

Transcript of Oral History Tape # T-E-95 La Porte County Politics

Interviewer: Paul F. St. Arnaud

Subject: John Stellema

Interviewer: This is July 26, 1978. Mr. Stellema, where, where were you born?

Stellema: I was born in the Netherlands, in 1910 and in July and in the fall of that year we came to America. That was my mother and father and one sister and we came to Holland Michigan. Lived there or in that vicinity for 18, my first 18 years. All of my brothers and sisters were born there. We became a family of 15 children. Andy father was in business at Holland but eventually felt that, there were, needed to expand so we decided or he decided on Michigan City as a good place for the type of business that he was in. And that was produce and it was in 1936 when, when the family moved to Michigan City. And we resided at 416 E. 9<sup>th</sup> Street at that time. That's the home we lived in, all the while the family was here.

Interviewer: Now how long did you live here? Or did the family live there at 9<sup>th</sup> Street?

Stellema: Well, I would say they they lived there until the children were grown and all married and

Interviewer: When did you first leave?

Stellema: When I, I left when I went to service, course that was in 1942 and when returning from service, I still went back home to live. I was single at the time and married the following year and of course we had our own home and

Interviewer: Where did you live then?

Stellema: I lived um, west, to the 200 block on, West6<sup>th</sup> Street for a period of time, and eventually moved into this home and then we moved here in in 50, 58 at this present address.

Interviewer: In 58 you moved into Edgewood?

Stellema: Yes, so there, there was a period of time that we moved in. We lived in two or three different homes up until the time we

Interviewer: What was your occupation right after you got out of the service?

Stellema: we went back into the produce business and

Interviewer: Where was your business located?

Stellema: At that time it was at, the one store was at the 1100 block of Franklin Street and had another one at the corner of Barker and Franklin and we also had a store at LaPorte.

Interviewer: uh hum

Stellema: and a

Interviewer: Now were all of your brothers still involved in the business?

Stellema: Yes, there were four brothers and my father that were still active in it. And it was in it was I think towards 48 when became ill and say I had an arthritic condition and it got to the point where the doctors recommended I get out of that type of work because it was not good for my health.

Interviewer: It was strenuous.

Stellema: So I was told to take some time off and I did. I don't remember just how long a period I was unemployed completely. Just for recuperating you might say, but during that time I got to know Mayor Heilman, who was then mayor of Michigan City and he said the he thought that he would have an opening, or thought that I might be interested in something that he could a arrange, and that was the appointment as Deputy Treasurer for LaPorte County.

Interviewer: Now what year was this?

Stellema: This was, early 49 I think when or late 48, somewhere in there when he made that statement. And as however this appointment would not be available until January of 1950, so as that time came I was still interested inland I accepted it.

Interviewer: uh hum

Stellema: I was interviewed by Mrs. Marshall at that time, Mrs. Florence Marshall who was the Treasurer and qualified and a, that was my start in politics as Deputy Treasurer for LaPorte County, and that was 1950. However, I was employed maybe 30 days there at the office when they started talking about the filing period for the primary election and that had never dawned on me that I was going to be running as a candidate but was encouraged and said and more or less persuaded to file and I did. Of course the May primary I was successful.

Interviewer: Who did you run against in the primary?

Stellema: That I know the, I did have two opponents in that primary and they eventually became very good friends of mine, and and supported me in, in elections.

Interviewer: In other words, during that time the parties were very solidified after the, after the primaries.

Stellema: Oh yes, uh hum.

Interviewer: After the primaries the solidified parties went after the opposition?

Stellema: That's right, and my my candidate from the Democratic or the, my opponent on the Democratic ticket was a Mr. Pallen from LaPorte. And he was at that time the License Bureau Director at LaPorte City and, in those times,

that first election at the treasurer's office was only a term of two years, but it was during my first two years that the legislature made a four year office out of it. However, I was elected for two years and then my second time around I no more than took office as an elected official and I had to run again for my next term, so it was my second term then was a three year term so I had five years as Treasurer out of two terms. But from then on all terms were four years for all offices in the county. And, and of course when I was, my second term as Treasurer, then I filed for County Clerk and I was successful there.

Interviewer: That was 1954.

Stellema:

Interviewer: Right?

Stellema: No, no it would be later than that. I was appointed for two years. Then I had a two year term and a three year term so there was a total of seven years there that I was involved in the Treasurer's office. But, in 1956 is when I run for the, for the clerk and a however, that was a holdover office. And the clerk at that time, let's see, there was a vacancy in the clerk's office and I was elected to that office, however my term would not start for a year but I was appointed by the, by the governor, to, to um, that one year vacancy.

Interviewer: Who was governor at that time?

Stellema: Umm, Governor Craig was the governor at that time, and of course I went down with our County Chairman and a few other supporters and I was appointed to fill that one year vacancy. Then, of course, I took over my four years that I was elected to and then I run for re-election and served a little better than three years. Cause in 1965 is when I was approached by members of the Michigan City Housing Authority to fill, to accept the directorship of the Housing Authority and then after giving it some thought I thought, well that probably would be a good thing because it was more or less non political. But, so I resigned my last 11 months as clerk, I think well it was 10 months. But a, after being with the Housing Authority for a period of about six or eight months I realized I didn't, I didn't like the job but I stayed there 2 ½ years nevertheless. They, until I finally resigned and I did stay long enough to be responsible for acquiring properties where the Boulevard Gardens are now built and a, we also started the acquisition of Merrihill Properties, but that was built after my time then as, after my resignation.

Interviewer: Could you tell me, could you tell me a little about campaigning back in those days?

Stellema: Well, yes, campaigning was different than it is today. I think cause today you have so much radio and television, but those days it was more or less individual effort. You went throughout the county to their, to their, the activities, activities that they had, they and especially during campaign years when they had fish fries and chicken dinners and Sunday dinners and I did a great deal of rural campaigning and I always felt that I probably traveled every muskrat trail there was in the county and other than just the highways you see. And a, and I really got my name out and I think that's what

made me successful as a, especially on my first attempt because I surely wasn't known as a as a politically interested person at that time. I mean I wasn't in politics.

Interviewer: No personal contacts, or name in the paper, or fliers, that sort of thing.

Stellema: Yes, that's right, I remember the first time out I had one, I had a hundred cards made a posters, and it didn't take long to whittle them but before this campaign was over I had 1200 of em, and I had a, nailed them all up myself. And in those days, they, you'd see posters on every pole in the county but, which is prohibited now. And I think that is a good thing that they are not allowed because they are very unsightly. But we did put them up and the wife and daughter, she's a child, baby then, but we would campaign every evening and every day. But you got to know a lot of people and it was it was something that has always been with me. I remember even today those those people even today that I met out in the county. To be honest with you, I didn't know how many townships there were in LaPorte County, I didn't even know where these little towns were or what the names of them were because I just wasn't. I was Michigan City most of the time but you say Rolling Prairie or Mill Creek or Union Mills. I, I didn't have no knowledge of any of those towns that, but it was, it was somethin that I've never regretted and politics I have always thought that I enjoyed it. I know I enjoyed it while I was in office and um, when I finally left I said that was the end of my political career not, pretty much by choice. I thought there was good many other people that should be given a chance and I let them have a chance but, and they, they tried to encourage me since that time to run for office again but I a, I've always thought well, I've had my, I did my share and let someone else do it. And of course, they've probably done better than I have but uh, they,

Interviewer: I don't know about that.

Stellema: But things today, things today are different to as far as public office. They have new methods now, they have types of mach, equipment, computers

Interviewer: technology

Stellema: Yes, everything's been advanced and I think it's a good thing that LaPorte has eventually caught up with with a good many of the larger counties in their methods of doing things now. It was sort of I wouldn't say that it was old fashioned way of doing it but it was sort of a back, backward way of doing it, and it was an expensive way of doing it too, sometime, although the commissioners and the common council at that, the county council, they, they were concerned about their expenditures and they held, money was a little tighter in those days and didn't spend it foolishly.

Interviewer: Now back in those days wasn't LaPorte County a republican stronghold?

Stellema: Yes, yes, rep, rep, practically all the county offices were republican for many many years and year after year. In fact, Michigan City was, was the, had a tendency to be a democratic city administration, however, Mayor Heilman was republican and he was elect, re-elected but LaPorte had

republican mayors and I think all the county officials at that time were, were republican and practically all the townships were republican with, with the exception of well, Coolspring Township was most always democratic, New Durham Township was democratic, and I think Union Township. Now those were the three townships that, that were pretty much democratic in those days. But then they gradually went from republican and then democratic and then changed back and forth and now, now you can run on the ticket on any party and your chances are of being elected are pretty, the same with Porter County was practically all republican in those days and they have since that time have gone democratic in some offices.

Interviewer: Now, through your travels through the county during your campaigning days, did you find a difference between the people in say, Michigan City and LaPorte, or Michigan City and Union Mills, or the southern areas of the county?

Stellema: No, no I would say the people in general were pretty much the same, especially in the rural areas. Now there would be a few areas where you would campaign and there would be like the lake areas you know around in Lincoln Township where the Fish Lake and then when you get over into Hudson Lake and Saugany Lake there were a lot of summer people there and they were here just for the, so they had homes there but of course they were non voters. But and, but the residents of the county, they were pretty much the same. They, whether they were people who lived in the small towns or whether they were people that farmed. They all about the same. Cause a lot of the small towns they had, they were retired farmers that lived in those towns you see. And their children probably still farmed and in LaPorte, in the city of LaPorte of course they had a lot of retired people living there, too. And there's, well there was a little different type of people. Maybe, I don't know if it would be the nationalities, of course Michigan City had a different type of industry here too, and that called, called for different types of nationalities and of course then the war years. There, the black people came into Michigan City in the greater percentage than LaPorte and these are the things that made a difference but rural, I think people were all the same. I, in fact, they all enjoyed talking politics too, when you get out in the, in the. It didn't make a difference what party you represented. They were glad to see you, and they, and if they were of the same party they were just more than happy to work for you and support you.

Interviewer: Now what were the main issues campaigning in the early 50's in county politics?

Stellema: Well, I don't, I really don't remember just if there were any real strong issues, that were presented or that were discussed. Of course right after that the war was just over with and there were a lot of young people and I know one of the, it really wasn't an issue but everybody was concerned with the veterans coming back and they thought they should be given some priority although just campaigning on the basis of being a veteran wasn't necessarily qualifications for holding public office and a lot of them thought that they should be given preference, but I never felt that way, and even today you'll still see, occasionally you'll hear of someone running for office and say a veteran, you see. Well, it doesn't carry a great deal of weight anymore.

Interviewer: Not as much as it used to.

Stellema: No, I don't recall that there were any issues that were on the, on the county. There were no big projects that were contemplated that were actually an issue for discussion as far as cost wise and all. I can't, the one thing that was of, that pertained to LaPorte County was when the Toll Road was, was built. There was a lot of interest shown at that time and of course it was eventually proven well worth all the interest.

Interviewer: How is that funded? Do they take part of the money from each county that it goes through?

Stellema: well no, it was

Interviewer: Or federal funds?

Stellema: The Toll Road was completely bonded by bond issue. And the bonds were sold to, if I remember correctly, it was a \$280 million dollar bond issue and it's still owned by the bonding company even to this day. But the Toll Road is, although it's the State of Indiana naturally backed up the bonds. I think but a, I don't know just what the procedure is, there but I know once you have so often as they say, like the toll bridges, they keep throwing the paint on it just to burn up the money, or spend the money that they never pay off the bond and say, all right, now it's no more a toll, it's a freeway. You see, and of course I think someday the Toll Road will be a freeway too, even though we have a freeway running along side of it in some areas. But to say what were the issues, I don't remember.

Interviewer: In other words, there weren't any burning issues. There were just more or less each party was campaigning on fiscal responsibility?

Stellema: No, it was just, just, that's right, that's right, it was just another, just another election and boy, you would take sides probably on some arguments but there wasn't nothing that was world shattering or anything like that. I can't recall at this time what it might have been, if anything.

Interviewer: Well, what functions did you perform as a Assistant Treasurer and then as Treasurer?

Stellema: Well, as a Deputy Treasurer of course I had the same I had the same responsibility as the Treasurer and I assumed responsibilities of the Treasurer when she was away from the office orbit I was required to take care of all of the books and of course in those days all of the tax bills had to be prepared and this was all done manually by typewriters and clerks that were typists and it was quite a procedure in those days but now it's all done by machine and

Interviewer: Where did the bulk of the money that was collected by your office go?

Stellema: Well, the collections were banked and of course this was done as prescribed by the County Board of Finance. All the banks in the county were allotted a certain percentage of and we maintained the balance in all the accounts. I think there were four county banks at that time and the city banks and the LaPorte, there were two banks in LaPorte and there were three banks in Michigan City at that time. And the money would just keep growing in

that bank until the time of the settlement. And the settlement was made twice a year. You had your June settlement and your December settlement so then

Interviewer: Settlement, what do you mean by settlement?

Stellema: Well you see the monies that you collect as Treasurer were the different levies of each level of government. After all, the city had their, their city, we collected the money for the Michigan City. We collected the county levee, the township levies, the school levies and all these different funds. Then, when the settlement was made and the Auditor then would make the computation of it as to the distribution of it. And then the checks would be paid out. Now, in those days, sometime like Michigan City, they would run, they would run a little short of money and they would have an advance draw long before the settlement was made so and the same with LaPorte City if they felt they needed a whatever it was, \$100,000 to tide them over for thirty days and then of course they would have an advance, an advance payment by the Treasurer. But then, then of course the balances would go down again you see. Now, I don't remember just what our total collections were in those days but we did after I was in the Treasurer for I think the third or fourth year, we got to the point where our total collections were about 97 ½ or 98 percent of the total, charge, which was considered a real good collection you see. The balance then would be carried over as a delinquent tax collectable later on, but, very little problems were had as far as delinquent property or delinquent taxes on property for tax sales. The people usually paid them up before the date of the sale, and I think maybe we collected, in those days probably a total of three million dollars around that. However, today they're way up there, probably 18 20 million dollars collectable taxes now every year. Course that's because the rate is so much higher and it wasn't. It was quite common years ago to have townships that had a, had a tax rate that was around \$2.25 or \$2.50 total rate, but now here like in Michigan City we're up to about

Interviewer: Is that per hundred?

Stellema: That's per hundred, yea, now days they're up to 12, 14 dollars, so that's one reason why taxes are so much higher, the collections are so much greater, I should say.

Interviewer: Then it was in 1956 that you became County Clerk?

Stellema: Yes.

Interviewer: You ran against. Chapala? Isn't that it?

Stellema: yes, he was my opponent, the second time I run him. And it was Mr. Chapala that was appointed then again by the governor to fulfill my last year, that year that I resigned.

Interviewer: Uh hum.

Stellema: So that was almost a year, I think 10 months.

Interviewer: Now

Stellema: But, as clerk or course, you're responsible for, for all the activities of the court, and all the proceedings of the court and you maintain those records. And however there's, also at that time the clerk was also the registration officer for the county. That eventually has been changed where they now have registration officers appointed by the court. And that relieved the clerk of all the registration responsibilities. He is also and still is today, a member of the County Election Board by virtue of his office. And the three, three member board there is usually a member appointed by the Republican Party to serve and one by the Democratic Party and of course whatever the politics the clerk is makes it a two to one board, then. But they are the ones that makes the decision as to the procedure of the election and all the mechanics involved with an election throughout the entire county.

Interviewer: Uh hum.

Stellema: At that time there were 77 precincts in LaPorte County and that has been reduced some and I was very much in favor and I tried hard to have it reduced even when I was clerk and I think we did reduce it somewhat, but naturally the more precincts you have the more expensive an election is because you have to set up all these special local boards again and now it's all machine voting which makes it much faster and but the, when they had paper ballot voting, I remember one election we didn't get our last returns in until around 4:00 the Wednesday after the election day, so, and, of course the people had to continue counting until the job was done.

Interviewer: And it was all done by hand. It was a pretty lengthy process.

Stellema: Oh yes, yes it was. Some precincts naturally had a method where they could do it a lot faster, but paper ballots, and especially when you had at that time you'd have a, a, a national ballot, and a state ballot, and a, and a county ballot and then probably also maybe had a, could have had a school ballot or a referendum in it, so there was a really complicated, anon the national ballot and likewise on the state, it was quite common to have four or five parties listed on the ballot. I mean it wasn't always just the democrat and the republican they had, they had a

Interviewer: Socialist Party?

Stellema: Yes, in fact I think not while I was, but even prior to that we still had the communist

Interviewer: Uh hum.

Stellema: ticket.

Interviewer: Well speaking of parties, how did you first align yourself with the dem with the Republican Party?

Stellema: Well, I really didn't make a choice as to

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Stellema: I really didn't make a choice by just picking one out of the, a paper out of the hat and throwing and assuming that whichever one stuck is the one that I chose but being that I had been given the opportunity to enter politics on Mayor Heilman's recommendation, that's the party I aligned myself with, which was the Republican Party, and

Interviewer: How did you vote before that time? Did you?

Stellema: Well, I, I wasn't too active as a voter prior to that, because for a good many years. I, in fact it wasn't till I went to service that I became naturalized as an American citizen, and it was just something that you just neglected doing you see, and, however, I had, I had to make up my mind when I was sent the Greetings From, this is a little something that I might say here, when I was sent the Greetings By The President that I was to serve and a, to go my draft board, a week prior to that I received a Greetings From The Queen Of The Netherlands saying I was to serve in her army, that I was still a subject of the Queen, and that made. It didn't take long for me to make up my mind whose army I was going to serve in.

Interviewer: You received from the Netherlands a draft notice?

Stellema: Oh, yes, yes.

Interviewer: That's amazing, all the way from the Netherlands to LaPorte County?

Stellema: Well, no, you don't, it was probably originated in the United States or someplace cause after all they had the Dutch Consulate. You know it was something that I never, I knew I was born over there, but my father was never naturalized and of course if he had been naturalized before I was 18 I would automatically had become a citizen but after I was of age, then it was up to myself to become naturalized and I didn't do it. Well, it wasn't done until after I was in the service and of course it was only a matter of a few days then and they just picked out maybe 50, 60 men out of a group and we all went to it was at Galveston Texas where we went where we were all naturalized in a matter of 30 minutes. But a, I honestly felt that I got my start in politics through Russell Heilman and that's why I just stayed with the Republican party and have never regretted it. I have always been a Republican and of course for my, for the lack that I have shown as to voting prior to my entering into politics, I have made up for probably since I have been in it cause I have never missed an election, a primary or general election or any special election since that time. So and still been, I am still interested as a citizen in, in good government and I, I don't go around waving a flag or running up and down the streets but I do attend meetings yet and in fact there for awhile I'd attended every council meeting there for years, and a, just sat there and listened most of the time but I was there nevertheless to see what was now going on and I would go to other meetings, go to School Board meetings a couple of times. Well, whatever meeting that's open to the public and I think that's, that makes for a better, better government and it makes the, makes the individual feel good to, to take part in that manner, so

Interviewer: How about the fact that I've read that in Indiana there is really no difference between a republican and a democrat. A radical democrat or a liberal democrat in the State of Indiana is about as common as a skyscraper in Hanna or Waterford. What do you think about that?

Stellema: Well, I've sometimes wondered what the difference is in, in in a lot of people that are strong politically one way or the other, they quite often, it's their bread and butter and that's why they have to be that way but as to your as to the to the well, I don't know what word to use, but a, they're alike as two peas in a pod you might say, as far as their, their politics are, they're a, I don't care what your politics are, you don't want to pay more, anymore taxes then actually necessary, you don't mind paying your share but you sure don't like to, and I think that everybody feels that way regardless of what your party is. Or you don't like to see tax money wasted. I think that everybody likes to see things improved even though it does cost money but if it shows that improvement is needed, or is going to be accepted, then it should be done.

Interviewer: Ok, now, this is just more or less a personal opinion question. What do you think about politicians during a campaign promising to lower taxes? Do you think that's realistic?

Stellema: No, no they can, to go around campaigning on that, on that basis that they are going to lower taxes, they can't do it today anymore. Taxes are, they've holding the line on them now, but you'll never see the day again when, when, when you're going to get back to where taxes are something that people don't have to worry about anymore. I mean it's always going to be with us and it's going to be even, they're going, I wouldn't say they're going to go higher, but people want services. They want, they want the conveniences. They're going to have to pay for em.

Interviewer: As the, as the cost of running the government increases, your taxes are going to increase.

Stellema: That's right, that's right. And it's not, it's not a case of just having a dirt road anymore. People want good streets and good highways, and they want all the services. I mean there are some things that that, that we could do without, probably or probably do better but you surely want your Sanitation Department, your Water Department, and your Bus Department. Now even Michigan City is having problems with their busses now. I think there's a better way of doing it than the, than the method they are trying here, this busses that they're acquiring but now maybe someday they will have a better system, .

Interviewer: That's just the city government, what can you say? (Note, the word city is indecipherable but I believe that's what he said)

Stellema: Yea.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for the interview Mr. Stellema.

Stellema: Glad to be part of it.

Completed by Susan Webster, May 31, 2003.