but this was not a bunch of sloppy drunks.

VASQUEZ: They were doing it for a purpose?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't know about that. I mean, motive, I don't know. I saw them there, and my impression was that they weren't falling down

drunk over each other or slobbering. They were very intelligent guys who had an agenda when they came up there.

VASQUEZ: How did the more established members of the legislature, either in the assembly or in the senate, try to counteract that wave of new, aggressive, perhaps better-informed legislators that were coming in and moving legislation. Because they stuck together, they exchanged information, they conspired.

WRIGHTSON: Well, they ran a rear-guard action a lot.

VASQUEZ: Give me an example, if you can think of one.

WRIGHTSON: Oh, boy, I can't.

VASQUEZ: Well, maybe not a particular example. What kinds of things might they do to try to counteract the influence that was beginning to grow around these primarily liberal young Democrats?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the fight over the budget, or how much went into welfare, or reforming the welfare code. Now, Burton was head of the Welfare Committee. I think one of the things--I'm not sure of this--in the law was that the welfare worker was supposed to get as much as he could

for the client, rather than as little as he could. I think they put that in the code. These guys would fight that tooth and nail.

VASQUEZ: Charles Garrigus had a lot of trouble supporting welfare in his district. He was always getting a lot of flak, he tells me, from people in the local area [who] wanted to cut back on welfare payments, until he was able to show that, in fact, welfare brought money into a county. It provided money that was going to be spent there, and less than one-third of the money that went into welfare came from the local area. It came from the state.

WRIGHTSON: Yes, he did that. And he also did another thing to the farmers. He told them, "You won't have any labor if we don't give welfare down there, because these people don't work [for] four months a year. And if we don't pay them welfare, they're going to go someplace else. When April comes and you want people they won't be there. So quit your bitching." [Laughter]

[End Tape 2, Side B]

[Begin Tape 3, Side A]

VASQUEZ: So Garrigus would argue that welfare, in fact,

kept the labor force that you were going to need at a particular time of the year in the county?

WRIGHTSON: Sure, sure.

VASQUEZ: You were telling me you covered the CDC conventions in Fresno. Do you want to tell me about that?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, not just in Fresno. I covered them in Bakersfield. I covered them in--when they had the big fight . . .

VASQUEZ: Did you cover the Asilomar meetings?

WRIGHTSON: I don't think so, but I covered the ones in Hollywood. See, I didn't go north from Fresno that much. Sacramento took that. I went as far as Merced County probably, and then I dropped off. But nobody at the Bee wanted to cover southern California. They didn't like it, and they didn't want to come down here. Rodda didn't like Los Angeles and neither did Pete. And Pete didn't travel that much, anyway.

VASQUEZ: What was it they disliked about Los Angeles?

WRIGHTSON: The reporters?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: Well, it was a sprawling place, and hotels were expensive, and they couldn't get around, and

people weren't on a first-name basis. It was just harder to cover. Jones didn't think Los Angeles had much influence on Sacramento, anyway, and let the wires do it. They didn't do much.

But I was eager to do it, and I did. I covered a lot of the CDC fights. I forget the names of those people now, I'm sorry. But they threw one guy out. He was from San Diego. He came in, and they had a big turmoil about that. I went to a lot of CDC conventions in Bakersfield. I did all the Bakersfield coverage, almost, because Rodda didn't want to go down there. Rodda did a lot of that, but I did a lot of CDC coverage, an awful lot.

VASQUEZ: Give me your impressions of that.

WRIGHTSON: And I did a lot of right-wing coverage, by the way. I covered the--what's that . . .

VASQUEZ: The [John] Birch Society?

WRIGHTSON: No. Well, I did that. But I did the--oh, it's a Republican--not the California Republican Assembly, but the other one.

[Interruption]

VASQUEZ: Let's do the CDC first. Tell me your impressions

of how the CDC was formed and how it changed over time.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I wasn't there when it was formed. I wasn't covering that.

VASQUEZ: But the meetings that you did cover, tell me what the issues were, what divisions existed and why.

WRIGHTSON: Well, it was formed by Cranston, who did everything but play the organ at the conventions, and by a guy named Tom--who worked at Lockheed--Tom Carvey. Very intelligent, heads-up people who were liberals. And a woman named Barbara Double. She lives in Pasadena, here, and she's still a Democrat. And a woman named Sharon Lee was there. And these people, they'd come to Fresno.

They'd come to Fresno [on a] Thursday night and they'd get ready for it. They'd set up an agenda, and they had orderly meetings, and they'd pass resolutions. They'd condemn Burns, and they'd promote other people. Garrigus was backed by the CDC and so was DeLotto. They didn't like Unruh because he was too ruthless. They liked Phil Burton, of course. It was kind

of a grass roots.

I always think they overstated their membership, but I couldn't prove that. A lot of people came to that convention, let's put it that way. And there was a lot going on, and it was very dynamic. They got behind--I can't remember which, but they got behind certain initiatives at the time. They opposed certain initiatives. And they always passed resolutions against the Bracero Program.

VASQUEZ: Some people say they were more effective at passing resolutions than affecting state politics and Democratic politics. What's your assessment of that?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I guess that's right. I mean, I couldn't argue [with] it. You never know what's effective.

For example, I don't think Unruh would admit that he was ever influenced by the CDC, but who knows? These people got together. They passed resolutions. They were pillars in their community. They gave to the Democratic party. They got out the vote. People came before them to get endorsed.

- VASQUEZ: So they must have wielded some influence.
- WRIGHTSON: They didn't have much influence in the legislature, true; they did not. But, nobody had much influence in the legislature, except for lobbyists, really. The Republican party didn't have that much influence in the legislature. The Democratic party only had influence in the legislature when they had a Democratic governor and a . . .
- VASQUEZ: A majority?
- WRIGHTSON: Sure. The Democratic party as such couldn't crack the whip up there. No way.
- VASQUEZ: So, is it your assessment that the CDC, in part, was successful because of the vacuum that existed in some areas, and [because] they were more organized?
- WRIGHTSON: Well, I wouldn't say that. If you say it, I wouldn't argue. No, my impression was that these people were interested in politics. They were interested in certain social causes and they got together. [They] tried to elect officials who would promote those causes and oppose officials who didn't and oppose initiatives that didn't.

Farm labor was a tough problem in those days, and they always had a couple of resolutions for farm labor. For health care, for migrant camps, inspection of camps. Now, who's to say? I mean, I really don't know. You never know what caused it. All I know is this happened here, and then that happened there. And I don't know, I don't think they had much influence in Sacramento. But they sent people up there. And I think once you send anybody to Sacramento, whether a liberal or a conservative, they got away from you, because that milieu was a complete whirlpool up there.

VASQUEZ: It had a dynamic of its own?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, it did. And once you left town and you got up there, it was so much different.

VASQUEZ: What, in your mind, do you think the CDC was most effective in doing: Articulating issues? Getting people elected or not elected?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I think it was most effective in articulating issues and in bringing to the [attention of the] California electorate that there was another way, that these people did stand for this. There was a whole idea that California

was being ruled by the farm community, by people who had no urban problems. These people were interested in urban problems, and they had conventions in Fresno to say so.

VASQUEZ: What was the reaction of the Fresno business and political types when these conventions would be held? Was there great opposition to those conventions? How did you handle it in your newspaper, which was a liberal paper?

WRIGHTSON: Straight away.

VASQUEZ: Did you ever get any flak for giving them objective coverage?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the Republicans [would] say it wasn't objective anyway. The CDC liked it because they had the whole paper. The Bee by this time had established itself as so liberal that people expected it.

Like, once I was a conscientious objector people expected me not to take ROTC. So I didn't get that much flak. Like, nobody condemns César Chávez for being a labor leader now. He is. And that's what the CDC was. That's what the Bee was. The Bee liked the CDC; they wrote editorials in their favor. They

thought it was a good grassroots movement; they were for it. And people accepted it. I don't think the Bee lost any advertising. I don't know, I wasn't on that end, but I doubt that they did. They never pulled in their sails, I'll tell you.

It was a big event for Fresno. It was a big convention. There were a lot of people there. They covered it every way they could. Rodda came down. Pete came down sometimes. And they lasted all night. They were given at the Hacienda Hotel, and they'd last all night, some of them. And then they'd meet the next morning. The AP [Associated Press] came down-- [Morris L.] Morrie Landsberg came down for the AP.

VASQUEZ: A lot of people were trained or were influenced a great deal by Morrie Landsberg up in Sacramento while they were on the Capitol press corps. Did you ever have any dealings with Landsberg?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I knew him, yes. He was on the editorial board with me.

VASQUEZ: Tell me about him. What were his contributions?

WRIGHTSON: What are we doing here?

VASQUEZ: Well, he's someone that I overlooked when I was asking you about some of the players on the Capitol news scene at the time. But he's very important to a lot of people and to the process of news coverage.

WRIGHTSON: He was a very good friend of Pete's. Had lunch with him almost every day. When they went out of town, he and Pete stayed together. I don't mean they lived together, but they had dinners together, they waited for each other. He was a very close friend of Pete Phillips.

VASQUEZ: And was he influential with other pressmen, other journalists in Sacramento?

WRIGHTSON: Well, the AP is, you know.

VASQUEZ: Yes. Because everybody wants to get on the wire, of course.

WRIGHTSON: No, because your editors get the AP and UP first. So they ask you what about this and what about that. So you want to know what the AP did if you're covering something. That wasn't true of the Bee because they'd run Phillips, but Phillips always knew what Morrie was writing. Morrie always wanted to know what Phillips was

writing. Morrie was influential in that way, but he was a very, very strict and conscientious, austere man. I mean, he had terrible ulcers. He's okay now, but he had ulcers all the time, and he was just tense. He did wire service stories like textbook stuff, putting new leads on every half hour. To watch the guy work was like watching Michelangelo paint. I mean, he really did it. He was very, very good.

VASQUEZ: He seems to have influenced a lot of journalists that were in Sacramento at the time by his example, I think.

WRIGHTSON: I guess he did. I don't remember that he didn't. See, by the time most people got to Sacramento they were veterans. There were very few freshman, except on the UP [United Press] and AP. In other words, by the time you got there for the Examiner or the Times or the Herald Examiner, you were a vet. I mean, these guys were veterans. They were older men. There weren't many young guys up there, except at the AP and UP. Boyarsky worked for Landsberg, for example.

VASQUEZ: He's one of the people that I had in mind when

I say he influenced people, and he [Landsberg] acted as sort of a mentor, guide and teacher for some of these people.

WRIGHTSON: I think so, yes. He was a very well respected newsman. You know he quit and went to the McClatchys?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: He was a very respected newsman. His integrity was above reproach. He was right down the middle. I never knew whether he was a Democrat or a Republican. He dressed well. He was a very, very conscientious newsman and did very well for that bureau. He gave them a lot of prestige.

VASQUEZ: I would imagine he brought that prestige to the Bee papers, to the McClatchy papers, when he came?

WRIGHTSON: He was editor of McClatchy television and radio.
[Tape recorder off]

VASQUEZ: Anything else that you want to comment on or recall about some of the CDC events that you covered before we move on to another [subject]?

WRIGHTSON: If you covered Sacramento at all and then you went to the CDC thing, you were impressed by the freshness of these people there. [They] had

none of the jadedness or the so-called "realisticness", the crackpot realism, that you got in Sacramento: "Oh, you can't do it," or "You can't get that bill through," or "They'll never vote for it." These people were really idealistic people. They earned their own living, they lived well. They did this purely out of belief. They weren't looking to run for anything. Maybe Cranston was, but Tom Carvey wasn't; and the Doubles and all those people, they were not looking for anything. You know [Carl] D'Agostino who's in the news?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

WRIGHTSON: Well, D'Agostino was a CDCer. And while some of them did go. . . . The Burtons were very active, you know, and they did go into politics. But essentially, most of those people, they had jobs. They didn't want to go up there. They weren't interested in that kind of thing at all. They were from San Diego. They were from L.A. They didn't want to go to Sacramento. So, you were impressed by that kind of thing.

And the legislators came to the CDC, but they didn't have that much influence. They

tried to because they didn't want the CDC to back certain resolutions or be against certain resolutions and make them vote that way in the legislature. You understand? They didn't want to have to go up there and have their opponent say, "He's going to vote with the CDC." They would say, "Don't do that, you'll hurt my election." But they didn't have that much influence. It was not a convention of "old pols," I'll tell you.

VASQUEZ: And yet, some of these "old pols" found it necessary to come and get that endorsement, didn't they?

WRIGHTSON: Well, sure. Let me tell you another thing about my impression of the legislature [that] just comes back to me now. When I got to the legislature it was run as if there were no cities any bigger than Sacramento. I mean, they were very short on urban population. In the first place, they only had two senators from Los Angeles.

VASQUEZ: One.

WRIGHTSON: One, that's right, one. First, they [Los Angeles assemblymen] didn't vote together; they

never voted as a bloc. You couldn't get them together. And secondly, no matter what they did, the rural-minded senate could kill it. So, you had this legislature meeting as if it was a farm group, you know. If you would have looked at the legislature, you would have thought this was an agricultural state.

You had Hugh Burns up top. Short, all these San Joaquin and Sacramento Valley guys, and so forth, Collier, Sisk, you count it. They had all the chairmanships. They ran it. And we had all these urban problems; we had the Watts riots, we had everything. And the legislature up there was running as if you were in Iowa. I mean, it was a very interesting thing, this way.

All the politicians used to come and say, "If you want to announce your vice presidency campaign, you campaigned, [and] you had a press conference in Sacramento." The first person who took the power out of Sacramento in politics was [Governor] Ronald [W.] Reagan. He took it to the streets in Los Angeles. He never liked Sacramento. He never stayed there. One of our people did a research-- Nancy Skelton did some

research thing and [found] he was down in L.A. more than he was in Sacramento.

VASQUEZ: Some people say he spends more time in Santa Barbara now than he does in Washington.

WRIGHTSON: Well, they'd have to figure that. But he can't get away with that. Down here, he could sneak down. Anyway, but my point is [that] his contribution to state politics was to take it out of Sacramento. And from then on, people who campaigned didn't go to Sacramento. And the Sacramento press corps wasn't half as prestigious.

There's a lot of younger guys there. As I say, when I got there everybody was older. You were a veteran by the time [you got to Sacramento]. Now that's just another job over there. It's very important that Reagan did that.

My point is that the CDC was meeting in Fresno, Bakersfield, wherever. And the legislature was a massive thing up there that did not reflect [the state]. I mean, they may have sent guys down there to get endorsed, but they did not reflect the urban problems at all.

VASQUEZ: You were there from 1961 to 1966. Did you see that begin to change?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, sure. Well, reapportionment, one man-one vote, yes. Well, that's what toppled Burns, in a way. I mean, one man-one vote, yes. That toppled all these guys. These guys, then, didn't have influence.

VASQUEZ: It completely reconfigured the senate.

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes, it did. Yes, yes, yes, it did. And it was very important.

VASQUEZ: For the better, do you think?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I guess. I'm just so much for the principal of one man-one vote, I couldn't say it didn't. I didn't like the way they did it. No, I don't like a legislature that sits up there as if it's a rural state when there's all kinds of urban problems they never tend to. I didn't like that, no.

And the way you changed that was one man-one vote. Like the way they're going to change the [county] supervisors is to put Latinos on it. You're not going to change it with Schabarum and these guys. I mean, if they put more people on it, and they elect people from

the Latino community, then we'll have some change. But we're not going to have any change otherwise.

My other impression was that the people from the San Joaquin Valley and the rural areas were of a higher type than the cities sent, generally speaking. They were pretty high-type guys.

VASQUEZ: In what sense? More intelligent, more prepared?

WRIGHTSON: They had a little more integrity. They weren't tainted. They knew who they were. I mean, Burns was tainted by his lobbyists' things. So I don't include Burns. But, take DeLotto and look down this list. Some of these guys from Los Angeles, [Assemblyman Joseph M.] Kennick, he didn't do anything. And [Assemblyman Charles E.] Chapel, he was half-crazy. I mean, he was the one who joked with the airline stewardess that he was armed, had a bomb.

[Assemblyman Frank] Lanterman had stature. [Assemblyman] Bruce [V.] Reagan from Pasadena, he didn't, he was a stockbroker. Assemblyman [Houston I.] Flournoy had stature. [Assemblyman Ronald B.] Cameron was odd.

[Assemblyman Vernon] Kilpatrick and [Assemblyman] Don Allen were nothing. [Assemblyman Ralph C.] Dills, he was still in there. He represented Gardena. I mean, the best thing you [can say] about him--I think he plays the bass or piano. He had a little quartet with George E. Zenovich or something.

Now, Unruh had stature and so did Carlos Bee and Crown, [and] Petris. I think [Assemblyman William B.] Rumford did. Waldie, Knox, DeLotto.

VASQUEZ: So you feel that the people from some of the rural counties had more standing than some of the urban people that were elected, and that, in addition to outnumbering the urban counties, gave them the predominant power?

WRIGHTSON: Well, and they were more secure. Anything can happen. For example, people used to really envy Garrigus and DeLotto because the Bee covered them so well. They didn't get covered that way in the L.A. Times. No, they [would have] never gotten covered personally with every bill they introduced or [be] interviewed. I mean, the Bee gave these people coverage all up in northern

California. And I've been in legislators' offices, and a lot of times they say, "Oh, boy. I wish I had a newspaper like that." You know? "Just to cover me. Even if you're against me, I'd like it."

The people were more secure. There was less rotating here. And these people were closer to Sacramento and they could get there. People in Los Angeles sometimes didn't like it after a while. They had to come up to Sacramento, [but] they didn't like to live in Sacramento, a lot of them. They didn't like it there. Some of them did. But the rural legislators, I think, had a lot of stature at the time.

Now, according to the CDC lights they were not sensitive to the urban problems, and I agree with that. They were not. But they were sensitive to civil liberties. They were sensitive to that kind of thing. And they were prisoners of the farmers, of course. They voted for the Bracero Program and stuff like that.

VASQUEZ: Before we get into particular issue areas and other areas that I'd like to cover, there's one

process that also took place, or was taking place, at the time that you were in Sacramento. And that was the rise of television in politics and the covering of politics.

I'm not saying that it eclipsed the press by any means, but it at least began to compete for the public attention of what was going on politically. How did you see that process take place, and what was your assessment of that?

WRIGHTSON: Well, we should talk [about] two things. You want to know what happened or what I thought about it? I can tell you what happened.

VASQUEZ: Let's do. First, what happened, and then what you thought of it.

WRIGHTSON: Well, in the first place, the print media wanted two press conferences, and I think they had two press conferences. They had one for the print media and one for television.

VASQUEZ: The Brown administration used to do that.

WRIGHTSON: There was talk about if television had it [a press conference] the print media wouldn't cover it. And Landsberg said, "There is no press conference that the AP's not going to cover. I'm sorry. I don't care what you guys do, but I

can't do that."

VASQUEZ: Let me see if I got this straight. The idea was that there would be one press conference for print media closed to the electronic media, and then one for the electronic media closed to the print media. Is that pretty much the configuration?

WRIGHTSON: Yes.

VASQUEZ: Which is borne out by Jack Burby, press secretary of the Brown administration.

WRIGHTSON: And because the print media was chummier and they knew more, they were the same people. See, television would send people over from San Francisco and all over. They didn't live there. I think CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] for a while--they don't have anybody there now--had somebody who was there all the time. And I think NBC [National Broadcasting Corporation] did for a while. But generally speaking, at first television had nobody living in Sacramento. So they didn't know. They'd come in cold. They knew their legislator, but they didn't know anybody else.

VASQUEZ: What was the quality of their reporting, then?

WRIGHTSON: I can't assess the quality of television reporting because it's [so] different. They have a whole different thing that they do. You know what I mean?

VASQUEZ: Squire Behrens, in his oral history, says there was a certain amount of resentment by the print media of the electronic media, because they felt that the print media really did all of the footwork and did all of the investigative reporting and that the electronic media basically rode on their writing and just presented pictures.

WRIGHTSON: They still do.

VASQUEZ: You feel that went on and still does?

WRIGHTSON: Sure. I think every television editor here looks at the L.A. Times. I think the Times sets the agenda for what television does here. Oh, I know it. I've been to seminars where they say so. Absolutely. They do all the work.

Television is interested in, say, getting a camera into a committee meeting. And they don't really care if they have a fight outside. That's just as good for them. And they're not interested in documents at all. All they're

interested in his pictures, anyway. I'm not saying they don't do a good job sometimes at what they do or they're not knowledgeable, but it's such a different thing. I mean, if I'm running a television [show] and I can get into a fight with the judge outside the chamber and be photographed, that's as good as being in there.

VASQUEZ: What do you think that does to the electorate's conception or perception of politics when the electronic media begins to get more public attention than the print media? What does that do to the elective process?

WRIGHTSON: Look, I'm for anything that opens it up. And I don't like coteries and I don't like aristocracies that only certain people can cover. I don't like that. So, therefore, I didn't mind it when some bungling television [reporter]. . . . Well, I'll give you an example.

The radio guys don't know anything. They cover eighteen stories a day. So a guy goes and asks John Kenneth Galbraith at a press conference, "Dr. Galbraith, what causes depres-

sions?" Now, you wouldn't ask that if you knew anything about economics. You just don't ask a Harvard economist that. And he looks at him, and the great man took maybe thirty seconds, maybe twenty, and he said, "Too many people are trying to earn a living sitting down, I suppose." Well, we would never have gotten that if that guy had never asked that question.

VASQUEZ: It's got to fill a [sound] bite?

WRIGHTSON: Well, but was just completely brash. He didn't know enough to formulate any other kind except a brash question. In that sense, it opens it up. What I hate most about a press conference is--like a presidential press conference--the inside laugh, they laugh at certain things and they're all so cozy there. You understand? Well, you get tired of that. And the print media was cozy. We knew Burby. We liked Burby; Burby liked us. He was a gentleman; we were all gentlemen. We had our differences.

But television was completely irreverent. They didn't know who Burby was. They didn't know he was a fine reporter from the [San Francisco] Chronicle. Well, we knew that. He

was sort of one of us, and he'd moved on. It's a different thing.

And they did change it. Sure, they changed the coverage. They were there, and the people reacted to them. In the first place, they could see a legislator when the print media couldn't. It made my job much harder, because if they had television--who would want just to be in the Fresno Bee if they could be on television in L.A., say?

VASQUEZ: But getting back to the question, what does that do to the public perception of the political process? Does it make [voters] aware of it? Does it make them more sensitive to it? Are they more susceptible to being manipulated by electronic media than by print media?

WRIGHTSON: You know, W. C. Fields said, "You can't cheat an honest man." We get what we deserve. In other words, the guys in television give it to you the way you want it. And if you'll tune in to that, they'll give it to you that way. The station manager will make them.

Like, the best journalists who've left television are working for public television

now. They left the regular commercial television. I think the public loses a lot of respect for our legislators, but maybe that's okay, too. Who knows? I mean, how much respect do they deserve? I don't know. I think they've lost a lot of respect.

For example, my personal opinion is that television has killed the conventions. And now nothing's happening, now they don't want to cover them. But at one time, when the print media were covering the conventions, they were serious and taken seriously. But now, TV sends somebody down to where somebody's eating an ice cream cone, you know. You're all over the place. And everybody takes, as you say, a ten-second bite. If you read this morning's paper, that the Republican convention is set up for television. There's a topic a day.

VASQUEZ: For prime time?

WRIGHTSON: Sure. I mean, it's very hard for the print media to do much there, because most of the stuff is a photo opportunity. It's just not real. You have to cover it anyway, now. But I think the change is tremendous.

People do things for television they wouldn't do [otherwise]. Well, look at the game shows. Can you image somebody saying what kind of a date you had with your wife, or when you first met your wife, or your first sex and everything? That's on television now. I never thought people would do that. But they do it on television. They won't do it for a reporter. You go say that to somebody, they'll smack you. But if he gets on television, he feels he owes it to them to tell all. I think that's the way it is.

VASQUEZ: Here in California, do you think the coverage of the state legislature has gotten better or worse since you were covering it? I know "better" and "worse" are very ambiguous terms, but I'll give you an example. In the past, as you were saying yourself, to get assigned by one of the papers or one of the wire [services] to Sacramento you had to be somebody already. You had to have a career behind you. Now it's sort of a training ground. Is that indicative of anything?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I'll tell you what. Sometimes, a young journalist who sees [things] with fresh eyes

will do a much better job in covering the legislature than a guy who's been there for ten years, or five, or three. I think the reporters nowadays are better educated and essentially smarter than those other reporters were. They're more career oriented.

The reason it's only a step up is that's what they think of it. We saw Sacramento as the end. That's all you had to do. So, it's such a different attitude. If you're just there temporarily to show how good you can do, it's one thing. But, if you've arrived, you give another kind of coverage. You see? It has its good and bad points.

For example, young people, they have never read the minutes of the last meeting, and they'll write that the legislature had better solve this in three months. Well, the legislature doesn't have three months to solve it. They don't know that. And a veteran would know that right away. Say, "Well you haven't got three months." So, it's a trade-off.

VASQUEZ: From the legislator's point of view, do you think that they have to be more concerned about

what the press writes now than they did before, because before, you had old veterans that knew their way around.

WRIGHTSON: No, I think they have to less, because they can go on television and have it their way. No, I don't think they care as much.

VASQUEZ: Does that make them less responsible to the electorate, at least in the public perception?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, it could. It could. First place, we'll have to discuss the fact that it's a different situation now. The press, essentially, has an adversarial relationship with the legislature which they didn't have before. And that's different now.

If you have an adversarial relationship, it's a completely different thing. Now, I don't mind the adversarial relationship. I think you'd get a lot out of that. You're not co-opted and so forth. But, on the other hand, there's some things you don't get. It doesn't come across that way. I think a lot of times, down here especially, the legislators come off as sleaze-bags and terrible people.

VASQUEZ: And it has to do, in part, with that adversarial

relationship? You think it's grown out of the press's [role in] politics?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, I do. And I think that more and more the press just couldn't give people the benefit of the doubt. And I think television did that. Not that they did any investigative journalism, but they were showing [pictures]. In television you're there.

If you're in the assembly, you see, it's a certain realism. So, you may have to do something else in your stories to prove that the guy up there stayed out all night with a mistress. If that's the story. Or [that he] spent the night with a lobbyist, or this weekend [he] is going to the beach with a lobbyist. It's no longer a club, that's all. It just isn't. I think that's good, but the coverage is different.

VASQUEZ: There's another element to the advent of television in politics and that is the amount of money required for a politician to project an image; to be known; to reach the electorate. What impact has this had on the quality of coverage and on the kind of information the

public gets from political figures?

WRIGHTSON: Well, let me answer it another way. I think it makes, our legislators, say from Pasadena, less responsible to their constituents than they are to their contributors. Now, that's the bottom line.

In other words, if you've got to raise \$100,000 to get elected from Glendale, you're much more responsive to the people who give it to you than you are to the regular constituent. Now, you may have constituent meetings, you may meet all up and down the valley, but the point is you have got to get the money. And the politicians themselves say so.

They spend two-thirds of their time collecting money. They have these big dinners for lobbyists, and they make them buy tickets. You're no longer as interested in [their individual] constituent, because he really can't elect [them]. The thing that elects you is people giving you money so you can get on television [in order] to get elected.

VASQUEZ: [Has the] fourth estate stepped in between the politician and [his] constituents?

WRIGHTSON: Television has. I don't think newspapers have.

VASQUEZ: No? Okay, those are the distinctions I want to get at. Do you think newspapers still serve much the same purpose of informing and investigating.

WRIGHTSON: Well, the editorial side. Have you seen a politician take an ad in the paper lately? I can't remember the last one I saw, can you? I don't remember hardly any newspaper advertising during an election, do you? Do people take quarter pages?

VASQUEZ: There are still some, but it's usually around a highly controversial issue and really only backing up some [campaign in] the electronic [media].

WRIGHTSON: Yes. I mean, I guess it's a completely different thing. But I think the editorial purpose of the newspaper, to explain and to inform the electorate, is the same. I don't think they're taken by it. But as I say, I think they have an adversarial [relationship].

The other thing is, if you're a reporter you're forced to watch television, because they've got it. In other words, the only way they cover the convention down here is watching

television from a hotel room in Louisiana. You know that, don't you? They're not even going to [the convention hall] because there are so many people. You know, as Ernie Pyle said, "Every man's war is only one hundred yards wide." So, if you get to the convention, you don't know half as much as if you watch television all day, because they're everywhere. They bring fifty people there, and they're at everything, whereas you can only be at one [event].

So, if you're there with two or three people, you watch the tube. And you can understand the speeches. Like the speech tonight that Reagan's going to make, you don't have to go to the hall. You have to send somebody to the hall. But the person who writes that [story] will probably watch the tube.

[Session 3, August 25, 1988]

[Begin Tape 4, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Continuing on the press here in California. You've had several decades to observe the working press and its treatment of California politics during the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, and into the eighties. What is your general assessment of how the press, the print press, has covered politics and government in California in the last three decades, and what are the most significant changes you've seen over time?

WRIGHTSON: I want to say that most of my experience was in central California. I was never working for one of the metropolitan newspapers. I worked down here and ran a bureau for the McClatchy newspapers from 1966 to '71. But my stuff went in the three Bee papers: Modesto, Sacramento, and Fresno.

So, I didn't really have access to the metropolitan newsrooms to know what they were doing. My experience was in the press corps in Sacramento and as a lone bureau [chief] here. So, I don't really know the dynamics of the

pressroom like the L.A. Times.

VASQUEZ: I think maybe more than the actual internal operations of each segment of the print media what interests us in this project is the impact that various newspapers around the state had on the flow and the course of California politics at crucial periods in its recent history.

There's the example of the Los Angeles Times, which is extremely powerful in southern California and especially Los Angeles. But in the last thirty or forty years, I think it's fair to say that there has been a shift, a change, in its editorial policy, its direction, and its political influence in southern California, wouldn't you say?

WRIGHTSON: I wouldn't question it, but I'm not sure [how] I know it. I do know it's changed. No question that when Otis [Chandler] came in they beefed up the news. They had more professional reporters like [William] Bill Trombley, Dick Bergholz, and so forth.

I mean, they used to have people in there that quit [during] every election and worked for the Nixon campaign and then went back to work,

[William] Bill Henry and [James] Bassett and those guys.

And Bergholz and so forth did not think that they were up there to further Los Angeles Times policy. They did not consider that their job. How much influence the papers have is any man's guess. If you take a survey and you ask, how many people believe what they read in the Times? Maybe 55 percent will say they don't, but they're still influenced by it.

In other words, I know when I used to read Time magazine what they did--because I was a stringer for them--it was rewritten. But I found myself believing that, after I'd read it. Like, if they said Adlai Stevenson had jelly on his tie, I'd think of him as [having] jelly on his tie. Although I know somebody put that in in New York. That happens. See? They put that in to soup it up. I knew that, but at the same time it influenced me.

So, people will say that they don't believe what's in the Times or they don't believe what's in the Bee or that the Bee was a Democratic paper. It's a subtle influence, because of what

you read, you begin to think that way.

Especially if you're busy and you don't have time to make opinions and the paper has a lot of them. I don't know who reads editorials, and I don't know how much they're read, but I know that they are read by the movers and shakers. I know that, because when I was a reporter they would talk to me about the editorials.

VASQUEZ: They're certainly read by key legislators.

WRIGHTSON: Well, yes, by people in foundations and so forth. And the faculty at USC [University of Southern California] and UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] read the editorials, or the administrators anyway.

When I was a reporter, people wouldn't read my stories, but they'd read the Bee's editorials. And I'd say, "Wait a minute, you read the editorial. Read my story, my story's straight ahead. The editorial is different." But those were the people I was dealing with.

I'm not talking about the man at the next barstool, I don't think he reads the editorials. But, if we're talking about influence, we have to talk about that. When

you're a reporter you don't know how much influence your story will have.

Let me tell you, in Sacramento and in Fresno, and with the McClatchys, it's like the Riverside Enterprise. It never gets out of the [Riverside] basin.

For example, when Reagan was thinking of running, I guess it was in 1965, and he was going around asking people whether he should run. You know, that's a ritual. You've decided to run when you're [already] doing that. And he was in Coalinga [California] of all places. Nobody covers Coalinga except the Bee. I went out there to cover him. I was with a guy from the Hanford Sentinel.

The Vietnam War was going. So we got to the question-and-answer period. [Senator Barry] Goldwater had been defeated by this time. Somebody asked him, "What about Vietnam?" He said, "We could bomb that place into a parking lot. I don't know what we're waiting for. We could turn that place into a parking lot; this is ridiculous." You know.

So, after [his speech], I went up to him

[Reagan] and I said, "We've got to get this very straight. We have the quote that you would bomb this into a parking lot. Is that right?" He said, "Well, yes. I said that.

So, I wrote it, and the Bee played it up. When he got to San Francisco. . . . Well, the wire services picked it up a little bit, and when he got to San Francisco he denied saying that. He said, "That was misinterpreted. The reporter got me on that." Well, if that story had first appeared in the Chronicle, he couldn't have gotten out of that, or the Times. See? But because it appeared in our paper, in the Fresno paper, he could go to San Francisco and say, "Oh, that was in Coalinga. I didn't mean that. I didn't say that."

VASQUEZ: So are there different gradations of influence-- whatever that is--that different newspapers or different newspaper chains can have?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. Well, on the basis of where they are and what circulation they have. Now, Sacramento [newspapers] are very powerful because they're in the capital. Any paper there would be powerful, because it's there. But, talking

about changes, certainly the Times changed. It used to be a real handmaiden of the Republican party; it is not that now.

Years ago, it became much more, if you want to use the word, liberal, but at least much less the Republican rag that it was. The Bee has changed in that it was, without trying to be, an independent paper and supported [Senator Thomas] Kuchel and a lot of Republicans in Sacramento. But, generally speaking, it was perceived as a Democratic paper. No question, it was. And it has changed.

Walter [P.] Jones died, the editor, and C. K. McClatchy took over. He did not want the paper to be taken for granted. In other words, people knew--or he thought, and I think he's right--when they picked up the editorials, what the Bee was going to say about [Dan] Quayle, or about anything. They all knew what these guys would do. He didn't want that.

He wanted the editorials reasoned, and he did not want [them] to be what was expected. The Bee has changed a lot, in that sense. Of course, they've become a much bigger paper; they

didn't used to send people out of town very much, because Jones had decided that they were going to cover that area and they were going to cover it like they did. But, now, they send people to Biafra [Nigeria] and all over the place. For a long while they didn't do that. I mean, they hardly ever left the capital.

VASQUEZ: Let me ask you something [about] that topic, since local electronic media is doing much the same thing. There's duplication many times of reportage on the most remote topics and remote parts of the world. Do you think that will, over time, bring the American people more in touch with the [rest of the] world?

WRIGHTSON: We're out of my depth here. I have no expertise. I have a lot of ideas. I am mystified. I don't watch much television, okay? I am mystified when I see television, and I'm surprised it hasn't influenced people more. I don't mean just the news, but the sitcoms [situation comedies] and the whole taking up of abortion things. And all these things that some of the sitcoms take up don't seem to have influenced the people as much as I would imagine they would. The way the

people dress and the way they talk to each other and so forth. I just don't know. That's way out of my field.

Like, when I wrote a story, I had no idea how much influence [it would have]. I will tell you this: It influences the person you write about. If you're a legislator and I [the reporter] find out that you're taking money or you're having people down at your beach house and I write that story; it will have influence on you.

VASQUEZ: And nobody else?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't know what it will do [to others]. But, it certainly will [influence] you. You may not take the lobbyists down there anymore. They may not go down with you. You may close up the house. I don't know what you'll do. But I will tell you, it does have influence on the person you write about.

If you write about a senator who never comes to committee meetings, he'll start coming to committee meetings. The Bee had a tremendous influence, because we watched our legislators very closely. The L.A. Times couldn't do it.

But we catalogued votes, we knew how our guys voted, all up and down. We had a lot of influence that way. Now, what influence [did] we [have] in the [San Joaquin] Valley? The politicians thought we had tremendous influence. They thought if the Bee didn't back them, they couldn't win.

VASQUEZ: In talking to ex-Assemblyman Charles Garrigus, from that area, he feels had it not been for the Bee and his being able to count on [its] coverage, he might have had it rougher than he did when he won [his elections].

WRIGHTSON: Well, who would know? In other words, how will you ever know? If [George] Bush loses, will we ever know whether it was because he took Quayle or not? How will we know?

We can make survey after survey--and they weren't making surveys that way in those days. Garrigus never had money for a survey. The only way he knew what his district thought was to go out and address Rotary clubs. He didn't do any polling. He had no way at all. So, I really don't know.

I know politicians did think that the

newspaper could make them or break them. And the Republicans thought they couldn't elect anybody in the San Joaquin Valley because of the Bee, and they blamed the Bee for that. [There] was no question that was the current wisdom. If the Bee was against you, you were sunk. That didn't pan out. Later, they elected Republicans there that the Bee didn't back. And the Bee backed some people they didn't [elect]. So a lot changed.

Now, whether television changed that or whether the Bee wasn't as strong as it was in support of people, a lot of things happened. One man-one vote came. In the society, a lot of things happened at the same time.

VASQUEZ: You think it's a different process . . .

WRIGHTSON: Well, I mean, César Chávez may fast, and at the same time you may get a labor bill or a poison bill that outlaws it anyway. Now, what's the cause and effect on that. Did César Chávez's fasting [change things]? I'm willing to believe that. I'll say, "Sure, it did." But I don't know that. There's a lot to cause and effect.

You might write a story, and if you see it

from somebody like Burby's position or a lobbyist's, who looks at the press in a completely different way, he'll get a whole different [perspective]. He'll say, "I know that after that story, I couldn't get into one of the assemblymen's offices." Well, that's his experience. I don't know that.

Certainly, we've been writing about lobbyists a long time, and their influence has not been diminished. It's true, we've passed certain federal fair employment practices initiatives and so forth, but the lobbyist influence has not been diminished. It's been better reported, because they have to make these long reports, and the Bee and the Times sent somebody over to look at those reports.

VASQUEZ: I think we've covered about all that we need to on the press at this point. Let's get into various processes of California politics in the last three decades. Since we're talking about lobbyists, let's do that. Let's get into the lobbyist. In the time that you were in Sacramento, who were the big lobbyists and the big lobbying powers in Sacramento?

WRIGHTSON: Truckers, the oil companies . . .

VASQUEZ: Teachers' groups?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, what was that called? CTA, the California Teachers Association. I'll tell you, I remember they had a guy named Chapel, who was from down here. He represented Catalina [Island] among other things. His name was Charles Chapel. There was a bill, and everybody was saying, "If you don't vote for this bill, it shows you're afraid of the lobbyists." The lobbyists were against this bill. And Chapel was a very strange guy, by the way. He was a different kind of a guy, very eccentric. He got up and he said, "Well, you know me. I'm not afraid of any lobbyists--except the CTA." [Laughter] And by the way, when the CTA wanted something, they got it in those days. The guy's [lobbyist's] name was [Robert E.] McKay.

VASQUEZ: What did their power rest on, that their influence, their power was taken so seriously?

WRIGHTSON: Teachers. At that time, there was honorific value in a teacher. If a teacher told you that your son wasn't behaving you didn't say, "This teacher's wrong." You said to your son, "The

teacher said you don't behave, and you've got to change, because that teacher's right."

Now, that doesn't work anymore. Teachers have lost a lot of their prestige and honorific value for many reasons, and I don't want to go into that. I don't know enough about education. You'll have to interview Charles Garrigus again. But, that's one thing.

Secondly, it was a fairly clean lobbying group. It was a pro bono lobbying group, in a way. Everybody thought teachers were underpaid, everybody did. Nobody argued it. Some people might argue they only work five hours a day, but they didn't get very far. Everybody agreed that education was only as good as the teacher, no matter how much money you put into it. So, they had it going that way. And that was powerful.

The University of California had a powerful lobby but they worked very quietly. They never gave big parties that we knew about or anything. But they were very powerful. They had [Edwin W.] Pauley on the board [of regents], they had Mrs. [Dorothy Buffum] Chandler on the board, and they had Mrs. [Catherine C.] Hearst on the board.

They had [Edward W.] Carter, of Carter Hawley Hale on the board. And they had Norton Simon on the board of regents. These people don't have to give parties for legislators. They pick up the phone and say, "This is Mrs. Chandler." And I've heard an assemblyman say, "Gee, I got a call from Mrs. Chandler today!" And that budget went through.

Also, we had a Governor Brown who gave an honorific value to education, state education. I mean, what the university wanted, it should have and got. Because it was a gem and it was a showpiece out here. They got pretty much what they wanted. That was a strong lobbying group. But it wasn't a lobbying group like the truckers. The truckers, the oil companies, the utilities were very strong. The liquor lobby was extremely strong, the liquor and beer lobby. The NAM [National Association of Manufacturers] was strong. Unions were strong.

We had a guy named [Cornelius J.] Haggerty, I forget his first name. He was with the AF of L-CIO. The labor lobby was very strong. The Associated Farmers were very strong. I don't

know whether the Grange was or not. You heard about them, but I can't remember who the lobbyist was from the Grange. I don't think the Grange was that strong out here. Toward the last part of the Brown administration, César was talking to legislators.

But see, I couldn't [characterize] their lobbying activity the same as you can the trucker or so forth. Oh, the Quakers had a lobby. They were fairly influential, because they were so pure, you know. I mean, they couldn't take anybody to dinner or lunch, they were sleeping on the floor of somebody's apartment. So, when they came into an office, we had good legislators who would listen to people who didn't have a lot of money and whose heart was in the right place, and who were campaigning. They may tell them, "I can't do it," you know. "I know we probably should do that, but we can't, we just can't do that because of this and this." Or, "If I give that vote, the assembly speaker would do this." Or, "I can't get a vote for whatever I gotta do for my district." And they would get a lot of

that. But, they had a lobby.

The churches had a lobby, I'm sure. I can't remember, but I think the Council of Churches had a lobby. Whether they had an office or not, I'm not sure. The [Catholic] dioceses did. Sure they did.

VASQUEZ: How did the different lobbies operate? I'm sure everybody knows, or thinks they know, about the drinks and the parties and the dinners and the ball game tickets. What other means did lobbyists, use when you were there, to influence legislators?

WRIGHTSON: Well, let's put it this way. Most people will tell you, reporters and anybody else, that they're not influenced by a drink or a dinner or a bottle of wine or two tickets to a game. They say that, "You can't make me write differently or vote differently for that." And you remember Unruh's thing, "If you can't eat their steaks, drink their liquor, and 'bleep' their women, and still vote against them, you shouldn't be here." There is some truth to that, although it couldn't be that way.

VASQUEZ: Why not?

WRIGHTSON: Because it's an insinuating thing when you eat dinner with a lobbyist and he picks up checks and keeps your supply of liquor and gives you tickets to games that you couldn't afford, or you wouldn't want to afford. But, that's one thing they did, okay? And they will tell you. . . . For example, I wrote a story called "Errand Boy Assemblyman" in July of 1981. I found out, and I wrote the story (it's in the Sacramento Bee), that the lobbyist gave somebody a bill. "Here's the bill we want." The savings and loan and banking lobby put them in there. And the AMA [American Medical Association]. . . . Oh, what I talk about. And the insurance lobby was strong.

VASQUEZ: I wanted to get into a couple . . .

WRIGHTSON: Well, you said what lobbyists were up there. Okay, I forgot the AMA and the insurance lobby. And the trial lawyers had a lobby. The rice growers had a lobby. I mean, you know, we could go on and on here. The contractors had a lobby. The road builders had a lobby, which was very active when they were building freeways. The newspapers had a lobby, the CNPA, [California Newspaper Publishers Association]. Almost

everything you do, they put a lobby up. Almost everybody did. The state colleges had a guy up there. Don't you think they didn't!

VASQUEZ: We were talking about the different ways that they bring their influence and power to bear.

WRIGHTSON: Okay. Well, I'll tell you what they would do, and this is not sinister. I mean, it's better copy to talk about how they take everybody to "The Firehouse." What a lobbyist could do. . . . Well, after he took you to "The Firehouse," he had, pretty much, access to your office. And he would come in and say, "We need a vote on such-and-such a bill, or we need it one way or another. And I know that when you campaigned, you campaigned on filling Lake Elsinore. That was what you campaigned on. I can talk to certain people and get you a vote on that if you'll give me this vote. You don't have to talk to all of them." Maybe that guy couldn't even talk across the aisle.

Maybe, a guy, say like a right-winger, like [Assemblyman Robert E.] Badham might not be able to talk to liberal Phil Burton. But the lobbyist could say, "I can talk to Burton. I'll get you a

vote." And he'd bring these people together. Besides his vote, he would be working on other bills. Or two lobbyists would get together. They'd go to the education guy and say, "Listen, I can get my people to vote education if you'll help promote our bill or not be against it."

Like, the education lobby, I'm sure, had more influence on Garrigus than the oil lobby did. There's no question about that. Or the farm lobby would. So, if they came to him and said, "We need a vote in Contra Costa County, they're going to do such-and-such to oil." Well, Garrigus didn't care about that. I mean, that didn't make any difference to him. He'd give you a vote on that. And he'd say, "In the meantime, I'll get you the votes that you need to air-condition Fresno State College." And that was a very powerful thing. There's nothing sinister about that. They're just there, and they work all the time.

VASQUEZ: Jesse Unruh used to say that both politicians and lobbyists know how to do one thing well, and that is count. Those 41 votes and those 21 votes.

WRIGHTSON: Right. But they live there all the time, they

work full-time at it. You saw them around. Familiarity is a big thing up there. You know, they call it the "freshmen," and so forth. Well, it is like a college. You see the same people all the time, every day. They all get together. They get very familiar with you. They call you Jim, they call you, they know each other. And "my esteemed colleague" and all that, that's not phony. They really feel that.

And you know, there was a [Assemblyman] Lester [A.] McMillan down here, and he got indicted for I forget what, something about road bribery. He was indicted and tried. He was declared innocent, or they dropped it, something like that. And he got a standing ovation when he came into the assembly. Some of the reporters like [William] Bill Boyarsky and I were appalled at that.

VASQUEZ: Why were you appalled, if you understood this comradery that these men developed over time.

WRIGHTSON: A standing ovation? I can see the guys being sympathetic to him, coming up to him and saying, "I'm glad you weren't convicted." But a standing ovation in public, for a guy who all he

did was escape with his skin! I mean, that was not a trumped up charge! They had tape recordings. I didn't go to the trial, but we were amazed.

Another time, they had a eulogy for a lobbyist named. . . . I don't want to get his name wrong. His name was Vince Kennedy, and he was with the liquor lobby. He died, and they had a eulogy for him.

And people got up and said, "I remember Vince used to come to my house with toys for my children and put my children on his knee. And when my son died, Vince was right there." And Boyarsky and I were at the table and we said, "Who are they eulogizing? Is this Gandhi?" This is a liquor lobbyist these guys are talking about! And they were telling all these personal anecdotes with this guy. It was a lobbyist. He was paid to do this kind of thing. Nothing against him, but you know, wait a minute, was this Martin Luther King?

VASQUEZ: So [is] the Third House an appropriate name for it?

WRIGHTSON: Yes. Certainly. I think they're much more of

an influence on the legislature than the press is. They wouldn't say so. And it's not all sinister. As I say, they worked at it full-time, they put votes together, they put coalitions together.

If two assemblymen are fighting each other or being nasty, they try to make peace, or invite them to dinner together. And they give money in the campaign. They wait until you're really desperate, like the last weeks of the campaign when you've almost run out of money and you need a big television spurt, that's when they come in with their \$29,000 and buy it for you. And so you remember that contribution more than the other ones all the way through. I mean, there's millions of techniques.

Now, what Unruh did was turn this around. See, he said to the lobbyists, "Give it to me and I'll see it gets to where it should. You're going to run yourself ragged all over the state with these guys. But they're going to come to me. They can't come to you, ethically. But they'll come to me and say, 'How can we do it.' And I will parcel out the money where it's most

effective for you." And he did it. He did it.

VASQUEZ: Was it a better system?

WRIGHTSON: I don't know.

VASQUEZ: A lot of other things made the speakership in California such a powerful position. And of course, today's papers are full with the problems that the current speaker is having, who has followed that kind of technique.

WRIGHTSON: It's developed so naturally. It was almost a logical way to go. Somebody was going to put it together some time that way. I guess [Arthur H.] Art Samish did the same thing, although I wasn't there when he was there. He was the liquor lobbyist who was convicted finally and sentenced.

But, I don't know who did that. But the speaker is a logical figurehead to do that. He knows the assemblymen, he knows their votes, he has a staff. Whether it's good or not, I don't know. It's natural that somebody's going to do that.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, let's discuss a couple of particular lobbies.

[Interruption]

WRIGHTSON: The thing you have there, which Unruh said first, I remember his saying it.

[Interruption]

He said, "We can't determine who will come up here." For example, they can send somebody up from Bakersfield. Although he tried to control that, too. But he said, "We can't really determine that." And as you know, they couldn't.

"But when they get up here," he said, "we can give them staff and educate them, once they get here." So, when you get people coming up there who've had, say, a tough race in their district and have a conception, say liberal or conservative they think, "I'm going to go up there and do such-and-such." And they get there and they realize that when you come there you get a small office. Your office isn't big enough, say, to do anything. You need somebody like lobbyists or Unruh. I had one of the guys from Hanford--a couple of people used me that way--say, "What's going on here? And what should I do?" Not how I should vote. I'd never do that. But I would tell them, "Watch the

lobbyists. Watch it."

VASQUEZ: Learning the ropes?

WRIGHTSON: Well, they'd say, "Tell me about it." What was his name? He was an optometrist from Hanford. He became Health and Welfare secretary. [Gordon Duffy] He married Jean Morehead. Can't think of his name. Anyway, he was from Hanford and I covered his campaign. When he got up he said, "What should I do?" He was a Republican and he said, "What should I do? Maybe you could help me." He was an intelligent man.

So I said, "Watch the lobbyists. That's all. Be careful, because they will try to co-opt you." Of course, he had other people he could talk to, too. But anyway, if he used me, a lowly reporter, to get that, think of what he could get from Unruh or Unruh's staff or other people who really knew much more about the legislature than I did. They knew the inner workings.

VASQUEZ: Some people use the phrase, "Knowing where the bodies were buried."

WRIGHTSON: Well, that's a sinister phrase. But, for example, no, he wasn't looking for that. What

he was looking for was, "Who is this man?" For example, if I could tell him, "George Miller's a liberal, but he votes with the utilities and the oil companies." Well, he now knows something that might take him six months to learn. Well, I'm not the only one who knows that. He can find that out from a lot of people. But that's the kind of thing. He didn't want to know whether George Miller was on the take or not. That isn't what we wanted to know.

VASQUEZ: Are journalists often [approached] by legislators to get this kind of information?

WRIGHTSON: Not formally, but it happened, yes. Sure. Especially in smaller papers. We covered their campaigns, and then we went up there when they got up there. That was a different thing. Like Garrigus, I chased him all over Fresno County. And then when he got up there, I was the most familiar face he saw. And they almost felt that you'd campaigned with them. You see? I mean, you'd asked them questions and you'd written stories. I mean, you'd had maybe six or eight months [together]. The Bee did that. Now, the Times didn't have anything like that. They'd

never seen their reporter, these guys that got up there. Neither did the Chronicle, and neither did the Oakland Tribune. And there weren't that many small papers up there then. There are more now, but there weren't many small papers.

VASQUEZ: The press was pretty much interested in what lobbyists did and who they did it with. Is that right?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, because it was part of the scene. I mean, they were there. You couldn't ignore them. In other words, it's just like traffic in L.A., you can't ignore it. They were everywhere.

VASQUEZ: Was the common wisdom that they were a good thing, a bad thing, a neutral thing, a sinister thing, a corrupting thing?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it depends on who the guy was. If he was a good guy, he was a good guy.

VASQUEZ: But there was no perception overall of lobbyists?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it may have been when Samish was there. But the more enlightened lobbyists were not Samish-types. I'll tell you what a lobbyist would do. For example, we'll take the medical

lobby.

If you came up there and they needed your vote, and they wanted your vote--say they had a package for that year--they would size you up somehow. They'd come to see you. And they'd try to find out about you. They might ask the reporter that had covered you, "What's the guy like?" And if the reporter said, "Hell, he's a womanizer." Or, "Hell, he's not." Or, "He's a funny guy. He reads poetry." Or whatever.

If you wanted to hear dirty jokes, they'd get you somebody to take you out and take you to nightclubs and tell you dirty jokes. If you wanted to discuss Plato, they'd get somebody who could discuss Plato with you or the latest books. If you liked the theater, they'd get somebody to discuss the theater with you. If you were a family man, they'd invite your wife to these things. You understand what they would do?

Say you were the chairman of the Finance and Insurance Committee. The insurance lobby would say, "Listen, you're going to have a committee meeting. We'd like to have a little

party. We'll furnish the food, and your wife will preside at the party. It's a party so that new committee members can know each other." Now, this is true; I'm not making this up. They'd say, "All these new committee members, they should know each other. So, we'll have this party at the El Mirador, or something. We'll furnish the food, we'll have it catered, and the liquor and so forth. And your wife will preside." They [would] send your wife a corsage. And these men and their wives [would] come to this party.

Sometimes, the lobbyist isn't [even] there. He has to decide whether he's going to be there or not. He may decide, "I don't even want to be there. You're giving the party. You give the party. We don't give it. We don't pour any wine or anything. I won't even come." Or he may say, "Well, I'll drop in and see how everybody is."

It's a powerful thing, because there's your wife--especially if you're [from] a small town--your wife with a corsage, and the iced elephant is there, and caviar and shrimp. And you're

giving the party, a party which she could have never given in Hanford or never given in Benicia. And it's a powerful thing.

And if you're the kind of person that depends on your wife, your wife is invited to these things and they don't take you to stag parties. They don't want to make your wife mad. And so you won't get invitations to stag parties; they won't take you there. Or, they won't take you away from her to go to football games. They'll give you two tickets so you and your wife can go. And you won't go with a lobbyist. He doesn't want to go. But you and your wife know that that's why you're there.

VASQUEZ: And cumulatively, over time, [the] influence builds [with] this kind of treatment?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it's like any public relations thing. You never know what you've done.

VASQUEZ: What types of people went into lobbying when you were there, that you knew? What kind of background did they have?

WRIGHTSON: Well, people who had been there were ex-assemblymen sometimes. It got in your blood. I don't know what it's like there now, but it got

in your blood. There were ex-assemblymen who were sergeant-at-arms; they just hated to leave Sacramento. And it gets to you, because you understand, you come up there as an assemblyman and the doors are open to you. The sergeant-at-arms will drive you home if you're drunk. If you call the sergeant-at-arms, they'll come get you. And you get services you never got at home. Even if you were the leading hardware dealer in Irvine, you didn't get services this way. And it got to you.

[End Tape 4, Side A]

[Begin Tape 4, Side B]

WRIGHTSON: You never had to open the door, you never had to buy a meal. And some lobbyists bought clothes. I mean, the lobbyists bought clothes for people. They'd take them shopping, say, "Let's go shopping." Say you were a guy from Monterey Park. Just say that, okay? And you lived down there. And say you were a lawyer, and you were making--oh, in those days, \$30,000 a year wasn't bad. You're not a big lawyer. And you got up there, and they liked you and so forth. And you never had the money to go to the Cable Car

Clothiers to shop. They'd take you over to San Francisco and shop.

I mean, they wouldn't do it the first day. But after a while they'd say, "Why don't we go shopping over there?" And they'd take you shopping. They'd go over there with you. And they knew the guy at the Cable Car, they'd say, "Fix Carlos up. He'd like a new suit. Fix him up." And you'd walk out of there with it. Worse, you couldn't even come in there as a \$30,000-a-year lawyer. First, you wouldn't get up there. Now, I don't know how much of that was done.

VASQUEZ: Tell me about two particular lobbies that have been very powerful in this state, that some people even argue are insurmountable: The insurance and the real estate lobby. What was your experience observing those two lobbies when you were covering Sacramento?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, I don't know. You see, these were personalities. I remember [James] Garibaldi, who represented the liquor and oil. Okay? I remember the liquor lobbyists like Kennedy. I forget, there was a guy named [Don] Redman for

the trucking lobby. But they were big florid-faced guys who were very nice. You remembered the man. You saw them eating with assemblymen, you saw them around. I don't remember the real estate lobbyist at the time. I'd have to be refreshed. I just don't remember who he was. What was the other lobby?

VASQUEZ: Insurance.

WRIGHTSON: I don't remember who he was.

VASQUEZ: So it was not a real visible lobby up there?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't know. I wasn't that interested in lobbyists at the time. I was covering local [stuff]. I mean, they insinuated themselves. I mean, I saw them. I ate lunch out there, and so forth, and I heard the press talk about the guys. And those guys were in the press room all the time.

VASQUEZ: Oh, really?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. Not ours, though. I told you about the incident where they said, "This guy works for McClatchy; we'd better not buy his lunch." Oh, no. Pete Phillips wouldn't have them in there. I told you, once a guy quit and went to lobby he couldn't even sit at Pete's table. So,

we didn't have that trouble at all.

VASQUEZ: How did they try to influence reporters? The same way, with gratuities?

WRIGHTSON: Partly. But they have stuff that you can't get as a reporter. They can tell you they were at a thing last night where you were falling down drunk, or they may know that the trucking lobbyist buys your clothes. They get together. They have a tremendous network, you understand, lobbyists don't work alone. They have a tremendous network, and rightly so.

It's a symbiotic relationship; if you can tell me about your guys, I'll tell you about my guys. Okay, so they may tell a reporter, "I was out with him last night. He says he buys all of such-and-such's clothes." Or, "He gave him a car." Or, "He fixed the roof on his beach house." Or, you know, whatever. So, that's valuable information. And a reporter has to get his information where he can, at least the start of it.

You don't say, "I don't listen to lobbyists." If a lobbyist comes and you're talking to him, or you have lunch with him, and

he says. . . . Maybe it's not his bill, but he says, "Boy, did you see the CTA in that committee?" Or, "Did you see what happened?" And they know what's happening in those committees, because a senator or somebody will tell them, where he's not going to tell a reporter because he doesn't want it in the paper. So, they know more about the legislature than almost anybody. Not more than the speaker, but. . . . Well, they may even know more than the speaker. I mean, they really know. And they keep books. They have files. They have a book on you. And they're very helpful.

You call a lobbyist and say, "I can't remember how Carlos voted on that bill. Do you know?" Say it's an insurance bill, and you may not want to tell me, or you may get defensive. Or I don't want you to know I'm asking even. See? And I could call the insurance lobbyist and say, "How'd he vote on that bill?" The guy may tell you. And he may not call you, or he may call you. I don't know. But you can find out a lot from the lobbyists. Or, "When does that bill come up?"

Or, "What was the vote on that bill?" You call a lobbyist up and say, "What was the vote on that bill in committee?" Say you didn't get it. Or after a committee meeting, say you didn't get it all. Say I was covering a committee meeting, I'd say, "How did they vote on that committee?" He's got it, because he'll take a secretary with him to get it if it's an important bill.

VASQUEZ: Now, you were in the Sacramento press corps at the time that the professionalization of the legislature was taking place. That is to say, when more staff was coming, and mostly owed to Jesse Unruh's efforts in trying to get a better-informed legislature. Didn't that take away some of the influence from the media?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I left in 1966 when the legislature became annual. Okay? And that's when it was really much more professionalized, when the guys could buy a house up there and live up there. And I came down here then and opened the bureau. Yes, it changed things. The lobbyists were more around Unruh than they were. I mean, they worked through Unruh.

VASQUEZ: His argument was that you could be more independent if you controlled a lot of the information. Up to that time, you could only get it from lobbyists because of the resources at their command. Did that change the locus or the access of information, from the lobbyist to the speaker? Or do you think that the assemblymen were better served by this professionalization? I know you didn't see the whole transformation.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't think the lobbyists ever surrendered to Unruh and let him do the networking and all. I mean, if you're a lobbyist, you can't do that. You've got to see these guys yourself. Because if something happens to your bill you can't say, "I turned it over to Jesse and he didn't come through." They don't want to hear that. [Laughter] "Well, where were you!"

So, they had to make a decision every day where they would go for their information, or where they would give their money, or whether they'd tell Unruh that they had eight tickets to a game and he could give them out, or whether

they'd give them out. They did a little bit of both. You know, a lobbyist hedges his bets. He bets on everybody. He's not a Republican or a Democrat. I mean, you could never get those guys to admit whether they're Republicans or Democrats. They're not, and they won't go the liberal-conservative route at all. The ACLU lobbyist may; but the oil lobbyists, they're as nonpartisan as you can get.

They want the vote. They don't care, they get their votes where they can. They don't care whether you're a John Birch Society member or an ACLU member. I mean, they may personally, while drinking say, "This guy's so liberal." They may not like you because you're that way. And I think most of them are pretty conservative guys in that sense. They were not big civil libertarians or anything. But they didn't make anything about that.

VASQUEZ: Given the importance that money has come to have in modern politics, do you think that lobbyists have more influence now than they did twenty-five years ago because of the money they might have at their disposal?

WRIGHTSON: No, I don't. Twenty-five years ago, the legislature was easier to influence, because the guys were paid \$300 a month. See, at one time, the lobbyists paid these guys' hotel bills. You understand that? Because they didn't have the money to do it and they didn't want to live in a fleabag.

I think they had a lot more influence on the legislators, and the newspapers didn't explore the lobbyists' connection like it does now. No, it was a tighter group and they could influence. You know more about this than I do, but the lobbyists worked the senate, because there's only forty people there and you can stop any bill through the senate. So, that's where you work. I mean, you work the assembly, but you work the senate essentially if you want to stop a bill. And if you've got those guys, you don't need the assembly. Now, if you need a bill, then you've got to work the assembly, because they've got to pass it, too. But, if you just want to stop a bill. . . .

Say you think that this year they're going to have a gas tax, that the people are now

saying that that's what is going to happen. And you don't want it. Just say you're the oil lobbyist. You work the senate. I mean, what the assembly does, you can't get around all those guys, so you work the senate. And you work the key people in the senate; you work the people in the committee who're going to consider it. If you can kill it in committee, you've got it made; because they've got to take it to the floor over the committee, and they won't do that in the senate, it's very rare. So, that's what you do. So, you saw the lobbyists much more in the senate than in the assembly.

When I wrote that thing about "Errand Boy Assemblyman" . . .

[Interruption]

The lobbyist gives you a bill--say you're an assemblyman--that he wants. Say it's an insurance bill, okay? And he writes it, his lawyers write it. And they give it to you, and you take it to a committee. And he goes to the committee, and he gets people to testify. He lines up the witnesses for it. Okay?

Then he gets it passed, and then he takes

it to the next committee. He does all the work on that bill. Now, you don't even have to read that bill; it doesn't make any difference, he does all the work on it. That's what an errand boy assemblyman is. So, I went to Bane, [Assemblyman] Tom Bane. Tom Bane is a great savings and loan assemblyman. Somebody'd asked him about a bill. And he said, "I didn't even read it." [Assemblyman John F.] Foran was another one. He said, "I didn't even read it. You'll have to ask the lobbyist. I don't know what's in it." And they have said that. Bane took offense, and he called me and said, "Let me tell you something. When I came up here, the savings and loans couldn't do anything. The banks had it all. And in my twenty years (or however many years) I've gotten them to be able to loan and this and this. Certainly, when I give a dinner, the savings and loans buy tickets to it. Absolutely. I'm their guy here. I have done more for them. And they're in my district, and it's for my district. It's not against my district. It's a home industry for me. That's it. Sure, I'm a savings and loan guy. Of

course that lobbyist writes those bills. There's nothing wrong with that."

So, this was said in his office across a desk, and me with a pad. And so, how are you going to argue that? I mean, what's sinister [about that]? It's true, and you publish it. This guy is a savings and loans guy. But what do you care, if you're in his district, if he's working his district okay? You don't care.

Now, you might care up here if he gives savings and loans things that they shouldn't have or something. You wouldn't even care up here. The only time you'd care is if you were with the banking group and they were taking your bread and butter away. But you wouldn't care if you were sitting here. So, Bane is in with the savings and loan. So what?

And he reports everything they give him. It's in the report. At least nobody's caught him taking anything he shouldn't have. So, suppose they do these things. And it's very hard to connect contributions with votes. You can do it, and it's fun to do, but it's very difficult. As he said, "I've done a lot for

them, and they contribute to my campaign. And why shouldn't they? What's wrong with that? I give them votes, sure I give them votes."

VASQUEZ: What's your feeling about a case in which a special interest is perceived to work against the common interest in pursuing its own goals? Let's say the way that certain segments of the real estate industry really turned much of what the Rumford [Fair Housing] Act was meant to do on its head and used a lot of scare tactics and less than [honest] political discourse to achieve their aims. It's what some consider the public's loss.

WRIGHTSON: Right.

VASQUEZ: What's your sense of that?

WRIGHTSON: How much of it was there?

VASQUEZ: Right, and what's your feeling on it?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I think it's wrong. I can wax quite indignant about that. I'd give no excuse for that.

VASQUEZ: So there can be a certain sinister aspect to this kind of lobbying?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, it's rightfully sinister. I mean, they may take these guys out to parties that I'm not

invited to and buy them prostitutes and take pictures of them and show it to them the next day. I mean, I don't know about that. Sure, they could do that.

One time, we had a thing at the Sacramento Bee where you could go to a lobbyist's party if all the press went, if the whole press corps went. And so, we had a thing where, I forget what it was, the controller's office or somebody had a party, had parties [at] Christmas. Afterwards we ran a story the next June or something that this controller or controller's office had taken a lot of favors from the liquor lobbyist. And he called, I think Dick Rodda, who was Pete Phillips's assistant, "Dick, you came to that Christmas party. The liquor lobby bought the liquor!" You know what that is. Well, it's a blackmail; you're part of it. You're tainted. "You drank the liquor, didn't you? You liked that liquor." And it's a sinister thing.

So, if you try to be suddenly independent they'll say, "Wait a minute. You went to so-and-so games. You got an honorarium for speak-

ing here."

VASQUEZ: Do you think the Political Reform Act of 1974¹ helped any of this, helped to take the element of corruption or the possibility of corruption out of lobbying?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I'll tell you what I think it did. I think it made for more reporting. But if you report it and nobody cares about it or nobody reads it, then you're back where you started. I think it's in the record now how much these guys give and what they give, and how much these guys take and what they take.

Now, they don't list the prostitutes that they take or that kind of [thing], but they list the games they go to, or a limousine if they loaned it to them, or a television set, or whatever. It depends on what you think, if you think that just merely reporting a thing keeps it from happening again. And you have to believe that if you're in the newspaper business. You have to believe that once you lay

1. Appeared as Proposition 9 on the June, 1974 ballot.

it out the people won't do it anymore.

I mean, like the Quayle thing. Some people say, "Well, that's all right. Everybody tried to get out [of being drafted into the Vietnam War]. What's wrong with that?" If nobody cares. But, if you report it and they say, "Well, gee! Did this guy do this?" it influences them. But if they just say, "Well." Or if they say, "We know the legislature's corrupt. I would be too. I'd take lobbyists' tickets if they gave them to me. So what?"

So you have to believe that the people don't want their assemblymen and senators to do that. If they don't care, then where are you? But I think we get reportage out of it. It's there. You can find it. And the FPPC [Fair Political Practices Commission] and the--what's the other group?

VASQUEZ: Common Cause?

WRIGHTSON: Common Cause. You know, they look at that stuff and they publicize it. They send press releases out. How much difference it makes? I think it makes a difference. I'm a believer.

VASQUEZ: Because it's out in the open.

WRIGHTSON: Yes. I'm a believer.

VASQUEZ: Let's shift to another area that I wanted to get your impressions on. And that is direct legislation, the use of the initiative in California. Some argue that the initiative process has become abused, and that it really does very little to fulfill the original intent for the electorate to make their voice known on something. Some people argue that so much money from special interests goes into those things it really confuses more than clarifies the issues. What's your assessment of what's developed over the last twenty or so years?

WRIGHTSON: I'll tell you what my assessment is. They say the same thing about the courts; the lawyers run them and they're too litigious and the people with the money get them. It's everything. Any device that changes things is subject to having people with money dominate it and use it. They do. Whether it's the courts, or whether it's the OPA [Office of Price Administration], or whatever it is.

Look, let's set up scholarships for the

needy in East L.A. We'll set up so many, because they need them. But we can't designate them [specifically] for there, because that's discrimination in reverse. But we'll have more scholarships, and we'll invite these people in. Well, who's going to apply for those scholarships? The people who'll apply will be the people who know how to do that kind of thing. Somebody with eight children or nine children who's barely getting along, he won't even know there are scholarships available.

Now, if UCLA recruits him, maybe so. Or maybe his mother and father will say, "You can't go for four years. Look what we got here." You see? But the people who know how to use that, they do fine. They get the scholarships. They know how to do that. They know where to go.

Well, it's the same thing with the initiative. If you take an initiative process it really changes things. We got the Coastal Commission out of that. But the people who know how to use that, or people who know how to fight that, they're the ones who have the money and have the organization there to fight it. They

don't always win. The real estate dealers lost that one, the Coastal Commission. Of course, they fought it after it [was established]. I mean, they never quit.

But, sure the initiative process is abused. Certainly it is. But so are our elections abused, and so are contributions abused. I mean, anything that changes things [is abused].

People come in there with any mess that they can. Like the courts, look how crowded they are. And look at people, how litigious people are. When the legislature won't do anything, like [in the case of] Proposition 13, they could not grapple with the fact that assessments were going up so high that people were losing out. They just couldn't grapple with it. I mean, they just couldn't get together on it.

VASQUEZ: So the initiative was the way to go?

WRIGHTSON: Well, with everything that way. The same with fair political practices. You can't expect the legislators to limit their salary or their own emoluments. So, people have to get an initiative and say, "You've got to report.

We'll set up this body."

VASQUEZ: Let me ask you to comment on something that's not in the past but very present. That is the various initiatives on regulating insurance. What does the present situation on these various initiatives tell you about the initiative process in California?

WRIGHTSON: Just exactly what I said. It's a powerful device for changing things. If you can get an initiative passed that will lower automobile insurance rates, since automobile insurance is compulsory, and you can lower it 20 percent, that's a powerful, sociological, political thing.

So, you expect people to put in counter-initiatives, two initiatives, three initiatives, five initiatives, whatever they can do so that that won't happen. And I don't know how you can stop that in a democracy. I think it's sort of a dirty trick and underhanded, but they have a right to put their initiatives in. I mean, it's hard enough to get them on the ballot; you have to get 600,000 signatures.

So, it isn't just the same as frivolously

going down and putting an initiative on. They go through the process. I mean, they get it on the ballot somehow. Maybe through trick and device, but they get it on there. I don't know what you can do about that in a democracy if we vote on it. And it is confusing.

Like I covered a thing in Arizona where some of the big companies were trying to limit health insurance costs. Finally, there were five measures on that ballot, and they all lost because there were five measures. This may happen with the insurance thing. They may all pass or they may all lose.

VASQUEZ: Just because of the confusion that they cause?

WRIGHTSON: Well, right. So, how do you stop that? You tell people you can only have two measures on insurance? And which two would you get then? I mean, I don't know how you do that. I abhor the fact that they would deliberately try to confuse the thing by putting their own initiatives in.

VASQUEZ: I guess my underlying question is: Do you think the initiative still serves the initial [purpose] that it was incorporated for?

WRIGHTSON: It's been corrupted certainly. But so have our

elections been corrupted by money. I mean, I don't want to abolish elections because of that. No. I don't like the initiative process. I didn't like Proposition 13. I think the legislature should handle it. But apparently, the legislature can't handle those things.

They can't do anything about automobile insurance. They can't get together on it. Either the lobbyists are too powerful, or I don't know exactly what the mechanism is. Or growth. If the city council and these people can't stop growth here, then we have to have an initiative to stop it. We apparently can't get the city council to say no, apparently for some reason. Maybe they legally can't, or they take them to court, or whatever. So, you get a [slow-]growth initiative. I'm for that.

And then, the realtors put in an anti-[slow-]growth initiative and lie about it and say that if your initiative passes, you won't be able to build a room for your house or you won't be able to put up a fence. I think that's terrible. But, I don't know what you can do about it. If you get that initiative, it really

hurts those developers. So, you expect them to fight back any way they can. I'm not jaundiced about it; I think it's terrible and I wouldn't work for them. I think they should be called on that kind of a deception. But what do you expect?

There are millions of dollars involved in this. And in the insurance thing, there are billions of dollars involved in that. You don't expect to have two initiatives, one by the Ralph Nader group and one by the insurance, and let you decide with those two. You're going to have the trial lawyers have one. Everybody's going to have one. I lament it in that it's not as simple as it should be. But controlling insurance in this state is not a simple thing anyway.

VASQUEZ: So, does it come back to Jesse Unruh's famous phrase that "money is the mother's milk of politics?" Or is that oversimplified?

WRIGHTSON: Well, that's oversimplified. It isn't just the money. It's the whole emotional [thing]. No. I mean, it takes money to do it. It takes money to start a baseball team, but it won't get you the pennant.

[Session 4, September 15, 1988]

[Begin Tape 5, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Hale Champion, in addition to being in the executive branch of the [Edmund G. "Pat"] Brown [Sr.] administration, was a long-time journalist. In his oral history he makes the following comment:

There are two kinds of journalists; there are those who genuinely are observers, who are not seeking to influence the outcome. They're really trying to provide people with a good information with which to draw their own conclusions about the outcome. Then, there are people like me, who get into journalism because they aren't affecting the outcome. They're interested in having their perception help shape outcomes.¹

What kind of journalist were you and why?

WRIGHTSON: You have to understand, the Bees considered themselves a paper of record. And although the people who read the Bee thought it was terribly Democratically slanted, that was not the perception of the editors and the people who worked on it. Most of the people at the Bee believed in the policies of the Bee; there's no

1. Hale Champion, "Communication and Problem-Solving: A Journalist in State Government," Governmental Documentation Project, Goodwin Knight/Edmund G. Brown, Sr., Era. Regional Oral History Office. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

question about that.

My job was really to report what was happening in Sacramento, and I worked under a managing editor named Orville Shelton. Well, we used to have a phrase, "You don't make news; you report news." Okay? It's a bromide, but that's it.

I mean, Hale Champion was at the [San Francisco] Chronicle, and I think he was a Nieman [Fellowship] fellow. He was in a much rarer atmosphere than I was. I certainly don't want to hype my role, because I was covering news for Fresno and Modesto, and I was told to stick pretty close to it. And I was glad to do that, because we had a whole staff of other guys who worked for Pete Philips.

So, I don't think I had much influence. I'll tell you how I did influence, for example. Well, when I was, say, working in Fresno, I used to go over the vouchers of the members of the board of supervisors. The [County] Supervisors Association [of California] met a lot of times in San Francisco. And when this one supervisor, who was a wealthy farmer,

when he went to San Francisco, the thing would be like Thursday, Friday, Saturday. His name was [Floyd] Olson. He would go up Wednesday night, and he would stay at the Fairmont [Hotel] and eat at the Tonga Room. He'd go for the two sessions, and so forth, and then he'd stay the weekend. He charged the county for the night before and the night afterwards, not the Sunday or the Saturday, wouldn't charge them for that if he stayed. But, most of the time, he didn't stay. And I found that out.

Another supervisor named Bert DeLotto, who became an assemblyman, would go up on a bus, eat in the cafeteria, and stay at the "Y" [Young Men's Christian Association] or something. And I compared those two vouchers. Olson was very angry about it, and I told him, "Mr. Olson, the people in your district, well, probably 98 percent of them, will never see the inside of the Fairmont Hotel." Oh, he told me first, "Look, if I went there on my own, I'd stay at the Fairmont. I'm not staying in some fleabag because I'm a supervisor." I said, "Fine, but most of those people will never see the inside

of the Fairmont or the Tonga Room. And if you want to do that and charge the county, that's perfectly all right; they're paying it. But I want it in the paper. If your constituents want you to live that way, fine. I'm not against it. I don't want you to live in a fleabag. But I think while they're out cutting the lawn and you're in the Tonga Room they should know that, because that's a fair thing to know." I said, you know, "On Saturday morning, they're out cutting the lawn and so forth, and you're having breakfast in the Tonga Room. That's okay and it's on the county." And the county paid it, the auditor paid it. So, he then paid his own way after that. So, in a way, it influenced the thing.

But, I didn't set out to. I just think that the people should know what goes on. I believe in reportage. I believe in it less now, because I've seen good reporters like William Trombley of the [Los Angeles] Times, and Bill Boyarsky of the Times and Denny Walsh of the Bee report terrific stories, and nothing came of them. There was no change; people didn't care

at all. They didn't do anything about it. I mean, it didn't start any groundswell at all. So, I'm a little more jaundiced about that than I was.

At that time I thought, "Well, if people know that, they'll give him the message. They may write him a letter, or when they see him on the street tell him, 'Look, what are you staying at the Fairmont for?'" You know. Or his opponent could make an issue of it next time. That's what he was really afraid of. So, in that sense, I influenced things. Or if a guy tried to sneak a bill through and I found it out and wrote about it, he'd withdraw it many times. So, in that sense, I influenced events.

VASQUEZ: Could you give me an example of the latter, what you just mentioned, someone trying to sneak a bill through?

WRIGHTSON: No, I can't. I mean, not accurately. And I don't want to use anybody's name who did that. But they did. [Laughter] It was no big page-one story, but I would just find a bill, or a guy's name would be on the bill, and if it was in my district. . . . If it wasn't in my

district, in those nine or ten counties that I had, I didn't care, or I'd turn it over to the Sacramento staff and see what they wanted to do with it. But lots of times the guy would call me in or say, "Now, you've got that wrong. I introduced that bill." Or, "I didn't know my name was on that." Or, "He asked me to put my name on it, I didn't know that. I'm taking my name off." And sometimes they would withdraw it, or they wouldn't push it in committee. I don't mean they'd openly say, "I'm sorry," or anything. They just wouldn't push a bill, it wouldn't go anyplace. So, in that sense, I may have influenced some things simply by saying that it's happening. And this happens all the time.

VASQUEZ: In a recent legislative seminar that I attended with a very seasoned professional, a veteran of California politics and California political campaigns, he made the remark that the difference with the writing in political journalism in California today and, say, twenty years ago when electronic media was just beginning to make inroads was that journalists wrote as if it mattered and as if people cared

more about California politics than they do today. What is your reaction to that?

WRIGHTSON: I wouldn't dispute that. I'll tell you my feeling now, because I'm retired. I have a hard time in this election accepting the fact that politics has a life of its own. It's like reporting baseball. But, when I was reporting it I didn't see it that way. I thought it was equated with issues and governance and so forth. You see? But I don't think it has any connection anymore. I don't think what Bush and Quayle and [Michael] Dukakis are saying has any relationship with what they're going to do when they get in.

If I had to cover it, I'd have to cover it like the [Los Angeles] Dodgers. If the Dodgers win a game, it has no relation to anything but baseball. I mean, it doesn't have any relation to economics, or physical fitness, or sportsmanship, or coaching, or anything. It has only a relationship to that game, that league, and that team. And I think the political thing has been set up that way.

I think these people have set it up for the

electronic media that way. How responsible the electronic media is for getting set up that way, I'm not sure. Certainly it was a two-way street. I mean, the electronic media was glad to have it set up, and the people who had it were glad to have it set up, too.

Down here, you get 7 million people watching you if you get on the evening news. Oh, a guy will do handsprings for that. I mean, otherwise, he lives in anonymity down here--nobody knows anybody--until they see him on the tube. And then all of a sudden he's in 7 million homes and maybe twice that many that night.

VASQUEZ: To what do you attribute the blandness of political discourse, say, compared with twenty years ago?

WRIGHTSON: I contribute it to a shallow overcoverage of the television people. They shortbite. They can't do much. And the [politicians] like that. I mean, you know what [Andy] Warhol said, "On TV, everybody has fifteen minutes of immortality." It's true. It's true.

VASQUEZ: Why isn't the print media being an alternative

to that? Why does it seem to be tailing [the electronic media] and trying to tailor itself to that?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't think it is. I think it takes the guts out of you when you go to report something and you have eight television cameras there and all the [camera] crews, and they elbow you around, and they ask the questions, and the guys answer those questions for television.

When I was covering [Maxwell L.] Max Rafferty [Jr.]--he was running for the [United States] Senate, and I would cover him, say, at four meetings. And I'd come home and my family would say, "Max Rafferty said something." And I'd say, "Well, not quite. He didn't say that."

And my wife and children would say, "Jim, we saw him on the tube. Don't tell us he didn't say that." I said, "Sure, he said it for that TV. But later, there was another question. And when I asked that question, he backed off of that." "But we saw it. It happened. Don't tell me it didn't happen."

So, it takes the guts out of you. And most newsmen watch television news. They feel they

have to, and they do. And almost every newsroom has a television set at the city desk. There's no question they do. So, it's just like wire service reports used to be. If UPI sent out an inaccurate lead, everybody had it, and they called the reporters, "What about this? Have you got it?" And you'd have to say, "No, that's not what happened." Or, "That's phony."

So, television does make an impression on me, too. You saw it. I agree with you that most of the print media journalists don't think what they write is as important as it used to be or as people used to [think it was]. It isn't.

When they changed from horses to automobiles the guy in the livery stable wasn't as important as he had been. He still may be running horses out of there. But the point is they were buying cars now. And this has happened. I think it's too bad, because I think the print media can [influence]. It's filtered, but I think they can do it better. I think an honest reporter can give a better report of a thing. A dishonest reporter, of course, is like a dishonest banker. But, I think that's true.

- VASQUEZ: There's a story about ex-Congressman Philip Burton being followed . . .
- WRIGHTSON: Followed by the FBI, yes. So, they played it quite large there. And I don't know what the television did. You said NPR did a lot on it.
- VASQUEZ: Yes, National Public Radio. Well, he was from San Francisco.
- WRIGHTSON: Yes, right. And I think they thought that was very important, and it was. But, generally speaking, unless you're doing an investigative story, you're not going to. When Bush gets up and says, "This is September 7, and this is Pearl Harbor Day" on television, that has a lot more impact than if you write it and it appears a day later.
- VASQUEZ: Yes, and it even sort of attracts the level of discourse to that kind of minutiae, doesn't it?
- WRIGHTSON: Certainly.
- VASQUEZ: Before I move on to the Los Angeles bureau [of the Bee], what were the local issues that came around and around, that were repetitive, that were cyclical, that were constant while you were covering the Fresno area?
- WRIGHTSON: Well, I don't know whether they were issues,

there were pet bills.

Burns and these guys always introduced a bill to get a branch of the University of California in Fresno. Okay? No way they're not going to do that. I think it was always a bill to make them call the state colleges, "state universities." I think they always had that bill in. The university fought that, and they lost, finally, not too long ago.

There were a lot of perennial water bills that were so complex that I can't really describe them here, but it took a lot of my time explaining them. And I had to explain the difference between this year's bill and last year's bill which failed, and why the last year's bill failed, and who voted against it, and why it didn't get out of committee, or why it was there, and the chances of this year's bill. And this took a lot of time and a lot of print, which they gave me.

When you ask did I influence anything, [the answer is] probably. I wrote about a lot of complex bills. And there were forces moving in the San Joaquin Valley far above what I did or

what the Bee did.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of those forces?

WRIGHTSON: Oh, well, [John E.] O'Neill was one, and I can't think of all the names of the big farmers right now. I just can't. These guys owned thousands and thousands of acres.

VASQUEZ: And the California Farm Bureau Federation?

WRIGHTSON: Sure, in the paper, yes. And you got the quote there. But those guys went back to Congress and they lobbied themselves. They would call a representative on the phone and say, "This is Salyear himself. And we've got to have that bill." The Farm Bureau, it was an organization, but those guys didn't need that, really. That isn't what they. . . . I mean, they backed it, they may have funded it. And I'm not calling it a front organization, because it wasn't that.

So, I wrote about a water bill. But that afternoon, maybe five of those ranchers from the Westlands Water District had taken the committee to dinner. I didn't know that. There's no way I could have known it. Or maybe just one rancher took the guy to dinner, or maybe he took him in his airplane--this was before reporting

was that way--maybe he took him in his airplane up to Sun Valley. And I couldn't know that. So, I didn't have a big opinion that I was influencing.

There were forces there that I could not track. I mean, they came out once in a while, and if the tip of the iceberg showed, I wrote it and I got it and I investigated it more. I was never under any wraps or any constraints. In fact, the Bee wasn't liked by the farmers. But, we never did a big investigative job in those days on Westlands Water District or any of those. But, we'd never flak for them. Those guys never took me to dinner. The Bee was never an errand boy. I would have been pulled off the beat if they'd have thought so.

VASQUEZ: Tell me something--and it goes back to something we left unaddressed some time back--why is it that the Bee, being as unpopular as it was with very powerful forces in the Fresno area, never was squeezed or pressured to curtail its activities? Or was it?

WRIGHTSON: By whom?

VASQUEZ: By some of the large farmers, let's say.

WRIGHTSON: Well, the big farmers weren't advertisers, in the first place, okay? Car dealers were. And the Bee was an independent paper. I remember Diz Shelton, Orville Shelton, the managing editor. When they came in to complain he'd say, "The complaint department's 162 miles north. Take [Highway] 99. Those decisions are made in Sacramento." And we were fairly isolated from that, everything. I assume. I didn't know. We were isolated from the advertising. I never knew whether anybody dropped an ad because I wrote something or not. I had no idea. They wouldn't tell me, and I didn't know and didn't want to know.

Now, I understand lately they've had more contact with the community, but the big gripe about the Bee was that it was owned by outsiders; they weren't Fresnoans. But let me tell you, in my opinion Fresno got a much better paper because of that. They got a straight-away paper, because they were not influenced by advertisers. They were not.

I mean, there may have been incidents. I'm not saying I know, but generally speaking, the

advertisers took their lumps. Especially the politicians, they took their lumps. There's no way they could call anybody and get favorable treatment. They just couldn't do it.

VASQUEZ: There was another question that I never was able to get back to, following up on the earlier interview, and that was, why is it that such a conservative area--and you characterized it yourself as conservative--seemed to elect very liberal representatives to the state assembly? Why do you think that is?

WRIGHTSON: In my opinion, the Republicans put up a lot of kooks, a lot of squirrels. And when they put up good people, they broke the Democratic hold. I don't [think] they're good people now. But [Ernest N.] Ernie Mobley, he was an assemblyman, he was good. Oh, what's this guy from Hanford who was the optometrist? He was head of Health and Welfare in Sacramento when he was no longer an assemblyman. He's one that I told you about. He asked me what to do about the lobbyists when he came there. Gordon W. Duffy! from Kings County. [Laughter] It's been a long time, I'll tell you. But, Duffy. Where were

we? He's the one. What were we talking about?

VASQUEZ: You were saying that the quality of [Republican candidates]. . . .

WRIGHTSON: Oh, yes. Well, he was a pretty sharp guy. And he won down there. And we'd had [Assemblyman John C.] Williams, we always had Democrats down there. Kern County, the same. They had Walter Stiern down there and a couple of others.

Again, I have got to tell you that those people served their district. I mean, water politics are strong in the Valley, and [some] other politics. But, like Sisk was there for years. He was a Democrat. He served the district. When Westlands Water came in and needed something, he helped them. And the same with all these guys; they had to serve their district.

They didn't make a big thing of their ideology. And the farmers will forgive you if you're a liberal if you vote for their bills. They don't care. Now, they may back the other guy, and they may like to hear the other side at a dinner, but they'll work with anybody. The lobbyists are the same way; the last thing they

want to know is what your ideology is. I mean, that's just trouble.

So, these people were Democrats, there's no question about it. And they were on the [Harry S] Truman campaign or the [John F.] Kennedy train. But, when it came to voting their district, they voted for their district. That's what made my job fairly important. And the Bee had influenced that, because we always had the vote of those guys. The Bee did influence that. Because we always went and asked people [legislators] how they were going to vote or what they were going to do, if we could get it.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, did you depend much on the use of polls. Did you give much credence to polls?

WRIGHTSON: Really, no. There wasn't much polling then.

VASQUEZ: What's your assessment of the impact that polls have on political currents and even on elections today?

WRIGHTSON: One word: Tremendous.

VASQUEZ: Good? Bad?

WRIGHTSON: Tremendous. I mean, what's your assessment of the effect that automobiles have on the United States? I mean, tremendous. I don't know

whether it's good or bad. You know, we've got smog, we've got accidents, we've got oil drilling all over the place. On the other hand, we can get places where we could never get before. And people are going that never could afford to. So, I don't know. These polls, I can't tell how. . . .

Did you see what happened yesterday? The New York Times had Bush way ahead, and the L.A. Times had them even. So, who do you believe? But that isn't the thing. What they use polling for is to find out attitudes so that the candidate can take that posture. If they find out all the people in Fresno County hate Japanese, they'll stay away from the Japanese issue, obviously. Or they won't vote for the \$20,000 for the internment camp [victims]. If the Japanese are strong there and the poll shows the people think they shouldn't have been taken out, then. . . .

VASQUEZ: More specifically, do you think [polls have an] undue influence on political discourse? That maybe, sometimes, candidates meander according to the polls.

WRIGHTSON: I know they do. Oh, you wouldn't take a poll if you're not going to follow it. You go see your lawyer, he tells you to do something, you'd be crazy if you don't. Sure, they follow polls.

I think that and television absolutely blurs or defeats a candidate's instinct. A candidate used to have an instinct for people and how it went, and he could go into a town and sense what people wanted. You can't do that anymore. Nobody does that. In the first place, they're not there that long; the jet's waiting. And secondly, [if] somebody gives you a poll and tells you something, it sticks in your mind.

I mean, if you're running for something, and somebody says that in your district they don't want a hotel or they don't want growth, if that poll shows it, it'll influence you. You may not go that way because you need the money from the bed tax, but it's influential.

The polls are conducted by experts. They're pseudoscientific, but these guys try. They have a margin of error there. They're very respected people. Everybody polls--or almost.

Nobody takes chances.

And with the urbanization of things, you couldn't do it any other way. I mean, you used to be able to go into a town like Sanger and spend a day and visit all the important people there. You can't do that anymore. You just can't do it. I mean, you reach them through television if you've got the money. Or you reach them some other way.

So, yes, polls have a great deal [of impact]. Between the polls and the TV, I think politics has changed. That's no deep observation; everybody knows it. And I think, you know, none of us can assess cause and effect for inflation or anything else. But, you know, there's an old Texas saying, "If you see a turtle on a stump, you know he didn't get there by himself." [Laughter] I mean, you see the turtle on a stump, you know that something must have happened. Now, you don't know how he got there, but. . . .

And when you see television going the way it is, and the polls going the way they are, it's not a bad jump to say that they influence

elections, campaigns, and everything.

VASQUEZ: I guess the assessment that one would be interested in is, as a long-time observer of American politics, do you think this is good or bad for democracy? Democracy defined as a well-informed public, or electorate, influencing the outcomes of political actors.

WRIGHTSON: Well, let's put it this way. I'm no political scientist. It makes me sad to see it work that way, okay? It's an evolution of things.

Years ago, you and I couldn't have even done this [record an interview]. You would have sat here and taken notes for four hours and typed them up. And we wouldn't have gotten this far, either, if you had to write everything down. So, I think it's too bad in a way. But what else is there? This is the way it evolves. People use the tools they can. And just like any other tools, I think if it's misused or used in a dirty way, in a bad way, I think that's bad, just like any other great invention, you know.

But I think candidates have lost their touch with people. I do. They communicate with

them through the tube, which is cold. And I happen to think, for example, that our Pasadena representatives here, from what I can see--they hold meetings at Caltech [California Institute of Technology] and all--but they vote the way of the big contributors, because they need the money for television. I mean, it's logical. Of course you vote that way, because that's what you need. Like when Unruh used to back campaigns. I forget who was running. It was [Eugene] Gene Hahsey. He lost in 1966. And Unruh backed him down here. I think he lost to Ernie Mobley.

VASQUEZ: You were saying, you were talking about people who . . .

WRIGHTSON: Unruh held back making contributions until the last five days, when Hahsey really needed it. And then he gave him \$49,000 for a television [commercial]. Well, you see, I mean, it made Hahsey beholden to him. And when you can use that money that way, it was for a television. . . . He couldn't have done that if they hadn't had television. You couldn't have blitzed him that much with newspapers. So, that's influencing an

election.

So, I think we have to regulate it, we have to report it, we have to make sure we know what's happening or how it got into our homes, how much it cost for them to do it. That's all we can do. We can regulate some of it, I think. I would be in favor of that, although you run into First Amendment problems. Say you have a rich father, and I tell you you can only spend so much on a campaign. Well, I'm interfering with your freedom of speech, because if you have a message to get out and you got the money to get it out--it's a public 400,000 leaflets--and I say you can't spend that money for that. I say that you've spent enough money now, you can't spend anymore, or you can only spend \$2,000 in an election. I'm interfering with your freedom of speech, because a new issue may come up, and you want to tell everybody about it, but you've already spent your money up to that.

Of course, the rule is you can't tell a man how much he can spend on an election. You could make him report how much he spends, and you

could make him report how much he gets and where he gets it from, but you can't tell a man that he can't spend that much.

VASQUEZ: What's your opinion of some of the proposals that have been put forth in recent years for public campaign finance?

WRIGHTSON: I'm for it. I'm for it.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that will circumvent problems with the First Amendment?

WRIGHTSON: Well, somewhat, in the sense that you would agree that if you took the king's shilling, you had to do certain things, like a contract. In a contract, I do certain things for a certain thing. You know. And so, I think if the government contributes so much money, if we all contribute, then we have some kind of leverage to say how it's spent, or how much of it's spent, or how much they can add to it. I don't think that's too bad.

VASQUEZ: In June of 1981, you came down to Los Angeles to open a bureau for the Bee, is that correct? Can you tell me about that?

WRIGHTSON: Well, I really got here in September of '81.

VASQUEZ: Was it September? I'm sorry.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I had been on the editorial board and had written editorials, and I had decided I didn't want to do that anymore. I had done it for ten years. There was a man named George [G.] Baker, who'd been in Washington as a McClatchy correspondent. And he had come back, and they had asked him to go over and take the Capitol, take over the Capitol staff.

VASQUEZ: What was your responsibility here in Los Angeles in this bureau?

WRIGHTSON: Well, wait a minute, I went over to the Capitol first. Then I wrote that memo I told you about, that we needed a bureau in Los Angeles because all the money's raised down here and the candidates are down here. And I came down just to cover an election first and lived in an apartment. And then, when the election was over, they decided they would like a permanent bureau like they'd had before, and I was the man to run it. And I was willing to do it, more than willing to do it.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, was there a different perspective in seeing state politics from, say, Fresno and living in Fresno and reporting out of Fresno, as

opposed to reporting out of Los Angeles? What is the difference in perspective, if there is a difference?

WRIGHTSON: Well, in Fresno, you knew the guys by their first names, and you saw them, and they came up to the paper, and so forth. Here, well, the politicians don't know who McClatchy is until they get up there. Down here, they're gunning for television and gunning for bigger things. So, I didn't have that. Also, I was influenced by the papers and radio [stations] here who, generally, make fun of Sacramento. Sacramento looks completely different, if you read the paper down here, than it is up there. And I think the paper's accurate here, as well as accurate there. It's a funny thing about journalism, but where you stand depends on where you sit, you know?

VASQUEZ: Did they give it more seriousness, more deference up there than they do down here? Is that the difference?

WRIGHTSON: Well, it's a matter of perspective. In Sacramento, you get a different perspective because you're with them [the legislators] day to day.

And the Bee had a special relationship with legislators, because it was the capital paper. Down here, you had no relationship like that with anybody. And down here, it was chasing trouble more.

I was sent down here to cover the election, essentially. But, after that, I chased trouble. I covered the strike in Las Vegas, I covered the strike in Disneyland. I mean, that's what I did. I covered the trial of Hedgecock¹ in San Diego, [Mayor] Roger Hedgecock. And, you know, it was a different thing. I did some political stories, but I didn't do as much politics as I had before. The paper wasn't as interested in politics really, then, as it had been.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that was?

WRIGHTSON: Well, Walter Jones, who was the editor when I was down here before, was extremely interested in politics. He really was. He thought it was very important. And he wanted to be

1. Mayor Roger Hedgecock was convicted for conspiracy and perjury in 1985 and was forced to resign from office on December 10, 1985.

influential. There's no question he did. But after, when C. K. McClatchy took over, he didn't quite see it that way. He wanted the editorials to represent both sides. I told you.

VASQUEZ: Yes, we've been through this.

WRIGHTSON: So, politics in itself wasn't that important. Before, under Jones, if you wrote a political story it got in.

[End Tape 5, Side A]

[Begin Tape 6, Side B]

WRIGHTSON: Now they've got a political columnist, you know, Dan Walters. They've got two. They've got Martin Smith. He's called the political editor, but he's just a columnist. He doesn't read any other copy but his own. So, they [the McClatchy newspapers] are not as interested in politics, I don't think, as they were. Although, I've been out three years; they may be more interested, I don't know.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, you were a journalist here in California and an observer of California politics for around three decades. How would you summarize the changes in state politics over that period of time?

WRIGHTSON: I couldn't summarize it. It had to do with growth. It had to do with problems arising from growth. It had to do with new inventions. And these new inventions gave people a new outlook. Like, there are certain television reporters who would have never gone into print journalism. They wouldn't be around print journalism. I don't mean they're not competent, but they wouldn't have gone into it. First, it didn't pay enough. Now a lot of people go into television who would never go into print journalism. First, the pay is more. You know, the whole exposure's more and so forth. So, it drew people in that wouldn't have been drawn in.

And there was a proliferation of news on the radio; tape recordings, these guys running around with a tape recorder. They cover as many as ten stories a day, those guys. That all made a difference, I think. And the growth problems gave us urban problems. The urban problems made it more difficult to cover police, because the police couldn't handle the urban problems. And when the press would point that out, the police would get hostile. Court decisions: Giving

individuals their rights made the police angry at the courts, whereas most newspapers endorsed that kind of thing. And an adversarial relationship grew up that wasn't there before.

VASQUEZ: Some have argued that the growing diversity of the state of California, ethnic, racial, urban versus rural areas, makes it more difficult for California politics to produce a good quality of lawmaking and of lawmakers. What's your assessment of that?

WRIGHTSON: Sure, but any big change makes it more difficult, because you have to handle it. So sure. You bring ethnic groups in here. . . . I think the Hispanics have made a difference. I don't think they've made as much difference as they should have made or could have made, and I don't know why that is. I don't know why they could elect [Senator Dennis] Chávez in New Mexico and they can't elect Chávez here. I don't quite understand that aspect of it.

VASQUEZ: They couldn't elect a Chávez now in New Mexico the way they did then, because the ratio of white to Mexican-American has dramatically changed in the last fifteen years. That's one

factor.

WRIGHTSON: You mean there are more whites?

VASQUEZ: Oh, yes.

WRIGHTSON: Yes, well. Yes, but here, it's going the other way. And I don't know why they can't. But you're right, sure, the more ethnic diversity you have, the more. . . . You may have to print ballots in several languages. I believe in that, sure I do.

VASQUEZ: I guess I'm trying to get at whether it's the diversity that causes a lot of the problems or if there's a certain atrophy in the process of government itself in the state of California that's taking place.

WRIGHTSON: Well, the relationship between the legislators and the constituents has changed dramatically. Whether the process has atrophied or whether it's a meaner process, I'm not sure. It's more impersonal, because there are more people here.

That's why the San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento Valley legislators kept coming back. They did not have an ethnic diversity. They may have had it, but nobody knew it. I mean, there may have been Filipinos, Hispanics,

and so forth there, but nobody knew they were.
I mean, they just worked.

VASQUEZ: [Perhaps] they were disenfranchised.

WRIGHTSON: Well, they were disenfranchised. They weren't considered. They weren't part of law enforcement. They weren't part of anything, except their own culture.

VASQUEZ: And now, in urban areas, and increasingly even in rural areas, that attitude of accepting their disenfranchisement is changing dramatically.

WRIGHTSON: Right. Well, and not only that. When you bring braceros in, they're disenfranchised from the minute they cross the border. They're going back. Well, whereas other people come here to colonize. Well, look what the Cubans have done who have settled in Florida. They're running it. They've turned it into a right-wing state practically, and [they have] a little anti-[Fidel] Castro sovereignty down there. So, when people come in here, wealthy, say from China, or wealthy from Vietnam, or come in poor and decide they're willing to work seven days a week or keep their store open and live above it, it makes a difference.

I mean, they're not disenfranchised, in a way. Even though they don't vote, they have a lot of say, or some say. And they don't think they're going back. The braceros knew they were going back, a lot of the Hispanics just came to get enough money to get back. Well, that's not true anymore. People want to stay here now. They want to make their home here. And that makes a lot of difference in your district, if you are representing a district. Look how dramatically Monterey Park and that area has changed. You couldn't imagine that. Who would have ever thought that?

VASQUEZ: Are you optimistic generally, or pessimistic, about the future of California politics? You can define either of those words to your liking.

WRIGHTSON: Well, this morning, I'm pessimistic about the future of California politics because of the FBI sting [in Sacramento]. I'm also pessimistic about it because of the many initiatives on the ballot. And those initiatives are there mostly because the legislature would not deal with the problems there. I don't know how you get the legislature to deal with them, as long as they

have to take care of contributors before they take care of constituents. And I think they do.

VASQUEZ: For the record, the sting that you are referring to has to do with an FBI investigation and a sting operation that's been taking place with several leading legislators in Sacramento over the last three or four years. And the initiative crowd is, I think, thirteen initiatives that will be on the ballot this next November, several of them dealing with the same issue and put in such convoluted language that even experts in the field don't know what they mean.

WRIGHTSON: And this isn't the first time..

VASQUEZ: This is not the first time, but it seems to be getting worse, doesn't it?

WRIGHTSON: Whether it's getting worse or not, it's like anything else, it keeps repeating. Every time you do it, it's worse, by definition. I mean, if you do a bad thing twice, it's worse than doing it once, the second time. So, yes, I'm very worried about the fact that California politics can't embrace. . . . And I'm not talking about issues in general; I'm talking about things that people need for the government

to do.

Like, if we're going to have to have car insurance, somebody should regulate the insurance companies so we can have it. They've just got to do that. And I don't think the Republicans have any heart for it, or stomach for it, or mind for it. [Governor George] Deukmejian, I know Deukmejian, he doesn't believe in it. I mean, he doesn't believe in it any more than you believe in Jim Crowing the blacks. I mean, he just doesn't believe in that.

I talked to him once, and he didn't even believe in the signs on the freeway which say, Fasten Seat Belts, and so forth, or lanes which make people double up in cars. He didn't think the freeways should be used to coerce people that way. And those signs, if you notice, those signs are blank. They used to have all kinds of messages on them. You know, the Deukmejian administration doesn't believe in that.

He believes if you get in your Porsche alone, you shouldn't have somebody telling you you should have somebody in there with you or

that you and I should both ride in my Buick. You want to take your Porsche, that's up to you. We shouldn't penalize you and make you stay in a lane because you're alone. Why do that? And he believes that.

VASQUEZ: Are the Democrats any different?

WRIGHTSON: Well, when they were in, they tried to put lanes in. They tried to get share-rides. They didn't have this laissez-faire thing. And [Governor Edmund G.] "Jerry" Brown [Jr.] didn't even want freeways. I mean, he thought we had too many anyhow.

VASQUEZ: Getting back to this insurance question, right now you've got a Democratic assemblyman [Richard Polanco] running interference for the insurance companies on one of the initiatives.

WRIGHTSON: Right.

VASQUEZ: So, I'm wondering how different, in something like special interests as powerful as the insurance companies, how much different the Democrats are or can be from the Republicans.

WRIGHTSON: Well, I think if you see the general pattern of their votes, they're probably more for regulation than the Republicans are. Now,

individually, I think we've got some Democrats who are further to the right than half the Republicans out of San Francisco. I'm sure.

And we've got guys from the [San Fernando] Valley who say they're Democrats who probably never were or aren't now. But I'm disappointed in the legislature, and I know why it works the way it does. I think I understand it. And I think all we can do is do things like the FBI's doing, stop them from corrupt practices. If we clean it up, it has more chance.

But, we've got to clean up the legislature; they'll never deal with the problems if they're corrupt, if they're taking money as a political contribution for bills. So, the only thing we can do clean it up and hope that we get people to address the concerns of the constituency. I'm not talking about issues. Most people don't like issues.

[Interruption]

VASQUEZ: So, in 1988, what does the California voter have to be optimistic about?

WRIGHTSON: I wouldn't frame the question that way.

VASQUEZ: How would you frame it?

WRIGHTSON: In 1988, what can the California voter reasonably expect from the legislature, or from his elected representative: City, county, and state? I think he should think of what he expects from them and what the obstacles are for the elected official to give, to do, to act in an appropriate manner.

I think the voters are very tough, in the sense that they won't vote for taxes and they want more services from them. I think that's true. And I think that's a dilemma for anybody in government.

I mean, Dukakis is certainly affecting it now; he's screaming about the deficit, but he's either got to raise taxes or. . . . I mean, there's no way he can make that deficit go away, unless he. . . . And people don't want him to raise taxes. He'll lose if he comes out for taxes. [Walter P.] Mondale tried that and got swamped.

I would frame [the question] as, What can the voters expect from their elected officials, given the problems that their elected officials have? And I think the electronic and print media should

make clear what the problems are that these men face and where they are derelict in their duty, if that's what they are, so people can make choices and frame the election so the candidates put up those choices.

And the legislature's the same way. You hope that they can deal with problems, like insurance or hospitals going broke. I don't think Deukmejian dealt very well with the occupational health and safety thing [California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (CalOSHA)] of taking that away. Those workers need that protection. He took it away. We may get it back through an initiative. I don't know.¹ I'm worried that the legislature isn't more responsive to the needs of the people.

VASQUEZ: Can they be, given the rules of the game today?

WRIGHTSON: Yes, because some are. Yes, some are.

VASQUEZ: What's the difference? What does it take?

WRIGHTSON: I think, in any job--this one you're doing here with me--first, you have to have personal

1. In fact, Proposition 97 on the November 1988 ballot restored \$8.4 million for the CalOSHA inspection programs. 53.7 percent of the voters approved the initiative.

integrity. If you don't have that, then the thing slides off the table. So, if the guy doesn't have any personal integrity anyway or doesn't make that, then he starts out with two strikes against him, because he has no defense.

Because personal integrity is a defense. If a lobbyist comes with a dirty proposition and they know you have personal integrity, they won't come to you; they'll come to the guy who doesn't have any. Now, you may be out of the loop, but you still have your integrity and you're still a good legislator. So, first, it takes personal integrity.

And secondly, it takes a lot of work. As somebody said, people on the side of the angels have to work sixteen hours a day, and the devil's people only work eight. I think if you do that, if you're on the side of trying to straighten things out, you'll have to work much harder, sacrifice more. That's the second thing. And, from that would flow, I would hope, good things.

I mean, you'd influence other legislators, the lobbyists might take a different tack. They

might tell their guys, "Look, we can't push this bill." As somebody said--who was it?--one of the lobbyists. They were having a meeting. It wasn't the insurance lobby; it was the trucking lobby. And they were going to present this proposal. [Laughter] And the lobbyist came to the board of directors and said, "We put the dog food out, but the dogs wouldn't eat it."

[Laughter]

[End Tape 5, Side B]