

Interview number A-0374 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)  
at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special  
Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill. Permission from Cochrane required for  
quotation.

A-374

Interview

with

BETSY LANE COCHRANE

October 23, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

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

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~  
~~The Southern Historical Collection~~  
~~Louis Round Wilson Library~~

Citation of this interview should be as follows:  
"Southern Oral History Program,  
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,  
Wilson Library,  
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 1996 The University of North Carolina

**SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project****TAPE LOG --SEN. BETSY LANE COCHRANE**

Interviewee: SEN. BETSY LANE COCHRANE

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: Oct. 23, 1995

Location: Her home, Advance, NC

Tape No.: 10.23.95-BC (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximate total length 90 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Sen. Betsy Cochrane (Republican, 23rd Senatorial District -- Davidson, Davie and Rowan Counties), the 1995-96 Minority Leader in the North Carolina Senate. Born Jan. 20, 1936, in Asheboro, NC, Cochrane attended the Asheboro public schools, and in 1958 received a B.A. in Early Childhood Education from Meredith College. She subsequently taught elementary school for many years. In the early 1970s, she began her involvement in Republican Party politics, working at the local level in Davie County. In 1980, Cochrane was elected to the NC House, and subsequently served four consecutive terms. In 1985, she was chosen House Minority Leader, the first woman ever to hold a leadership position in the NC General Assembly, and she served in this capacity during both the 1985-86 and 1987-88 terms. In Nov. 1988, Cochrane won a seat in the NC Senate. During the 1993-94 term she served as Senate Minority Whip, and she was selected by the Republican delegation as Senate Minority Leader for the 1995-96 term. No woman had previously held either position. She is thus an important figure in both Republican Party affairs and the evolution of women's political activity across the last several decades.

Substantively, the interview is organized around the following general themes: (1) biographical information and earliest political involvements at the local level, (2) her commitment to the philosophy of Republican Party, and the Party's re-emergence over the last several decades, (3) her experiences in the General Assembly since 1981, particularly as a member of a minority party and also in various leadership roles, and (4) her summary assessments of the Republican Party's prospects, of race relations in NC, and of the NC economy. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion.

Subject

Headings: North Carolina Politics & Government; Women in North Carolina Politics; North Carolina Republican Party; North Carolina Democratic Party; Ronald Reagan; NC Governor Jim Martin; Political Reapportionment in NC since 1980.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

\* closed until Jan 1997  
when open - researcher must obtain interviewee's  
permission to quote from interview

TAPE INDEXCounter Index   Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. ]

- 001            [Opening announcement.]
- 011            Brief biographical sketch, family, and earliest local political activities.
- 035            When and why Cochrane became a Republican (both her parents are lifelong Democrats). Her father's emphasis on fiscal conservatism, individual rights, and limited government. Cochrane felt the Republican Party offered an excellent match for her beliefs.
- 052            She recalls no ramifications, personal or otherwise, of her Republican registration in a very heavily Democratic state. She sought to follow her political beliefs.
- 065            Social protest movements of the 1960s had only a limited impact on her life in North Carolina; she was busy with family and her work as a teacher. She "was not dwelling on" the feminist movement and was not active in such groups as the League of Women Voters, which involvement might have amplified these issues.
- 088            Her earliest political involvements at the local level, particularly in the 1972 gubernatorial campaign of Jim Holshouser. After moving to Davie County in 1973, she became more active in Republican Party affairs. In 1976, she worked actively on behalf of Ronald Reagan in the NC Republican primary. Description of Cochrane's very positive opinion of Ronald Reagan's brand of conservatism.
- 128            Intra-party tension over the 1976 Reagan-Ford divide in the NC Republican Party did not reach Cochrane.
- 144            Attending the 1976 GOP National Convention in Kansas City as a Reagan delegate. How moved she was by Reagan's address at the Convention.
- 170            The beliefs at the center of her political ideology: limited government, and the rights of the individual. Her preference for positive solutions rather than mere criticisms.
- 184            Description of her work as Davie County Republican Party vice-chair [1970s].
- 194            Her work on the state GOP Executive Committee beginning in 1976. Why she "stay[ed] the course" even while the Party was "absorbing loss after loss."
- 217            Participation in the 1978 Helms campaign brought her into contact with Congressional Club field workers and district leaders, but not with the top Club



leadership. Campaigning in Davie County largely involved getting out the County's conservative voters.

- 245 Her recollections of the 1980 election results, which took her to the NC House. Her commitment to Republican philosophy, rather than a fondness for campaigning, carried her through the effort.
- 274 Why she ran for the House. She did not particularly expect to win, but believed that the relatively conservative voters of the County could be better represented.
- 284 Cochrane points to 1980 and Reagan's leadership as a turning point for the GOP; it was then the seeds of the Party's recent successes were sown. The recent election is the "coming to fruition" of Reagan's philosophy of individual rights, limited government, and family values. The NC GOP's fortunes have also been advanced over these years by the emergence of a group of very strong Republican officeholders, including Gov. Jim Martin.
- 330 Contrasts between Jimmy Carter, for example, and Republicans like Ronald Reagan, help explain the shift of traditional southern Democrats to the GOP, initially in the voting booth and later in party registration.
- 358 Her three key issues in her 1980 House race: education, aging, and water. How she has remained involved in these issues subsequently.
- 410 Her first impressions of the General Assembly on arrival in January 1981. The pattern of poor treatment of Republican officeholders by the Democratic leadership. How, as a new member, she listened, watched, and learned.
- 473 Her re-election to the NC House in 1982.
- 487 Cochrane was asked by NC GOP leaders to consider running for Lt. Governor in 1984; why she chose not to run.
- 536 Her selection in Jan. 1985 as the House Minority Leader. Her view that the Republican Party has given women more opportunities than the Democratic Party.
- 579 The 1984 elections bring a significant increase in the number of GOP members of the House. Details of how she approached NC Republican Party leaders in 1985 as Minority Leader with the argument that the Party needed to begin working even then to improve the Party's future, particularly looking forward to reapportionment in 1991.
- 623 How being a woman factored into her experiences as Minority Leader. NC House Speaker Liston Ramsey's leadership style.
- 657 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 10.23.95-BC]

- 007 Further details of the relationship with the Democratic House leadership.
- 013 A range of experiences for Cochrane in 1988, beginning with her choice to leave the House and to seek a seat in the NC Senate.
- 036 Upbeat mood of the GOP leadership after the 1988 elections.
- 042 Her experiences as a member of the 1988 national Republican Party Platform Committee.
- 083 Her involvement in the 1989 elevation of Joe Mavretic as NC House Speaker.
- 113 Cochrane's experiences as a major NC GOP figure, including as NC Senate Minority Whip in the 1993-94 term and Senate Minority Leader in the 1995 session.
- 165 Further reflections on the evolution of women's political activity in NC; she feels that her party affiliation has had a much greater impact than her gender on her experiences. "So far, being a woman has not been the problem. Being a Republican [in a Democrat-controlled general assembly] has been the problem."
- 193 Persons whom Cochrane has admired as political figures. Additionally, Cochrane's respect for early women Republican pioneers who gamely sought, and occasionally won, local political offices.
- 232 She did not feel strongly about the Equal Rights Amendment, and doubted its putative efficacy.
- 249 Cochrane has felt no particular tension concerning the fiscal conservatism/cultural conservatism divide in the GOP. "I have never thought of myself as being of one group and not of another. I am first and foremost a Republican."
- 298 Her assessment of GOP prospects in NC: "We honestly believe that we can take over the [NC] Senate in 1996 if we do not have any catastrophe at the national level.... If there is nothing like that we really feel confident we are going to become the dominant party in the General Assembly."
- 347 Her views of NC reapportionment since 1980. Her view of the impact of increasing number of majority-minority districts on recent Republican successes: a significant factor, but certainly not the decisive one.
- 420 Her view of the evolution of race relations in NC over the years. Her conviction that government assistance has not advanced African American fortunes.
- 451 Cochrane's thoughts on the state's economic condition and future prospects. Government can supply education and training through junior colleges and universities, but initiative, the right attitude, and entrepreneurial spirit are essential.

- 537           Cochrane's final thoughts. The tremendous satisfactions of public service; the Smart Start program as one example where GOP influence has helped shape the program in a positive, constructive fashion; how current "welfare reform" strategies closely mirror ideas suggested much earlier by the GOP but rejected at the time by the Democratic majority, an example of the Republican Party's fidelity to its core ideology; and her hoped that her political service has helped open the way for still more women in the future.
- 673           [End of Side B. End of interview.]