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Interview

with

HERBERT L. HYDE

January 27, 1995

by Howard E. Covington, Jr.

Indexed by Howard E. Covington, Jr.

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~
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TAPE LOG

INTERVIEWER: Howard Covington

INTERVIEWEE: Herbert Hyde

MONO STEREO (X) NO. OF SIDES: 3 NO. OF TAPES: 2

INTERVIEW DATE: January 27, 1995

LOCATION: At the office of Herbert Hyde, 29 Market St., Asheville, N.C.

TOPIC: An oral history of political change in North Carolina during the second half of the 20th century. This tape covers the political career of Herbert Hyde, a former member of the N.C. House of Representatives, the N.C. Senate and a former chairman of the N.C. Democratic Party, 1991-1992. In the telling Hyde spends considerable time on his early life in the mountains of North Carolina, where Republicans and Democrats often swapped political power.

COMMENTS: Hyde is a fascinating story teller in the mountain tradition. The interviewer did not stop Hyde from these diversions in consideration of the richness of the stories. As a result, however, material directly related to the assigned topic is in the last third of the interview.

Counter No. Topic

Side A, Tape One

05 Opening announcement

07 Early years in rural mountain home. Father was an "axman" who worked with logging companies clearing the southern Appalachians in 1920s. Father started work at age 14 for logging companies. Also a farmer. Account of work of logging companies and the rise and fall of logging towns in southwestern N.C. mountains. Mentions some remote locations, aside from Joyce Kilmer Forest, where virgin timber stands remain.

139 Life in the mountains during the Great Depression. Families were self sustaining. Raised own meat and crops. Farmers lived off the land, sometimes cutting "telegram" (telephone) poles. "There was a Mister Hall getting out some poles. Some fella' asked his son how many he had out and he said, 'Well, he lacked just a few of having several.'"

170 Travel outside of the mountains to Tennessee or Waynesville. Rode in a taxi cab that was owned by a relative.

184 Early education. Started school at one-teacher, one-room school at Epps Springs on Tuckasegee River for seven grades. Later transferred to Bryson City schools. Had to walk four miles each way. Walked with two others and they were only ones in his remote community to go beyond seven grades. Voted most likely to succeed and the "Sherlock Holmes" of the class.

220 Access to books at home was limited to Bible and Sears Roebuck catalog. His mother was educated (eight grades). Her uncle was first native of Swain County to finish college. His father's parents were both unschooled, though grandmother did eventually learn to read. Grandmother read Bible to her husband who then could recite up to eight chapters at a time from one sitting.

245 War years and decision to enlist in U.S. Navy. Worked in spinning mill in Gaston County until he was old enough (18) to enlist without his parent's permission. Mother reluctant to let him go early because older brother already in Navy. Went to radio school and was assigned to naval intelligence. Decoded Japanese messages in the Pacific theater. Served in Australia, Guam, New Guinea.

280 He chose Navy because his brother was already in that service. Brother was highly decorated. Served on U.S.S. San Juan.

290 Further description of decoding messages. Could type 80 words a minute. Anecdote about organizing other servicemen to eliminate frogs that would keep men up at night with their croaking. The next day the odor of dead frogs created quite a stir.

320 Franklin D. Roosevelt "was a great man." Listened to him on radio. Family was split between Republicans and Democrats. Family was split during the War Between the States. Parents not interested in politics. Mother's side were Republicans. His grandfather Hyde was Republican too. Recalled that his Grandfather Hyde disapproved of blacks voting for FDR in 1932 because "we (Republicans) freed the slaves."

339 Anecdote about listening to black preacher who explained why he was a Democrat. Incident takes place at Decoration Day observances where blacks and whites held memorial services at community cemetery on the same day. White preachers sermonized in the morning while blacks preached in the afternoon. Decoration Day was week before Memorial Day.

367 Listened to battery-operated radio. Could hear FDR's speeches.

375 Explanation of Decoration Day. This was a community event that was not directly related to the church. "It was the day you went and decorated the graves with flowers." One side of cemetery was for whites, one blacks "and a few Cherokee."

388 About blacks who lived in the mountains. Not many. Most lived in Bryson City. One old man in particular by the name of Cook "could remember the days of the War Between the States." Blacks had own school. Father traded dogs with black neighbors and they would fox hunt together.

419 Anecdote about chicken fighting and Mr. Cook. About making liquor. "Only reason made liquor was you could carry eight gallons of liquor and you couldn't carry eight bushels of corn. It was a matter of transportation. Most people didn't understand that."

434 Republicans in the mountains in early years. They controlled politics in Swain County. Legislator referred to in his Swain County cussing speech was a Republican. Republican hero was Herbert Hoover. Had a cousin who was named Warren Calvin Coolidge Frasier.

462 Republican tradition in the mountains. Few slaves in the mountains. His family did not own slaves, or favored slavery.

474 Republicans elected to local and state office.

478 After World War II, worked as timber surveyor and in the logging business. Went to University of Tennessee to take mechanical drawing, mathematics and surveying for one quarter. Finished in June of 1946. Explanation of logging business. Hauled "stave bolts" (large logs cut to length for barrel staves).

494 English pottery makers dug kaolin clay from North Carolina mountains in 1700s and and shipped it to English to make Wedgwood china.

512 Moved to Franklin. Before entered Western Carolina Teachers' College he worked to make molasses with his father and brother. Lengthy description of making molasses and operation of cane mill.

543 Explanation of his choice of work as surveyor. Description of relocation of railroad around Fontana. Description of "coyote hole," a crude earth moving technique using heavy explosives to blast away an entire mountain side. His job was to keep construction in line with route.

560 Reaction of local people to the creation of Smoky Mountain National Park. Use of mountain balds as pasture for mountain farmers.

575 Knew Horace Kephart, writer and activist, who spearheaded drive to create park. Recalled events related to Kephart's death in auto accident. Hunting lands were put under government control, but that did not dissuade local hunters from continuing to use the land as if ownership had not changed. Recalled spring at Cold Spring Knob. "That water will break your teeth, it is so cold."

598 Decision to return to college at Western Carolina. Used GI Bill. Worked for U.S. Forest Service.

(End of Side A)

01 Stayed at boarding house in Acquone (Cherokee word for murmuring water) while working for forest service. Cruised timber and surveyed. Surveyed 40,000 acres on north side of Nantahala Gorge.

40 Went back to school at Cullowhee. Married in junior year. At time entered law school had two children.

51 Won Root-Tilden Scholarship at New York University School of Law. Only married student to receive honor. Also had scholarships to Tulane University and Wake Forest University. Both were smaller. Worked in logging camps during the summer.

77 Recollections of New York City. NYU Law School on Washington Square. Recalled restaurant near law school that had Thomas Wolfe's photograph in it. Went to plays with cheap tickets and to the Metropolitan Opera. Recalled restaurant where Metropolitan singers would come after performances. "You could buy a beer and sit there all night."

109 Attended lectures at Cooper Union where Abraham Lincoln lectured. Didn't like subways or rush and roar of New York.

125 After law school, came back to Asheville; "That was just good sense." His mentor at NYU Law School was Wall Street lawyer Kenneth Royall, Secretary of War under Harry Truman and formerly from North Carolina. Description of makeup of student body at NYU. "Never a hillbilly. They had never seen anybody like me." Royall offered him job. Declined it to return to Asheville in 1954.

148 Recollections of some NYU classmates.

172 Didn't hear much about politics during this period. Army-McCarthy hearings were going on during early part of his time at law school. Root-Tilden students spent evenings each week listening to noted lawyers, many of them in politics.

199 Had a scholarship to go to England. Could not get money ready in time to go. By the time he did, opportunity had passed. Took the N.C. Bar Examination. Borrowed notes from lawyer in Franklin. Passed the first time.

221 First brush with politics was in college. Was president of student body and editor of student newspaper. Students registered to vote and went to precinct meeting. Anecdote about precinct chairman who controlled meeting to shut out the voice of the students. "I learned some politics that day. He ran that meeting. He saw what was going on and he took care of it."

243 Active in Young Democrats Club. In 1960, helped Don Elias, political boss of western North Carolina, in Malcolm Seawell's gubernatorial campaign. Elias was publisher of Asheville newspaper. Seawell lost. "Terry Sanford called me and he said he would like for me to kill some of those snakes I kicked up."

269 His law firm was not political. Shortly after Hyde came he was reprimanded by senior partner because of a political speech he made. He told him he would not be told what to say in his politics. Old firm was Harkins and Van Winkle. Harkins was gone. Had been general counsel for Masonic Order. Harkins and Van Winkle were probably both Republicans.

303 Asheville politics. City controlled by the Democrats. Elias' influence was throughout the congressional district.

321 Anecdote about experience in Graham County during Seawell's campaign. Local man refused a free soft drink saying, "No son, I wouldn't want to be obligated to you." Sanford carried second primary.

330 Sanford's support was largely support of followers of former Governor Kerr Scott. Charlie Sutton and Oscar Ledford were old Scott supporters.

344 Legacy of Kerr Scott was help for small farmers and folks in rural areas, "the Branch-Head boys." He stood for "improving country roads so they could get out."

351 Race as an issue in the western part of the state in 1960 election? "It didn't make that much difference."

364 Was elected to the N.C. Senate in 1964. Recollection of 1965 fight to kill the Speaker Ban Law. Hyde and others collected signatures of 24 members of Senate to repeal law. Could not get 25 signatures. Thought could get lone Republican in Senate to go along. Never could get him. Lt. Gov. Bob Scott would have broken tie.

390 Special session for Speaker Ban. Gov. Dan Moore called him and asked him to support bill that "gutted" the bill. Moore's legislation would not be outright repeal, which Hyde favored, but law was eventually declared unconstitutional. "It was a terrible thing in my opinion."

399 His senate district was Buncombe, Haywood and Transylvania counties. Was a solid Democratic district. Buncombe and Haywood were solid Democratic counties.

409 The 1965 General Assembly had one Republican in Senate and about eight in the House. Republicans were not given much consideration. "There was no giving, there was no taking. You just ran it."

421 Hyde was solid Dan Moore supporter. "He swore me in to practice law." Not much of political contest in the mountains.

431 Description of N.C. senate. One Republican, no black members, one woman (Martha Evans from Charlotte). Mostly male white.

439 Power in senate was in lieutenant governor. Sen. Tom White of Kinston was "the force" in the senate. Sen. Frank Forsyth of Cherokee County also was powerful. Sen. Ralph Scott was "listened to." Sen. Lindsay Warren was "listened to."

456 Senate was mostly conservative, Democratically controlled. Battles were over East Carolina Medical School. Expansion of university to Charlotte. Hyde and Sen. Tom White opposed Charlotte expansion because cost expanded from \$3 million to \$13 million.

478 Anecdote about operation of the "Super Subcommittee" composed of 27 members. "It ran things. It ran the money." He organized a group of 14 members to vote as a bloc. "We got together on what we would support." After session, he and Lacy Thornburg, also a legislator, sent Sen. White a copy of Machiavelli's The Prince. White had not heard of the book. Hyde told him, "Tom, you are the Prince."

516 Returned to legislature in 1973 (elected in 1972). Saw election of Jim Holshouser as "isolated event" in context of political change.

525 Did not recognize the change in politics in North Carolina. First noticed political change in election of 1994, primarily from focused political interests such as the Christian Coalition and those opposed to gun laws. "I could see that." Said he could not predict it ahead of time.

544 Sees the media and organized letter writing to legislators is overwhelming legislators, "people who won't stand up."

550 Did not see much change between 1965 and 1973. More change when he returned to legislature in 1991. The lieutenant governor's powers had been taken from him. Hyde changed his mind about the veto. Had previously opposed it. "I could see there was too much power in legislature if they got together to fight the governor."

568 Unhappy with public education in North Carolina. Believes the legislature overspent in the 1980s. "We walked into deficit of \$1.2 million (in 1991). That was brought about by the actions of that legislature."

582 Doesn't know what brought about change in spending practices of legislature. "Some where along the years, they got the idea to spend whatever

you got." Conservatism of the 1960s, where budgets balanced with margin of safety, was forgotten.

(End of Tape 1)

(Begin Side A of Tape 2)

10 Does not believe that voters particularly aware of the "overspending" that he criticizes legislature for.

28 Saw less respect for fundamental rights and knowledge of law in legislature. Attributes that to fewer lawyers in the General Assembly.

61 Believes that the media, political action groups and lobbyists are going to have greater impact on legislature in the future.

67 Doesn't see the shift as one of a political party realignment as much as the effect of special interests groups. "They want the perfect democracy. They want an electronic town hall where everybody votes when anything comes up."

77 Believes there is weakening of partisanship, "which I think is bad for this country." Wants strong two-party system where one party keeps the other straight.

97 Returns to concerns about "failure in public instruction" where he believes system is misunderstanding the equal rights of individuals to mean equal ability.

148 Considers ERA Movement in early 1970s, in which he as quite active, as a forerunner to special interest politics of recent years. Expresses concern about initiative and referendum. "It's mob rule." Believes in representative government.

187 Believes the referendum of lottery is unconstitutional.

191 Believes political parties have lost influence. Recalled power of precinct chairman when these party functionaries had ability to distribute state jobs.

213 The decline of power has been gradual, he believes, and not just with political parties, but other civic organizations too.

224 Returned to short discussion of Terry Sanford and his legacy in North Carolina. Cited education, community colleges and general economy, "but that is hard to pin down."

242 Effect of Dan Moore's administration on Sanford programs. Believes Dan Moore did a good job in appointment of judges. His administration "just kind of held the government together."

265 The 1965 legislature was looking for governor for new things, "and it didn't happen."

276 Reflects on future of Democratic Party. Believes Democrats in North Carolina will ignore the national party "and step out on its own." The party will revive through organization. Doesn't know how party will handle "public information." Believes party leaders believe the national situation caused loss in 1994. Does not know how the party will influence voters at large.

306 Doesn't know how to deal with "splinter groups." Talks specifically about inability to "compromise" with the Christian Coalition on such issues as abortion. "I'm going to stick to what I believe, but that doesn't mean I am going to get elected."

330 Believes the 1994 election was outburst of anger. Believes the media and talk show hosts, like Rush Limbaugh, will affect outcome of elections.

347 Agrees that North Carolina political leaders have lost control of North Carolina. Doesn't know if "old-time" organization will be sufficient to determine outcome of elections. "Party loyalty has gone."

364 Brief discussion of his short term as state Democratic Party chairman. He resigned after 1992 election because of his position in state senate. Said did better with Clinton than thought would do. Believes that Clinton has been good president who has made mistakes. Believes Sanford lost in 1992 because of his heart surgery that occurred during fall campaign.