

Voices from the Past

Governorship and Politics in Idaho

Interviewee: Robert E. Smylie

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Tape #14

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An interview with former governor Robert Eben Smylie. Interviewer is Judy Austin of Idaho State Historical Society.

JA: This interview with former governor, Robert Smylie of Idaho is being conducted March 10th 1982 at the Idaho State Library and Archive in Boise. Questions were generally prepared by Harold Forbush of the Upper Snake River Valley Historical Society. The interviewer is Judy Austin of the Idaho State Historical Society. Governor Smylie, would you begin by giving us your full name and where and when you were born?

RS: Well my name is Robert E. for Eben Smylie. I was born at Marcus in Cheroot County Iowa in 1914 October 31.

JA: Where were your mother and father from and what were their names?

RS: My father's name was Lorne Francis Smylie. He was born in Branford Ontario Canada. And my mother's name was Ida May Stevens, Smylie. She was born in Macgregor Iowa. Mother was a descendent of a tribe called the Modes who sailed with William Bradford for Plummet Rock and came across the country through Myriad, Ohio and ended up ultimately on the bluffs of Bob McGregor across the river from Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Father's people were Methodist circuit writers and his father was ordained a minister at the age of sixteen and they came to Iowa in about 1865 I think. Father was born when they were back in Ontario in 1881.

JA: Did your father's family live in Canada long?

RS: About 200 years.

JA: What brought you to Idaho?

RS: I had an auntie and uncle out here in Caldwell. He was I guess you will say a pioneer physician in Caldwell, he came there in 1907. And I came out here in 1934 to go to college.

JA: At the College of Idaho?

RS: Yes.

JA: From which you graduated then in 1938?

RS: Right.

JA: And I believe that both a debater and football player, in your career?

RS: I did about everything there was to do. Only 400 students there wasn't much competition.

JA: What did you do when you graduated from college?

RS: Well, I tried to organize my affairs so that I could go to law school. I had already decided that I want to go to George Washington University. And this was a kind of a poor time to arrive in Washington than it was the fall of 1938. There was an election going on and so nobody was there unlike the way things are today. And I waited to get into law school until the commencement of the second semester in February in 1939. In the mean time I'd managed to get a job as a capital policeman and did that for six great months and worked for Covington Burling, a law firm in Washington for the rest of the time I was in law school.

JA: Did you then stay in Washington or come back to Idaho?

RS: There was an event that occurred and everybody got invited to a war. And so I decided early on that the draft board had my number and when it came up I would go do what I was required to do. The reason for that being that I was getting fairly close to graduating from law school and I thought that if I had that behind me before I went well it will make simpler when I came home. Early on about 1940 decided that it wasn't a question of whether we were going to get that war but it was a question of when. And I'd been going to summer school and taking as much in a way of courses that I could. I plan and managed beat them to the dry and got my degree in June of 1942 and Uncle Sam came calling.

JA: What did you do when you got out of military?

RS: Well, I had been working at Covington Burling which is, I guess you'd call a law mill as what is against the law apparently in those it was kind of small they only had about 50 lawyers. But they have 400 now. But I had been working there and as a matter of fact had been admitted to the bar about nine or ten months before I graduated from the university - and was doing a full time lawyer's work before I went to the service. I came back to Covington Berlin and was with them for about four or five months and decided the guys that had been there all through the war and sons and nephews and cousins and uncles, there were too many and so I decided to go out on my own. Then practice law for about four-five months literally out of a telephone booth in Washington. And 1946 late in December Elshie called me up and asked me if I would like to be Assistant Attorney General of Idaho and I...

JA: He was at that time Attorney General?

RS: Yes, but he was going to be in 1947. And I said yes after some consideration and Christmas week between Christmas and New Year Lucille and I rode to Boise.

JA: Now I was about to ask you about your seal. Some point in there you got married I believe?

RS: Yes, this is a – if you can't marry your boss's daughter why you marry his secretary. Lucille was Judge Covington's secretary in the law firm and we got to have lunch together and that sort of thing and in due course time ran on. She in the mean time had gone to Rio to be a secretary in the embassy in Rio de Janeiro during the war and came back in 1943 and we were married on 4th of December 1943 that was a Saturday afternoon and the only time they had a vacancy at the little church around the corner was quarter after four in the afternoon.

JA: That is when you were married?

RS: Yeah and we were married down there.

JA: You have at least two sons?

RS: Yes both of our boys are adopted; one is Richard William who is now thirty-two years old and Richard Stevens who is twenty-seven.

JA: Do they still live in this area?

RS: Yes they both live in Boise. Bill, that is Robert William, works for Hewlett Packer here in Boise and Richard Stevens, Steve is a social studies teacher at Prima Junior High School in Boise.

JA: So you came back to Boise then for the beginning of 1947 to go and work for Elshie?

RS: Ah... Was admitted to the bar on the 7th of January of that year and sworn into the system attorney general that afternoon.

JA: What were your particular assignments as an assistant attorney general? Did you focus on one particular?

RS: Well, the attorney general's office in those days was like the state government, happily something less than it is now. And I think there were only four of us in the office so being an all purpose gentleman while you did almost everything. I ended up working for the department of finance, the department of agriculture, serving pretty much as chief deputy because Mr. Elshie had a very bad case of the asthma and was often incapacitated. And in that capacity I used to follow his work on the land board and got to be more or less console to the governor who was then Dr. C. A. Robins. And I think it was in November after the death of his father and mother both within two months time Mr. Elshie himself passed away and there was a vacancy in the office of attorney general. I'd always thought that the reason I was appointed was because it only paid four-thousand dollars and there wasn't really much competition for the job, so Dr. Robins who would build some faith in me during our association over the year appointed me attorney general in November of 1947.

JA: And then you ran for re-election?

RS: I ran for re-election in 1950 and then as I guess occasionally happens there got to be some people around who thought maybe I have to be governor and I began to think about that.

JA: Had you intended to get into campaign type politics when you took the job in Idaho originally?

RS: Well, one evening in 1936 when the returns of the elections were coming in at the call to news tribute at Caldwell News Tribune, at Caldwell and Barzilla Clark was being elected governor and Ben Rocks was being defeated for the senate. A bunch of us were sitting down there listening to the returns when they came over the associated press tele printer and I explain to some people how to get yourself elected governor of Idaho that evening. I really didn't intend at that point in time to do it but I've always had interest in public life, as a matter of fact if Elsa hadn't died I had my plans all laid to go into practice sometime in 1948.

JA: And then perhaps look further down the road.

RS: Later, but is like in a mining count when you draw cards in the poker game you play the hand.

JA: While you have it. In your years as attorney general is there anything specific that stands out as either something was particular significant while it was going on or something you feel especially pleased to have had happen under your attorney generalship?

RS: Well, I think the most interesting law suit we had in those years was probably a raid case with the Mountain Bell Telephone Company, we forced the bell system to disgorge about four million dollars and over charges that I think is the only case against the bell system since 1926 where that has occurred it was a fun case simply because it was always plowing new ground. And the rest of those years I remember is years of administration, I earlier on had the conviction that the way to be a success as an attorney general is to be a good attorney general in a professional sort of way. And leave the politics to somebody else who was more adequately trained in that field. And actually try affirmatively not to use the office in a political way as a consequence I think I build up a very great degree of trust on both sides of the political fence - with the leadership of the parties and with members of the legislature and others around the state.

JA: Which would then stand you in good step during those limits?

RS: As it turned out it did. Yes.

JA: Not to sound flip, since you had stayed out of politics and done the administering as much as possible during your years as attorney general, how come you then took off and do it clearly in a more political office?

RS: Well, there was a fellow named Ken Woods who was then a publisher and editor of the Priest River Times in Priest River Idaho. And sometime early in 1953 or late in 1952 he wrote a front page editorial saying that I should be governor. I didn't know it was coming, as a matter of fact three people sent it to me before I saw the newspaper. And this had come about in part by reason of the fact that I had been helpful in getting the financing put together for the outlet control structure Priest Lake, which stabilized the beaches through the summer season up there. And I had stood in for Governor Jordan at the ground breaking ceremony of the Falls Dams Pondera River which now in Ponds Lake Pondera. For some strange reason, business in the office and otherwise, I had spent a good deal of time in those five northern counties, and I suppose that's when Woods got the idea probably didn't hear it at all he use to live in Sheldon, Iowa and he thought an Iowa boy was a pretty special thing.

JA: Well, I should think not. Also the fact that a south based Idaho governor was willing to come to north Idaho I suspect helped.

RS: Well, it was really funny one of the places that you never seem to get to in those days was eastern Idaho. I am talking about Rexburg; I think I've been attorney general for four and half years or five before I ever got to Rexburg on business. And for some reason or other there was a multitude of occasions when business took me north of Moscow.

JA: Was north Idaho then heavily democratic?

RS: Yes I would say so; Latah County Moscow was generally regarded as a republican county by reasonably narrow margin. And Bonner County was marginal but on and off Republican. Boundary County was about the same, the rest of them I'd say you'd have to list as pretty heavily democratic.

JA: So you had become somewhat accidentally quite visible in the area control by a party that isn't yours?

RS: Yes that is right.

JA: Did you have primary opposition in 1954?

RS: Yes, former congressman, John Sanbern from Hagerman, ran against me and Mayor of Cuerdenline, Larry Garner. And we developed a campaign strategy that was based on carrying six of the ten northern Counties in the primary and figured out later on that, that was the key to winning it was the mayor of Cuerdenline on the ticket we did carry seven of the ten northern Counties.

JA: Not Kootenai I presumed?

RS: We run even in Kootenai. Nobody is a prophet in his own land you know.

JA: What was your margin in the primary?

RS: Well, as I remember it was in the order of twenty five, twenty one –seventeen. That sort of thing; it was pretty firm margin by the billing standards of those days. I remember being over about eleven fifteen or eleven thirty in the evening, so it couldn't have taken too long to count because they were doing it manually in those days.

JA: Who is you're [inaudible] in the general election?

RS: A gentleman named Clark Hamilton who was a former state senator who was a merchant in Weaser. And he had had primary opposition in the person of former governor Charles Gusset and two other names that I don't at the moment off the top my head recall. But he won in a narrow victory and was then the democratic nominee.

JA: Was there also a senate race that year in other words was there state wide races I should know of?

RS: Ah, just a moment let me think no there was not a senatorial race that year, there was the two congress men who were elected and the governorship.

JA: So yours was clearly the, the significant race?

RS: Yes it was the most visible race and it was the only state wide race other than the other constitutional offices.

JA: What was your margin in the general election?

RS: Fifty four forty six in percentages I can't tell you the numbers without going to the abstracts.

JA: Anything out of the ordinary about where the votes came from in terms of party distribution of the election ballots?

RS: We came within forty votes of carrying Bounty County which...

JA: That will be out of the ordinary?

RS: Yes, that was regarded then as achievement. And we didn't lose Newburg County as heavily as we thought we would. We lost Shoshone, Carey, Kootenai, run even in Benewah and the big margin was in Eider Canyon County. I carried Canyon County by about seventy one percent and Ada by sixty-five.

JA: Prophets don't always lose at home?

RS: No.

JA: If you don't mind let me skip ahead and ask you a little bit about the other three gubernatorial campaigns as long as we discuss them?

RS: Alright.

JA: And I think perhaps I will simply let you comment as you would about what was unusual or remarkable about the fifty-eight, sixty-two and I guess sixty-six campaigns since the elections.

RS: Well there were fifty-eight campaign was the first time that any one of the parties in Idaho had espoused organized gambling as a campaign platform. Although Senator Deere, Ale Deere from Bonner County who was their candidate at that time did pretty well try to get lost from the issue as the general election got closer. But I think the over riding issue is that there was a recession, a recession in nineteen fifty-eight pertaining a dollar was 25 cent a hundred weight and it was difficult economic times. That is the election I won by fifty point one percent of the votes. It was four o'clock in the morning as a matter of fact the statesman went to bed without having the winner on his front page. And I was the only republican elected in the state, where election that year, senator Devosh Act was re-elected. I think that was the year the congress man Barge was defeated and two-third of both houses of the legislature was democratic after the fifty-eight election. So there had been a big wind in the willows that night.

JA: Yes indeed and you come out lucky I suspect?

RS: The one side light on the thing the right to work initiative was on was on the ballot. And it was blowing republicans down every which way. I had taken a position. I didn't against the fore right to work really. I just simply said I was going vote against the initiative in part at least I don't believe in the initiative, but I think the legislative process will stand on its two feet not have an excuse to go to the people in phony elections. But it was widely perceived that I was against the right to work legislation which I was and I think that was one of the reasons that I survived the holocaust.

JA: There are lessons to be learned in that in 1982 by any chance?

RS: Well, the right to work is one of those issues that is, without which issue. It's like some of these people about abortion and that sort of thing. You could be right on ninety-nine issues and wrong on that one and that burns the barn out. They are just not reasonable about it; I don't know how strong the people feel but I have a notion that most of the people out here who had been members of unions, or are members of unions, will see the support of right to work legislation as a vote against them and feel fairly strongly about it that it will remain to be seen. I'm too far out of the ballgame not having any really informed judgment.

JA: What happened in 1962 in the presidential election?

RS: Well, in 1962 against three other opponents, a fellow named Vernon Smith, who was a Boise lawyer, was nominated as the democratic candidate. He had been Senator Durious Campaign Manager in 1958. And he hung on the gambling issue to the bitter end as a strong proponent of open gambling. And this was going to solve all manner of economic woes, and was going to solve all manner of needs for financing for education, and this and that. And that was his downfall. I had a notion simply because the so called bible belt, never seem to be excited about moral legislation and gambling and things like that and in an election as they are really rhetorical. I had a notion that finally the perfection of Vernon Smith as a man came through and that had much to do with the outcome as the issues really. I of course had to run on a record to become a governor for eight years and be asking for four more without happen to answer for all your sins and all of your accomplishments. But the accomplishments was then very substantial by then and we won by the biggest margin and I think the governor won by up to that time that was the biggest margin that a senator had that year.

JA: Why don't we hold off on sixty-six till they get to the end of the discussion as your years as governor.

RS: Ok.

JA: Let me ask, first if you came into office were there any particular expectations or broad things you wish to accomplish?

RS: Ah, yes I am glad you asked that question because one of things I've always thought is that nobody is, ought to really, ought to be governor without having a pretty well established agenda of why. I... starting in February of 1954, we had isolated without the benefit any formal polling or any of that sort of thing - four issues that we thought were of some importance and I decided that the only way to really test those out was to go as public as you could with them. Political campaign seemed in those days to get a little better coverage than they do now in depth and as a consequent position paper attracted some attention. I made four major speeches that I manufactured the forum for. One was a junior high school PTA meeting in the afternoon and call and that one was about education. And one was a meeting of a service club in Fileler and that was about water. And one was Idaho State College business fraternity meeting in a Chinese restaurant and Pocatello that was about economic development. One was in McCall in some sort of a meeting and it was about environmental concern, parks, recreation, fishing, wildlife and that sort of thing. And as the campaign developed and when we finally got around the place where we had enough money to do some polling this was after the primary. It came once loud and clear that fifty-seven percent of the people thought more money for education was the most important issue before the electorate. And so we started coming down early on what was then regarded somewhat revolutionary by the more conservative members on my party and that was full funding for the formula for public school education. We won and we did it.

JA: It is a good revolution I think. Did you think about anything about the other three speeches that they make promises as well?

RS: Well yes, but anything that hit fifty percent in terms of voters identifying and it is their first item of concern, if your polling sample is anywhere as near accurate and most of these professional polling operations I would think hit within a margin of five-percent. Well that was the most fifty-six this clearly was a bill and red taped and the others were in descending order had lost of interest but no where is as near as common denominator thing working on it. And education was obviously the common denominator of the fifty-four election. And Idaho is always interested in water but strangely enough that issue ranked third in that fifty-four poll, economic development and tourism that sort of thing. My plan was to organize a department of congress and development which we did. And funded and get going and this apparently struck a good note.

JA: Somebody is going to do something concrete.

RS: Yeah.

JA: Were there any real surprises when you got into the governorship about how the office works and about relationships with the legislature about anything else?

RS: Well no, of course I think there was a great concern, not really concern, but a wait and see attitude on the part of what you might call a senior business community generally and the gray beards in the party, this is understandable as far as I was concerned because I cross my fortieth birthday less than two weeks before I was elected governor. There was a tendency to keep being concerned about that kid downstairs. I think the first message on the state of the state, which I think is one of the really great state papers of the state to the legislature of nineteen fifty-five, that and the budget message together, that pretty well set out guidelines that lasted twelve years and that tended to cure up some of the illness then they quit being as worried as they were surprised. And so I finally told Woolly Burns who was the state Chairman he was from Idaho Falls and I think he been surprised too. But I told him I was not going to give in until 15 of July I would surprised and then anybody was surprised after that way it was going to be too late.

JA: Their problem and not yours anymore?

RS: Yeah.

JA: What particularly stands out in that first four years term to you, either good or bad?

RS: Well, this will strike a controversial note but the fiscal gambles which my predecessors left in office left the government, was the principle concerned and getting that cured up.

JA: And your predecessors in office?

RS: Was Governor Jordan. It is not widely known but we were registering warrants when I took office. And the budget was in the red.

JA: Which was not only illegal but unconstitutional?

RS: Exactly, and the state couldn't meet its payroll on the 1st of January without registering warrant.

JA: Ouch.

RS: The two thousand dollar number, it wasn't a big deficit but it required quick planning while we managed to bring the cash flow back into balance by the 1st of February to establish reasonable margin of movement by the 1st of March. And in the mean time the legislature had come and gone and we raised taxes twenty-five percent in order to close. The problem was that the government was spending under the last Jordan budget about fifty million dollars on the revenue base that produced forty million.

JA: Ooo.

RS: And so we had to go find ten million dollars right fast. In the first two years 1955, '57, we only spent forty-nine point nine million against two hundred thousand under what the last Jordan budget was. And that way we closed on it by ninety fifty-seven while we had some margin. But I don't think we close 1957 for not more than by four- five hundred thousand to spare. But it was one of the things that I was always proud of is that we never had any surplus and we didn't ever run red.

JA: John Corellet used to tell me that the revenue projection during your administration consist of if you putting your feet up and thinking for a while and coming up with the figure, which was always extraordinarily accurate.

RS: Well that sounds like Corellet over-simplification and very complimentary. It not really true; I used to tell the tax collector and the auditor's office, the fellow in the auditor's office then did this sort of thing was Lewis Bediganida and I use to tell him and the budget director I told them to bring me hard figures. I told them that I didn't pay them to be optimists or pessimists. And I said you let me crack the economics into it. I had developed machinery that turned out to be a pretty accurate basis for estimating not necessarily how the economy was going but how people felt about their money, which tells you a good deal about what is going on. And this was by comparing bottle count and a dollar count in the state legatorial spensory.

JA: Ooo.

RS: If they were imperial our lines things was growing on pretty even keel. If the bottle count started to descend and the dollar count to up they were buying better booze. If it was the reverse, they were feeling bad and were down grade in their purchases. There will be more bottles sold and less money and it kind of a simple equation but it seems to work.

JA: It is particularly interesting that it works in a state in which great many people don't drink.

RS: Yeah.

JA: Fascinating.

RS: It a discretionary spending I think is what you talking about.

JA: Yeah and liquor is one example.

RS: There will be others except it on of which we had very close control and I can get after Mr. Charles had been superintended in the dispensary for a few years, few months actually. I can get months and figures by like about the fourth day. And that made the prognostication much easier. The only time that we run even close I can even remember what year it was but I think in 1961-63 budget I thought they've had over spend them. The available revenues by about five percent that turned out that it was almost exactly right but I just imposed the mandatory five percent hold back on every appropriation from the beginning of the biannual and that caused a lot of strain and pain and much screeching in a few universities.

JA: I'm sure it did.

RS: But anyway we ended in the black.

JA: Would you say it gone back to the biannual budgeting?

RS: Yes, very simple reason, this business of annual budgeting, I don't know how much money is spent in putting those numbers together. For a legislature that by the very nature of the organization doesn't have all that much equipment to digest it. And maybe you get better physical control but I doubt it. And it also allows the pressure groups to have two shots at the pot instead of just one which is never wise. But I think that by annual budgeting for instance in the Universities it will May of this year before the administrative staffs of the universities know how much money they are going to have to play with in order to recruit people. Well in most, it may not be true in this market because PhD's are pretty much dime-a-dozen these days. But anybody you want to hire is normally all gone by the first of May and I think having at least fourteen months free time in between might be helpful administrators of the institutions of higher education at least.

JA: You only have to face that crunch every other year?

RS: Yes that is right, because they have to make a contract before they know what money there is.

JA: What else happened? What did you learn about relationships between the governor and the legislature, generally and you in particular?

RS: Well, I thought I will just operate on the theory that if the legislature wasn't complaining about the man downstairs then you probably weren't doing your job. Which is to say in a different sort of way that it's important I believe, for the chief executive to have a strong agenda of things to do and problems to solve, and then to be very determined about doing it, in other words to furnish exceptionally strong leadership. The legislature is supposed to dispose, not propose, and they are not supposed to get themselves involved in executive decisions those ought to be left to the place where article four section five of the constitution leaves it, and that is in the governor's office. But that presupposes the governor is willing to do both his leadership and fiscal chores.

JA: In the years in which you were governor, how many times did you face legislature controlled by the other party, obviously in fifty-nine sixty?

RS: In fifty-seven the senate was divided and in fifty-nine both houses were democratic by two-thirds majority. Those were the only times but always in both houses we had a reasonably narrow republican majority, for instance two votes in the state set up was normally our margin.

JA: So there had to be some kind of working relationship between the two the parties if anything were going to published?

RS: Oh yes, in 1959, I had regular meetings as a matter of fact once a day with both the democratic leadership in both houses and with the republican leadership in both houses separately. As a general proposition, if it seems to me that it will be advantageous I get them together in my office. And I try to keep my office as a sort of behind the order place, you know it was alright to be in the cathedral, but you had to get to the special place, they sometimes are more reasonable in the governor's office than they were upstairs.

JA: Which meant that you were definitely providing some kind of influence on seeing that the legislative process kept going as well as the executives?

RS: Well, it is all well and good to be hard nosed about things but politics is the art of the possible and you move toward what should be, to what can be, which involves compromising adjustment and this and that the next thing and sometimes easier. And not comfortable and not easy to do but it's a very necessary part of process of being free in my estimation. And so you can really be partners in hard land sense of the word. You always have to remember where your friends are but you keep remembering where your friends are and don't be unduly partisan about it, ultimately you have some friends who used to be partisans.

JA: And may in some ways be more useful friends than the ones you started out?

RS: Yes that is right. I had exceptionally good relationships with the leaders of the appropriation and finance sections of the 1959 legislature. They were both gentlemen from Newburg County, Mr. James Manroll in the house and senator Howard Hefting in the senate. And we had just decided that we will keep the railway running whether the two parties did or not.

JA: Moment where I would like to transfer all three of you down to the legislature right now.

RS: Well, I think there has been some excessive partnership of both upstairs and down in the section.

JA: What was your relationship generally with the other constitutional officers? I was there in 1959 to '63 you were the only republican in the group?

RS: Well, Mr. Benson who was Attorney general had a difficult situation and I just never did have any relationships with him because it was a sort of impossibility. I was the long wall and the state auditor Mr. Joe Williams and with the others Mr. Angel King, Miss Mowen although I pretty well tried to keep them doing what they were supposed to be doing and not something else. But there again is a function of strong leadership.

JA: Were you lieutenant governor throughout your three terms of the same party?

RS: In 1955 to '59, the lieutenant governor was a republican in my party. Mr. Seal, Mr. Berkley Larson from Firth, Idaho. And then he was defeated in 1958, by then senator Drevlo from Lewis County who was lieutenant governor for the rest of my term.

JA: Both then elected in '62 as well?

RS: Yes.

JA: Ok. How do you feel about lieutenant governor and governor being joint ticket as opposed to being separate officers?

RS: Well, ideally I think you'd like them as a team but the real truth of the matter is that I don't think it makes much difference how you elect them. There ought to be an organized succession in which the people had a voice. Because people do crème airplanes and mountain sides and this that and sort of thing. And it better you should have an elected person than an appointed person. But I don't think anybody will ever be able to figure out what to do with the lieutenant governor or the person who is second in line of succession anymore than the Queen of England really knows what to do with Prince Charles. There is only room for one Hero. And that isn't the lieutenant governor.

JA: And there is a lot of thumb twiddling that goes on?

RS: Well, not necessarily because and the other thing is the ceremonial thing that you spend so much time doing and what is apparently means so much to people you can't substitute it, they don't want somebody else they want you. And unfortunately on many occasions they've contracted with the rotary club, or this or that, and the next thing to do produce you and so you got to get produce or you get renumbered.

JA: Yes, and there is always election out there. What else particularly stands out for you in the twelve years you were governor good and bad? Things you accomplished, frustrations you hit?

RS: Well, I think as it got to January of 1967 and I was thinking about how grateful I was. I didn't have to go out and make that speech on the state of the state. I got to looking back over the messages that have gone before and there really wouldn't have been much I could told them I don't think it was probably time for a change, simply because of the fact that everything the agenda was complete at the end of the sixty-five session.

JA: How very nice to be able to say that about these twelve years. I suspect you are very lucky?

RS: Well some of them were a long time coming. I first asked them for a parks department in 1959 it finally happened in '65.

JA: And then with a little with conniving with them?

RS: Well it wasn't really that, it ah... Mr. Deriamining who was in that year democratic leader in the house and finally apparently either gotten word or concluded that this had gone on long enough. What they really fighting about was fifteen or twenty jobs in the land department were held by democratic and this would have been a terrible thing. I'd assure them and a matter of fact I think we'd had used all of them except a couple who were manifestly unusually corrupt or unusually incapable. And the man in, decided that we were going to get it done so we made a few changes. And what I had suggested that neither hurt nor helped the original concept, but kept the mainland very intact and we did it. But I think that sixty-five sessions probably has to rank as one of the most productive in the history of the state. It fully funded the teacher's retirement system and public impeller's retirement system and acted the sales tax and gave education the money it needed and built about twenty million dollars worth of buildings of the universities. Provided the initial funding for Boise State University; added revenues to the highway fund that permitted very close to completion of the interstate system which is a problem they better face up to about now or else we going to end up with a highway system as shambles. But in general part we are sitting in a building that is built on a mall was enacted in those years. That was another thing I'd got tired of building buildings of thirty-six street and state and town and Municipal Park. And decided that it was time that the state government had home in down town Boise where the eight block capital mall is a result of that concern. I picked Sister Peter James hundred dollars from option on the old sale Alphansis hospital and got the legislature to pick up the tab.

JA: Ha-ha.

RS: Made me an honorary sister of the holy cross.

JA: Surely a unique achievement?

RS: It ought to be that in the judgment as well.

JA: Have you managed to pull up in safety yet?

RS: I am honorary judge with two. I have a degree from Consiga.

JA: Oh marvelous, marvel. You can go anywhere now absolutely? Well the great thirty-eight legislature sort of tied up all these nice loose ends and then came November of 1966. In fact for you there came August in 1966.

RS: Yes that is right.

JA: What happened? Is that a fair question?

RS: Well, yeah it's a fair question. I think I early on apprehended and start talking about what I conceived to be the destructive effects of all crooks and favoritism. And it was descend by the parties that I had something less than an enthusiasm for Senator Golgoth's nomination in 1964. I thought it would be disastrous and it turned out it was. And then I was worse off than I had been for being less than enthusiastic it turns out I was right and that was unforgivable. So in a series of ways I'd alienated a lot of what was then a much stronger right wing of the party than exist at the present I think.

JA: Was it a stronger party generally, as party structure than it is now as well?

RS: Well, I don't think the party structure ever in my time as such or now can produce both. Those are produced by personalities who happened to achieve a relationship that the Spanish would call some particle about politics. I don't think they perceived a candidate for governor as a republican or a democratic. They perceived them as an individual who could be the governor. And the party structures are useful in an organization sort of way. It is a rare occasion I think when you can count on forty-four organizations that turn up x number of votes for each. And believe it will happen.

JA: So by the time you got into it, had you thought about not running in 1966?

RS: Yes, well I made a basic mistake in 1960. Two when senator Divorsa died we were in midstream in a gubernatorial campaign, which I won. And I should have appointed myself to the senate. Instead I appointed Jordan and that was obvious I hadn't arranged when senator Divorsa acted, he was not going to run in '66, I was. That was a basic personal mistake and a basic political mistake.

JA: And the kind of thing you could not in that setting had much time to stop and think about?

RS: Well, we had a poll that showed Vern Smith running ahead of me. Really the decision was not whether we were going to get a new candidate for governor who had roughly two months to organize a total campaign including financing. And that would then be pretty tough to do if we're starting behind and we had to assume I was in a stronger position than the new candidate would be. And it was a very real possibility that Vernon Smith could be governor, well it wouldn't have been all that bad he died within ten months, it was the 1st of January '63.

JA: But you couldn't have known that you see?

RS: I thought the consequences of his ever getting the range of power would have been pretty disastrous for the state and that was one of the things that led me to the direction that was. But all and all I should have been thinking a little bit more of myself than I was.

JA: So in a sense you run in '66 to the hope of holding off conservative forces, I hate to put that I that way?

RS: Well, not necessarily that was, if you were going to stay in public life. I had to have a forum. And this was a forum the only one that was available. And Jordan and off the day after he was elected he was going to run for re-election. And that took that out of the context and I thought for a while really starting a Dawnic Brooklyn against him but would have torn Barns up so.

JA: And I suspect by the time he got well into his senate term you and he were perhaps closer in outlook than you would have been when he was a governor.

RS: Well, as a matter of fact he had the same view as senator Goldwiorer in 1964 as I did, he just didn't say it. It may have been lack of courage or I don't know. Or maybe closer apprehension of what kind of people there were out here in the bushes. Because they were organized to defeat him in 1972 if he hadn't stepped down. And he knew it and that is why he stepped down.

JA: Well, that makes a good deal of sense. Was your loss in the primary essentially an ideological loss?

RS: That plus the fact that, I forgot who said it, but there is a lot of good sense of American politics and history in what somebody called the patient wisdom of the people. And it had probably been about long enough. But the fact that the agenda was complete there was a message there that I didn't read. I had done about all that I could do. And they probably knew it and I didn't; those sorts of things. And after twelve years while there is a whole generation of politicians that are frustrated governors.

JA: Just waiting.

RS: Yeah. And don't really enjoy being deprived of the possibility of getting defeated.

JA: You run one more campaign '72.

RS: Yeah 1972.

JA: Which everybody ran for senate I think?

RS: Well, somebody asked me once why I did that and said well, it's like a lot of other things you just have to know the answer, so I found out.

JA: Which was no, unfortunately...

RS: Yeah.

JA: Is this the only time you've ever run legislature. Maybe you enjoyed being an administrator.

RS: Well, I would rather have been governor of Idaho than the United States senator.

JA: Because you enjoy the administrative?

RS: Yeah. Well, I think it's being in the senate for fifty years like Boreal was; he can look at Arrow rack Dam from wherever he is, and he can regard that as a physical achievement. There are miles of highways, at least hundred buildings.

JA: Lots of educated kids.

RS: That I can put my hands on those I things I helped to do if I didn't do them and the sense of achievement is much greater I think than a bunch of oratorio empty words and even worlds most exclusive men's club.

JA: Ok. While you were a governor, you were active in a national level and indeed before you were governor, in Republican Party politics, but also in organizing governors to be a voice for themselves particularly in the west?

RS: Well, this came about largely because of my conviction, which was born in 1960, as a result of horrendous republican defeat in 1958, nationally as well as in Idaho. We ended up with thirteen governor's nation wide. I think, I can remember who run against him, but David Lawrence had not been governor of Pennsylvania in 1960; John Kennedy would have been elected President.

JA: He carried Kennedy than the other way round.

RS: Right and it is one of the things they forgot about Kennedy was the legend built that he was among the already President when he was first elected.

JA: So not one of those four o'clock in the morning we don't go to bed without knowing the situation?

RS: That is right. As a matter fact it was ten the next day. But the whole, I perceive that we have to have some machinery for one help and make sure that we had good candidates for the gubernatorial offices. And do pick our targets do a modest amount of training. We put together national committee kind of an ad hoc group composed of Governor Rockefeller, Governor Scranton, myself, Governor Lao from Colorado—no Lao wasn't in it yet. Forgot who the other one was oh, Governor Knight in California. And this was to design and pick people, not to go in a state to pick people, but to assist them and recruiting guys if we could who might be electible. And then we also had what we called training not training schools but training conferences where we talked about some of the nitty-gritty of running campaigns and that sort of thing. And phenomenal number of people got nominated for governor without really knowing how to run a gubernatorial state wide campaign their legislatures, or this or that, or the next thing, and it all together a different ball game. And this republican governors association was designed to cure that up. It was formalized at the 1963 national governor's conference in Miami Beach and I was elected the first chairman and served in that capacity till I left office.

JA: How active is the Republican Governors Association now, do you know?

RS: Quite ah, you don't hear much about it because it doesn't engage in all these wild fund raising campaigns with houses in it committees for the preservation incumbency do. But it's been effective I think or one the reason you don't have a fund raising thing is that it's pretty difficult organize a national fun constituency for a governor of South Dakota for instance.

JA: You can tell people how to go about setting up the mechanisms, but you can do it yourself for them?

RS: And how effective that was is that by 1966 in that election, we elected 26 governors.

JA: That's pretty effective.

RS: By that time we had an office in Washington and they still do in the national committee country our offices back there. And out of that also grew the republican coordinating committee and which is now disbanded, but it was designed to be an out office sounding board for the senate of the house to get policy papers and try to establish party positions that were a consensus sort of thing. They never really made much noise simply because consensus seldom does. But they were useful.

JA: Would it be possible for such an organization given what happened in the Republican Party in the last year to make it in the last few months in fact with what I sense as perhaps

some widening splits, as Reagan has been more challenge one more issue in congress. Would it be possible for that kind of coordinating committee to even exist now?

RS: I doubt it simply because of the fact that republican policy is made by Ronald Reagan. At the moment that is what the people decided not the party.

JA: Yes. I understand that very well.

RS: And unless he is willing to advocate part of that, which I don't apprehend he his. While the coordinating committee the democratic ought to have one so that they could walk in 17 different directions at the same time like Don Keota's horse.

JA: Yes.

RS: But as long as there is a central policy making fountain which the white designed in our system of government to be. Then a coordinating committee or something like that tends to serve a useful purpose. And it also tends to sort of mellow the varying wings of people opinion. Hugh Scott, for instance, the senator from Pennsylvania very seldom thought along the same lines of Senator Jackson, from Illinois. But in that coordinating committee you've got arrive and it was composed of the leadership of this house of senate President Ford was there and all of the ex-former candidates for President Governor Dale, Mr. Nixon and this presented a pretty basic forum for discussion. I think there were five governors on it and I was a member of the committee for all the years that it existed.

JA: And a wide spectrum.

RS: Yes.

JA: Obvious a wide spectrum. Aside from running for the senate in 1972, what have you done to keep yourself occupied since January '67?

RS: Well, I have been asked oh, sometime in early sixties to become a board member of the college of Idaho and had declined on the basis that I thought there was a clear conflict of interest between being a member of the board of trustees and the private institution of higher education. And also to all intents and purposes that presiding officer over the organization that supported three state universities and a couple of colleges. And that offer was renewed in 1967 and I then accepted it. I've been quite active on that board and have served as its chairman from 1972 to 1980; I am still a member of the board but not chairman any longer. And have more fun since I am not chairman.

JA: That is kind of not being governor?

RS: And I've been active in the YMCA. Mrs. Smylie continues to be active in the Salvation Army Board. We have been strong supporters of things like the Boise Galway Park, Boise Philharmonic, Channel 4, and as you do when you kind of fade out of the

Law practice, you end up a whole bunch of people have depended on you and continue to, whether you say you are willing or not. And so I have been pursuing a small or career of being a widow of orphans of Uncle Bud.

JA: When did you formally retire from the law practice?

RS: In, let's see, 1979.

JA: When you hit '65 in other words you went through the ceremonial aspect?

RS: Yeah.

JA: I suspect well...?

RS: I decided that more people would be wise to decide in any organization of consequence. It's a pretty good idea for the old man get out of the way and let the lions that are under to start growing.

JA: If you've trained them well, you could be as proud of them as you can be of yourself. Do I do any speculating particularly giving the budgetary situation in Idaho financial situation about what is going to happen here in the next few years, to the state as an institution?

RS: Well, I think that I don't know if it is the one percent initiative or Governor Samuelson's unwise remission of the inventory tax. Some place along the line the two percent sales tax became inevitable. And I think the legislature and the governor, both of the last two governors, and the last six legislatures, have underestimated by far, public reaction to adequately funding sooner or later they will come to a realization that there is going to be more political reaction to not doing the things that people want done. I think this just now beginning a rash of letter to the editor about the highways as maybe acquired a bigger than a man's hand than the horizon. But the consequences of a tornado are there. I think unless there is a vast addition to highway funding, we are going to have a highway system that is going to cost us billions literally to replace the brand new interstate for instance in many places already going to pot. And for twenty days this weather we were without north, south, communication in this state. Both highways were gone. And I suspected to really put horse shoe hill back in place in any kind of acceptable form. You are talking about eight or nine million dollars worth of money.

JA: If it can be done over the hill itself rather than building it there.

RS: As far as universities and public schools and all that sort of thing, the time comes for two percent increase in the sales tax. And if I were doing that I would ask for the authority to issue pretty close to half a billion dollar in bonds to get going with this highways system. And do it now so it won't cost more money later. We borrowed money in 1955 to build the university library, which when first it appears in the appropriations schedules of the state was in 1927, they wanted twenty-seven thousand five hundred

dollars to build the library. We spent a million and half bucks building it in 1955, the same structure will cost four million today.

JA: The early investments really helps pay off.

RS: You pay a little interest but at least you have the use of the facility. And if we talking about economic development and making jobs for people, the best way they can do is to get the highway system back in shape, because you are not going to have economic development unless you got a decent road system.

JA: There has been accountability in being able to transport staff.

RS: Yeah.

JA: Have you got any final word to add? I think it will be welcome.

RS: Well, you asked me what I had been doing since I left the governorship, I inferred I practiced law both here and Europe for a while. Not many people know I have an office in Brussels.

JA: No international business?

RS: No, well I was doing a lot of work for international telephone and telegraph in Alpartal National Gas. And the, Lucy and I done a lot of traveling and I pay what some will think as an undue amount of attention to the stock market. I got up at 4:30 in the morning and listen to Short Wave Radio broadcast. It tells me what the market did yesterday in Hong Kong and Tokyo. And what the opening is in London.

JA: So you can start tinkering with New York.

RS: And when the Wall Street Journal arrived I started tinkering with New York. I was had an idea I can do and it turns I can. We do that and enjoy two grand daughters and I refurbish furniture as a hobby which is self perpetuating. If you don't want to keep it you can always sell it for more than that, and that financing the equipment and the ointment and whatever you got to buy to do the job.

JA: I think it's quite clear that you feel you have made a genuine and significant contribution to the state you've adapted?

RS: Well, I suspect I'd have to take it off the Broadway Bridge. I tried if I didn't feel that way and so I guess the answer is yes, I do.

JA: Good. Thank you very much.

Harold Forbush, representing the Upper Snake River Valley Historical Society Inc., at the close of the interview wishes to express personal appreciation to Judy Austin of the State

Historical Society for conducting what proved to be the most interesting and informative interview with the former governor Robert E. Smylie. And I thank Miss. Austin and I thank sincerely Governor Smylie.