

Transcript of Oral History Tape T-6-137

John Shawley

Transcribed by Mary Ann Vartia 09/10/03

Interviewer: Okay, we're speaking today with former senator, John Shawley, about county politics. Mr. Shawley, when did you first get involved in politics?

Mr. Shawley: I got involved in politics in LaPorte County shortly after World War II. I became active in the Jaycees and became interested in state level government, that is, in the House of Representatives, in about 1946, 1948. My feeling at that time was that having served in the U.S. Air Force and having taken a couple years out of my life that we had best become involved in our government, so I decided to be a candidate for public office.

Interviewer: Now, how did you get involved? Did you start at the precinct level?

Mr. Shawley: Yes, I began as a precinct committeeman, and then in 1952 became a candidate for state representative, lost the election in 1952 by 187 votes to six-term representative, Henry Kreft, who was a very fine person and did a good job in the state legislature.

Interviewer: I imagine you learned a great deal with your first endeavor.

Mr. Shawley: We learned quite a bit from that first effort; and the next time out against the same person, I was fortunate enough to win the state representative nomination and then go on to being elected in 1954.

Interviewer: Now, what were the issues in your first or second campaign that were of premier interest to area residents?

Mr. Shawley: Well, the issues at that time were getting away from the wartime economy and the rebuilding of our schools, the penal institutions, the mental institutions, state finance, and so forth.

Interviewer: Now, in 1956, 1958, you won your first election.

Mr. Shawley: In 1954 I won my first term as state representative and then was re-elected again in 1956. And I was defeated in 1958, and then in 1960 ran for my first term in the Indiana Senate and was elected to a four-year term in the Senate.

Interviewer: Now, what type of environment—did you find a big change in the environment between politics at the county level and politics at the state level?

Mr. Shawley: Well, actually the levels of politics are a continuous thing. You elect precinct committee people who then elect the county chairman; and the county chairman then elects a state chairman, and the state central—first of all you elect a state central committee and then elect a state chairman,

so actually it's a part of the whole cloth; and I found state politics a bit more (indecipherable) county politics. Yes.

Interviewer: Well, but it all works out right at the grass roots level. Did you find that working at the county level that you were able to more, let's say, more easily meet the needs of the people—the needs were more visible—and you could react as such?

Mr. Shawley: Well, I think here at the local level right down in the precinct and in the county you are able to really get to know the needs of the people, and that's where representative government really begins is right in your home territory, and then you convey those needs to the larger body, which is the state legislature, and that's how you bring about the solution of the problems.

Interviewer: Okay, then do you think that—well, let me ask you this. What difference do you think there is between a registered Democrat and a registered Republican in the State of Indiana?

Mr. Shawley: Actually between a registered Democrat and a registered Republican there are—I would have to say there are many facets to the individual Democrat, the individual Republican; and in some instances there is no difference. If we are talking about elected officials and the philosophy of the parties, there is a vast difference between a party of philosophy. The Democratic Party, I believe, feels that solutions rest in a strong federal government in a collectivist system, so to speak, dominating state government and dominating local government. Whereas I believe that the Republican Party historically has represented and championed individual freedom, individual rights, the free enterprise system, and a true republic.

Interviewer: Now, okay, but I read, now for what it's worth, in history that—in a history book somewhere—about Indiana politics that there was really no difference between a conservative Democrat and a conservative Republican, that there is more or less along—the difference is not party line, all the difference is in a name.

Mr. Shawley: The situation is when you come to voting on issues and the party takes—and the party gets its input into the issues, now the Democratic philosophy seems to be, what can my government do for me? Whereas, the Republican philosophy, that is a conservative philosophy, seems to be leave me alone, I'd rather do it myself, just keep the government out of my hair and I'll do it myself. So, I think there is a great difference between the two; and right now we are seeing that difference take the collapse of the Social Security Program. We are seeing what the destructive forces of the last thirty years of excessive spending and the making of a welfare program out of Social Security by an elected Democratic Congress has done to that program. Now all of a sudden they have come to the realization that it's going to go broke, and we've been pointing that out—that is, we Republicans have been pointing that out for the last 25 years, that the fund is going to go broke if you keep making it a welfare program. Now suddenly the Democratic Congress has found that they've had to greatly increase Social Security in order to keep the program afloat. That's a difference between the two parties.

Interviewer: Now what do you feel—what are your feelings about unionism and the pressures that unions put upon elected officials at the county level, state level, and so on?

Mr. Shawley: Well, I think unions have a legitimate place in our society, and unions have done a great work. I can remember in the 30s when there were no unions and when real industrial unionization was taking place. Salaries were so terribly low and working conditions were so bad that it was absolutely necessary to have unionization take place. This is just a case where you need a balance between management and labor and where you can have excessive use of force by either management or labor. So I think you need unions. I think you need a middle ground situation. I am really concerned with the national contracts, where two or three hundred thousand union people can go out on strike all at one time, as in the coal fields or the steel industry, where you can paralyze the nation; and though we have seen in England, France, and Italy where that kind of unionization can bring a disruption and a destruction of government.

Interviewer: Okay, well, do you feel—now through your own personal experience in holding office here in LaPorte County and environs, do you feel that there was a lot of pressure on you to deal with unions during campaigns? Did the unions ask for much from you?

Mr. Shawley: Unions always had an input as far as legislation that I introduced, and I introduced considerably labor legislation as a labor Republican. I was the chairman of the Labor Committee and served on the Labor Committee for 18 years in both the House and the Senate. The result is that I authored many pieces of sound labor legislation, including many improvements in the unemployment compensation, workmen's compensation, the occupational health insurance for working people, authored the collective bargaining bill, which has since been declared unconstitutional because one word was thought to be not constitutional in the bill, so, yes, labor unions have had a large input into my representation and I believe they serve a very great purpose.

Interviewer: Now, do you feel that the county government is responsive to the needs of the people in the county?

Mr. Shawley: County government possibly is not—has not in the past been as responsive to the needs of the people as it could be. I believe it is becoming more responsive to the needs of the people in the present. I think it is taking a much more active part and I am thinking in the area of planning, zoning, South Shore Railroad project, which is now a three-county project, and so forth. I believe the county government is being—county police department, which is now on a merit system, the countywide ambulance service. I believe we're becoming more responsive to the needs of the people.

Interviewer: Where else do you think we could get improvement through our county government?

Mr. Shawley: I think many things that we do in several small areas, that is, towns and cities, and even the rural areas in the county could be done on a larger governmental basis. Trash collection, a county dump, so to speak, or a county incinerator to handle the disposables that occur in the county would probably be more economic if we did it on a countywide basis. I think we could have a sewage system extending out from Michigan City and from LaPorte

and some of the larger communities that could better serve the rural areas. We could have a water system, taking advantage of the waters of Lake Michigan, which would certainly serve more people and would be better for our government. The countywide park system, which is just coming into being, can be a good system. Ultimately, there are many areas of cooperation where the cities can combine. A county airport would be another, where we can eliminate two airports and have one good airport that could service both communities; but there are many programs where the county could get together and we could have a better program for everyone concerned.

Interviewer: More public services in other words.

Mr. Shawley: More public services, probably at less money and less overhead from the standpoint of staff than we now have with the divided staffs. County health department is another area where—which has gone from small city health departments to a countywide health department, and is coordinating both the rural and the city areas.

Interviewer: Now another thing I'd like to ask is in your opinion, what do you think about politicians during a campaign will always promise to cut and lower taxes, when in actuality the government next year will cost more and more? It's kind of a Catch-22 situation. Do you have any opinions on that?

Mr. Shawley: Yes, I do. I think that it is possible to contain government. It is a matter of containment within a reasonable growth. Now, as a result of inflation, we have large numbers of new dollars coming into the treasuries of the cities, the county, and the state. Few people realize that every time a dollar turns over or every time salaries go up, more tax is collected on that dollar. For that reason, it should be possible to stay within the certain rates, that is, income tax, sales tax, and local property tax, and just live within our means without further tax increases, simply because we have, by virtue of having inflation, we have an increased number of tax dollars coming into the treasuries. We did, in the legislature in 1973, put a hard, firm freeze on real estate property taxes, and we did shift from a property tax base to more reliance for public schools and for local government on the sales tax and on the corporate net and personal net income taxes. So, we tried that experiment, and it has worked quite successfully; and those sales taxes and income taxes have grown in numbers. While the rate has remained the same, the numbers of dollars have increased and we have been able to more sufficiently fund our public school system.

Interviewer: Well, now, what are your plans as far as the future is concerned and your political future? John Shawley isn't just going to lay back and see the rest of his political scheme go on.

Shawley: Right now, I'm content to be a helper and to make recommendations to our party. Right now I am managing the campaign for Ed Simcox, a bright young lawyer from Indianapolis, who will be the Republican candidate for Secretary of State in 1978. I worked with Ed as a very young man and young Republican, and then he came to me for advice as he was in Indianapolis, first attending the Indiana University and then the law school. And then he worked as Secretary of State Highway Department, he worked in the Secretary of State's office, the Attorney General, and then went out on his own as a young lawyer. He's a real top quality candidate, and I'm delighted to help get him elected. I will be advising the LaPorte County Republican Central Committee. I serve

as a precinct committeeman, as a delegate to the state convention. I have no personal immediate political plans. I will not be a candidate for county chairman. I do not plan on being a candidate for Mayor of Michigan City, as several are saying. It will happen in 1979, but I will not be doing that. I think you have to say that at the moment I have no further political plans for public office.

Interviewer: In other words, all you would rather do is share your experiences with the young people coming up in the Republican Party.

Mr. Shawley: Sure, I'd like to help good young people participate in government and become leaders in our government. We're at the point where youth is taking over the country, and they do need the help of some of the older people, who have weathered the political storms and who have seen first hand the past history that has helped our country and some of it that go the country into trouble; and they can benefit by that experience as they assume leadership roles.

Interviewer: Okay, Mr. Shawley, could you share in one of your many experiences with us that you think would be historically valid, would stand up over time, that would be rather of interest to anybody that would listen to this?

Mr. Shawley: Well, one of the stories that comes to mind is that of Isadore Levine, a LaPorte attorney, an outstanding man who was active in the American Legion and was very active in the Republican Party. In the years—in the 1950s Izzy for some—Izzy, as we loving called him—for some reason got crosswise of the county organization and was almost read out of the Republican Party in LaPorte County; but he had backed a certain governor who found an ability to appoint him to the Supreme Court of the State of Indiana. And so at a convention that was held in Indianapolis, the regular party looked up on the stands of that convention, and there smiling down upon them was Supreme Court Justice Isadore Levine, smiling down. Well, Isadore Levine was a LaPorte native; and he was a Jewish man, the first Jew as I recall ever to be on the Indiana Supreme Court. Isadore Levine served in a distinguished manner as a lawyer and as a Judge of the Supreme Court and he certainly became a well-loved person in this county.

Interviewer: Now, what year was this?

Mr. Shawley: The year was approximately 1957, '58.

Interviewer: Do you find a great deal of change in the way things happen in the world of politics today as opposed to 20 years ago?

Mr. Shawley: Not really, I find that people are quite eager to serve at the local community level. The quality of people is improving. By quality I mean their educational background, their knowledge, their experience, perhaps their willingness. I find that it is more difficult to serve in public office since the Watergate period. There is a skepticism abroad, both locally, at the state and national level, candidates are becoming much more accountable for every facet of their daily life; and the thing that I find is that the public, the newspaper, and so forth are going much more deeply into the personal lives of the candidates and seemingly nothing is sacred any longer with the people who expose themselves to serving in public office. Perhaps

that's as it should be. It does make it more difficult for the people who sincerely wish to serve.

Interviewer: Well, would you like to say anything in conclusion.

Mr. Shawley: In conclusion, it has been a great opportunity. People in this county have been just great to me. They have elected me to serve six years in the House of Representatives, 12 years in the Senate. That 18 years is one of the longest tenures of any legislator in the State of Indiana; and I have enjoyed the opportunity for this and the opportunity to do things that we could do in the legislature, such as locating the Purdue North Central campus and causing it to be erected here in LaPorte County, some of the things we've done for crippled children in the state, and the handicapped children in the way of bringing about legislation that would provide for their education, many other items that have been accomplished in the course of my authorship of more than 125 pieces of legislation that have been passed by the Indiana General Assembly.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, Mr. Shawley.

Mr. Shawley: Well, Paul, I appreciate your coming over. It's just great.