



Nevada Legislature Oral History Project

JOSEPH M. NEAL, JR.
Democrat

Senate, 1972 – 2004

MAY 13, 2008
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

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**GRANT SAWYER STATE OFFICE BUILDING
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

Interview conducted by
Dana R. Bennett

Filmed by
Gwendolyn B. Clancy

Transcribed and indexed by
Jean Stoess

Get Consensus, LLC
Under contract to the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau

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The record copy of the interview transcript is printed on archival quality paper and on file with the Research Library of the Legislative Counsel Bureau in Carson City, Nevada.

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The 2007 Nevada Legislature approved an appropriation for a project of conducting oral histories with former state legislators, and in the summer following the conclusion of the session, the Research Division of the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) conducted a competitive bid process to identify and obtain a contractor to carry out the project. A committee consisting of LCB and other state personnel with expertise in Nevada history and politics evaluated and ranked the proposals received. In January 2008, a contract was signed between LCB and Get Consensus, LLC, for an 18-month program.

Administered by Donald O. Williams, Research Director, and coordinated by Amber Joiner, Senior Research Analyst, the Nevada Legislature Oral History Project consists of video- and audio-taped interviews, which have been transcribed, edited for readability, and indexed. An initial list of suggested interview subjects had been presented to the Senate Committee on Finance when it considered Senate Bill 373, which proposed an appropriation for the creation of an oral history of the Nevada Legislature. Using that as the starting point, LCB staff considered several factors—such as age, length of legislative tenure, contributions to the State of Nevada, and whether a formal oral history of the individual had been published or was underway—when identifying the former legislators who would be interviewed. The final list provided to the contractor revealed a careful balance of legislative house, political party, and geographic distribution among the interviewees.

After LCB staff acquired the written permission of each subject, the contractor would proceed with scheduling the interview at a time and place convenient for the former legislator. Each interview was simultaneously filmed and audiotaped. The audio recording was transcribed verbatim and then edited by the contractor for readability. Each interviewed legislator was provided the opportunity to review his or her edited document, and any misstatements or errors in the videotape were corrected in the text. The contractor produced three copies of each final product, which includes the text and a DVD of the interview film. Copies were presented to LCB's Research Library and the State Library in Carson City; the subject legislator also received a copy of his or her interview. The repository of record for all digital film and audio files is LCB's Research Library.

Together, these interviews make a significant contribution to the annals of Nevada politics and provide incomparable context to the state's legislative history. The official legislative record outlines the chronology for actions taken by Nevada's lawmaking body; these oral histories vividly portray the background and circumstances in which such actions occurred. Invaluable for understanding Nevada's politics in the latter half of the twentieth century, these interviews present interesting explanations, entertaining stories, and thoughtful observations that might otherwise have been lost.



Joseph M. Neal, Jr.
December 13, 2008

JOSEPH M. NEAL, JR

Joseph (Joe) M. Neal, Jr., began his 32-year legislative career in 1972 with his election to the Nevada Senate. The first African-American in the State Senate, Mr. Neal represented North Las Vegas in 16 Regular and seven Special Sessions. During that time, he was a member of numerous committees, including Finance, Taxation, Commerce and Labor, and Judiciary. His longest committee service was with the Senate Committee on Human Resources and Facilities, which he chaired from 1981 through 1985 and again in 1991. During the first two-thirds of his tenure, his party, the Democrats, typically held the majority in the Nevada Senate; the Republicans gained and held control during his last ten years. His leadership positions included Senate Minority Floor Leader in 1989 and President Pro Tempore in 1991. With the second longest Senate service in Nevada history, Mr. Neal retired in 2004 and was inducted into the Senate Hall of Fame in 2005.

A Louisiana native, Mr. Neal arrived in Nevada in 1964 after four years in the Air Force and with a B.A. in political science and history from Southern University; a year later, he married Estelle Ann DeConge and together, they had five children. (Mrs. Neal passed away in 1997.) As Mr. Neal explains in his interview, he quickly became politically active in Southern Nevada, a place of entrenched racial segregation at the time. He unsuccessfully ran for the Assembly in 1964 and again in 1970 after he moved into the home in North Las Vegas where he continues to reside. He also ran unsuccessfully for the State Senate in 1968. None of his losses, he explains, were a surprise because he had included his photograph on his campaign posters. Those campaigns, however, in addition to his efforts at integrating trade unions, raised his public profile. By the time he won the Senate seat he would hold for thirty-two years, he was well-known in Southern Nevada.

This interview was conducted on May 13, 2008, at 10 a.m. in the conference room of the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) on the fourth floor of the Grant Sawyer State Office Building in Las Vegas. In this interview, which lasted 105 minutes, Senator Neal answered a variety of questions about his first campaign for office and important issues of the time. He provides significant context for the reapportionment battles of the mid-1960s and explains why his election in 1972 was such a surprise to Nevada's political establishment. He talks about what it was like to be the first African-American in the Senate of a state where discrimination against people of color was then rampant. Known for his encyclopedic comprehension of *Masons' Manual*, the Nevada Legislature's parliamentary guide, Senator Neal describes several situations in which that expertise caught his opponents off-guard. In particular, he recalls how his skillful use of the rules resulted in the Senate unexpectedly passing the Equal Rights Amendment in 1973.

With wonderful attention to detail and a rich memory, Senator Neal reminisces about cooperation and conflicts with other Senators and Governors, regardless of party. His familiar chuckle punctuates his recollection of a particular encounter with Governor Mike O'Callaghan (D). Senator Neal also recalls that he was one of the first legislators to recognize and fully utilize the services of LCB's Research Division. For much of this interview, he discusses his fights on tax issues, such as an increase in the gaming tax and

opposition to the fine art exemption; his work on behalf of Nevada's Native Americans and working class; and his support for libraries, health care, and other social issues.

Senator Neal says he recognized early on that many of his bills would not pass, but knew that their introduction could change the conversations between Senators and their constituents. In this interview, he describes the change he successfully brought to the Senate rules at the beginning of his first session with the intent of introducing such legislation. In 1973, the Senate required a minimum of two sponsors on each bill. Believing that his racial status would complicate his obtaining the necessary second signature, Senator Neal convinced his caucus to change the rule. This story is one of the many fascinating anecdotes in this interview that illustrate the ways in which Senator Neal established himself as a unique voice in the Nevada Senate and a force with which to be reckoned during his distinguished legislative tenure.

Dana R. Bennett
May 2009

Dana Bennett: Good morning, Senator Neal.

Joe Neal: Good morning.

Bennett: Let's think back to the first day of your first session. It's Monday, January 15, 1973. It was overcast with a trace of showers, but the weather was mild in Carson City that day, and the newspapers were reporting that it was supposed to be a fairly calm session. You were walking into the Legislative Building in Carson City for the first time. What were you thinking?

Neal: My wife and my two daughters were with me, and I had family who had come from Oakland, California, to be a part of that session. I was mostly thinking about what I was going to do—the type of issues that I was going to tackle. Being the first person of African-American descent to serve in the Senate, I felt that it was going to be difficult to do the things that I wanted to do because I sensed that other legislators who had been part of the process for some time wanted me to have a waiting period to learn about the process and sit back and be quiet. I was aware that I only had two sessions in a four-year period, and that if I wanted to do anything, I had to start from day one. I had studied political science—I had a degree in the subject—and I had studied law. I was familiar with what needed to be done. I just hadn't had the opportunity to help make the laws. But I

had a sense of what was needed and what would most benefit the people that I represented. Those were the thoughts that I had in mind upon entering that first day.

Bennett: How did you get there? Why did you decide to run for the Senate?

Neal: I decided to run for the Senate after three tries for the Legislature. My first run for the Legislature was for the Assembly in 1964. That was testing the process because we had an old borough-type system where the Legislature was similar to the federal system today. Each county had one Senator, and the Assembly was apportioned along those particular lines, also. So I decided that I would go down and just file. I'd get 50 posters and just tack them up around town because at that time all of the Assembly people ran at large. So I tacked up signs—the 50 posters. That had never been done before. Even though blacks had run for office, they did not put their picture on a poster. I put my picture on the 50 posters tacked up around town, and people just went wild over this person who was so brave and brazen to put his picture on a poster, who's black, and who was running in 1964 for the Assembly.

At that particular time, my thoughts were concerned with creating a law school and a public defender for the area here. Those were

the two main issues that I was running on. One of those issues turned out to be successful because Justice John Mowbray—who was originally from Boston; Irish; a district judge; and subsequently became a Supreme Court Justice—decided that seemed like a good idea. So he wrote and got a grant from the Ford Foundation to establish that particular office, so it did have some impact. The first person to serve as the public defender was Richard Bryan.

John Code Mowbray was a District Court Judge from 1953 to 1967 and served on the Nevada Supreme Court from 1967 to 1993.

Of course, I did not win that election; in fact, it would have been a miracle if I had. Then in 1968, I decided to try again to run for public office. That time, I ran for the Senate. The person in that seat was B. Mahlon Brown. As you know, he was part of Senate leadership when I was elected. Between 1964 and 1968, a woman named Flora Dungan challenged this old borough system under the case of *Baker v. Carr*, which outlawed that type of system and instituted a one-man, one-vote rule. After that, the Legislature was apportioned based on the population, but they still had at-large seats. So they had one at-large seat in Clark County, and that was held by B. Mahlon Brown. They had another four or five that were at-large, and you had to run together with a lot of the Senators and Assemblymen. I think the Assembly had, at

*Flora Dungan (D-Clark) served in the Assembly 1962-1964 and 1966-1968. In 1965, **Dungan v. Sawyer** required reapportionment of the Legislature and the Board of Regents.*

that particular time, nine seats in Clark County, all at-large.

In 1966, Paul Laxalt decided to run for Governor. He wanted a fellow by the name of Woodrow Wilson, who was black, to run, and Woody ran for the Assembly. In 1966, there was a sizeable black population here in Clark County in what we call the West Side and which was strictly Democratic. But once you got a black who was Republican in the General Election, the vote would go to Woody. Woody would come in last because the Republicans would elect him to the general, so when everybody was running, the black community would push him up and make him the ninth person to be elected. That went on for three times—in 1966, 1968, and 1970

In 1970, I had moved from Las Vegas to North Las Vegas, and we had two Assemblymen who were running in two seats that were carved out particularly for North Las Vegas. The city fathers wanted to get rid of the black population in Las Vegas because a sufficient number of votes had developed to really control the city government. So they built a housing development called Regal Estates and Valley View, across the city line from Las Vegas into North Las Vegas. I moved to Regal Estates into a place where I still reside today. I decided again to run for the Assembly. Keep in mind

The first African-American elected to the Nevada Legislature, Woodrow Wilson (R-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1972. He passed away in 1999.

that I was not thinking about winning—that was never my thought. It would have been a miracle if I had won. There were other people in this state who needed to be represented and who could be represented if given the opportunity, and those were members of the black community. We were the largest minority group in the early and mid-1960s and going into the 1970s.

When I moved into North Las Vegas, the two individuals who were in the Legislature were a fellow by the name of Paul May and one by the name of Dave Branch. Dave Branch runs a casino somewhere in Latin America. Paul May is deceased.

In that election, I only campaigned in the black community—purposely!—because I knew we had a sufficient amount of votes that could really, really push Paul to do some things. One of the things I wanted him to do was create a district that blacks could be elected from and cut back on that system. I was campaigning for reapportionment. I stayed strictly in the black community, and when the vote came, I almost beat Paul May. After the primary election, Paul came over to my office—I was the compliance officer for Reynolds Electrical Engineering Company—and he asked me what I had in mind about the reapportionment suit. I had a blackboard in my

Paul W. May, Jr. (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 1984 and 1986 to 1988.

David R. Branch (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1968 to 1972.

office, so I went to the blackboard and diagramed for him one Senator, two Assemblymen, a school board representative, a State Board of Education person, a Regent, a county commissioner, and a hospital trustee. I said, "These are the offices that I'm looking for in terms of reapportionment." He said, "Okay, we will help you get this."

Reynolds Electrical Engineering Company was part of a family of companies, and one of them was EG&G. We had had a person by the name of Frank Young who had gotten elected as an Assemblyman; he was a Republican. I knew Frank very well, so I went to Frank and told him that if they reapportioned the Assembly to one-man, one-vote, they could probably get another six or seven Republicans up there. He was a scientist, so he looked at it and said, "Well, yes." It was fortunate that the northern part was mostly Republican, and in the 1970 election, the Republicans took over the Assembly, and Frank Young became the Chairman of the Elections Committee. So that was good. Now we've got a Democrat; we've got a Republican. So he drew up those maps with the same recommendation that I had recommended to Paul May, with the one Senator, two Assemblymen, county commissioner, school board representative, state board of education representative, and board of regents.

*Frank Young (R-Clark)
served in the Assembly
from 1966 to 1972.*

In the 1971 session, I made the trip up there, and Frank took me in his office, showed me the map, and asked me if that's what I wanted. I told him, "Yes, that's exactly what I want." Lo and behold, they pushed it through the Assembly.

I don't think that Woody, who was in the Assembly, really knew exactly what was going on. I think he saw an opportunity where he could move up to the Senate. A lot of people thought that was the case. Many of the conservative Democrats and the Republicans did not see me out there as a person who would beat Woody. Woody was kind of a mild-mannered person and didn't like shaking the tree. Understand that, up until this time, the black community enabled white Democrats to get elected because we had between 8,000 and 12,000 votes in our neighborhood, and this was a period of time when it took about 25,000 or 30,000 votes to elect a Governor. With that many votes, it became a force to be reckoned with. But nobody had really guided it to the point where it was creating something where blacks could be elected to offices or responsible positions.

After the bill was passed, and it was to take effect in July of 1971, the Democratic Party sued to challenge [chuckles] the legislation. I had to get some Republicans to come on

my side to fight the Democrats to defeat this in court. I forget the guy's name who was head of the Democratic Party at that particular time, but the Governor was Mike O'Callaghan. Mike did not say anything about this. Of course, he could have stopped the lawsuit if he wanted to, but he didn't say anything about it. The Legislature had to defend what they'd done. I think Frank Daykin was there at the time, and they had to defend what they had passed. They had created a couple of single-seat districts. One was a district in the black community, and one was Jim Gibson's district. I think they might have had a couple of single-seats up north, but the rest of them were dual seats. So we filed a countersuit to create all single seats for both Senate and the Assembly. We couldn't lose because we now had the Legislature on our side who had passed the bill that we thought was good. A three-judge panel from the Ninth Circuit met in Reno on December 13, 1971. The panel met to hear the argument, and since it was an expedited case, they ruled in early January that the legislative reapportionment would stand. That was in 1972.

Donal N. (Mike) O'Callaghan (D) was Governor from 1971 to 1979.

Frank Daykin became Legislative Legal Counsel in 1977, serving until his retirement in 1985.

You asked me how I came to run. I filed for office that year, [chuckles] and I got elected. I spent \$500 on the race.

They tried to pull some things at my job because the people I worked for had connec-

tions with the wider white business community. They tried to cramp my style there by requiring that I had to come in at eight o'clock in the morning, leave at 12, be back at one, leave at five. So I did that, and I left at five. I had some hand cards, and I would go out and walk and knock on doors. When the election-time came, Woody was running, and all the bets were on Woody. Woody got beat bad in that election. All of a sudden, the white establishment, including O'Callaghan, was faced with a Joe Neal coming to the Legislature.

Now I'd had some activities prior to that, and I was very well known because I had been working with the Department of Justice to integrate the building trades unions. I was the head of an organization called Greater Las Vegas Plan—we didn't have it too long—that dealt with integrating the building trades. A lot of people knew me from that, and they knew the work that I had done in terms of integrating the work force at the Nevada Test Site. So I was not running without name recognition, and that's why, I think, that I was able to beat Woody so badly. Like I said, I only spent about \$500 for that race, and I think they were giving Woody about \$50,000 or \$60,000 to run.

In fact, O'Callaghan [chuckles] gave Woody 1500 bucks, but he had to go down and take a loan from the bank. Then they paid the

bank loan off. We got wind of this—that O’Callaghan had given him money. They were trying to hide that. We only had one bank that Woody dealt with. It was called Twin Lakes—the First National Bank—and it was located up on Rancho at the time. The bank is a Wells Fargo branch now. I started hitting O’Callaghan with that after I got elected—that he had given money to a Republican, and he just outright denied it. His campaign person denied it also. What we needed was a check. This lady was brave—I don’t know where she is located now, and I will not name her—but she was a white girl who walked into the bank and asked where they kept their cancelled checks. Somebody told her, so she went in, found the cancelled check, made copies of it, and walked out of the bank with it. [laughter]

My first session was in 1973, and O’Callaghan came in with a proposal to make it the penalty of death for killing a policeman. So I’m sitting there as he gave his State of the State address, knowing, of course, that someone from the press will ask me about this particular statement. So when they asked me about it, I said, “Why give the death penalty to one who kills policemen? Why not give the death penalty for killing a janitor?” I said, “Life is life. It’s just as important to a janitor as it would be to a policeman.” [chuckles] The press

just took that and just ate it up. One of the columnists down here by the name of Paul Price started writing about that, and O’Callaghan was pissed over the fact that I had kind of upped him on that one and took his press away from him on that particular issue. So our road became a little bit rocky from that point on during that particular session.

Then he was getting ready to run for a second term, and I’m teasing him now. I issued a statement that I was going to run for governor, and he called me one day and said, “Come on! Get in the race! I hope you get in the race!” [laughter] I had no intention of running for Governor. I was just messing with him in a way.

Then he found that he needed me on an issue. I was on the Environment Committee that handles all the agriculture stuff in the Senate. But we dealt with Lake Tahoe, and he needed my vote because he wanted to do something on this particular issue. He asked his assistant, a guy by the name of Chris Schaller, to come over and talk to me. Chris came over and told me that the Governor wanted to see me. I said, “Okay, fine. I’m here in my office every day.” [laughter] Well, I wasn’t supposed to talk to O’Callaghan like that. He said, “Joe, he wants you to come by.” I said, “No. I’m over here.” That went on for almost the dura-

Christy L. (Chris) Schaller was Governor Mike O’Callaghan’s Chief of Staff. He passed away in 1984 and is honored by a bust in the entry hallway of the Nevada Capitol.

tion of the session. One day [chuckles], I'm walking out of the Senate Chambers and walking down the hall, and I heard this voice say, "Joe Neal!" It sounded like O'Callaghan; he had this crisp Irish voice. I turned, and he said, "I've been trying to get you to come over and talk to me. You won't come over and talk to me." I said, "Well, Governor, what do you want of me?" And he started laughing and said, "Damn you! I've been trying to get you over here almost two months!" [laughter] I asked where he'd be, and he told me that he had some data over at the mansion, so I said that I would come over and talk to him. And I did talk to him. He didn't understand that I was not kowtowing to him. I recognized the fact that he was Governor. I recognized the fact that I was in the Legislature. It's separation of powers. So we went all through that session, and we had kind of a rough time. If he had something that I thought was correct and fair to the people of the State of Nevada and to the people that I represented, yes, I would support it. But if it wasn't, I didn't, and I would get up and talk against it. That was something that he didn't like, if you could pick his legislation apart. He didn't like that at all.

The Senate was conservative in 1973. There was no difference between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate. Ideologically,

you would think that there would be a difference, but there was not a difference. You couldn't tell them apart. You might say that I was the only true Democrat that was there.

The first session, I decided that I was going to introduce a bill that had to do with restoring the rights of ex-felons because we had many blacks that were going to prison. This whole trend had started, and they were sending a lot of blacks to prison. The difficulty they were having once they got out was getting a job. So my first piece of legislation was to restore the rights to ex-felons once they had been out for a period of time and had no greater offense than a traffic ticket and to allow them to enter into the work force, to get a job, and not have that crime or whatever it was being held over them. I introduced this bill, and I had some opposition.

Then one day a guy by the name of Jim Slattery shows up. I didn't know Jim Slattery from Adam, but I did know that he had been a Senator. He came to me and asked if I needed any help with that bill. I said yes, and he took that bill, and he ran it through the Legislature. That was the only piece of legislation that I was able to pass in 1973. After the session was over, I'm back home and back at Reynolds at my regular job. I picked up the paper, and it had this big article by Paul Price that said that

James M. (Slats) Slattery (R-Virginia City) served in the Assembly from 1950 to 1952 and in the Senate from 1954 to 1970.

the only piece of legislation that I was able to pass was to give civil rights back to a whoremonger. I said, "Wait a minute. Hold it. That's not *my* piece of legislation." As it turned out, Slattery was working for Joe Conforte, who ran the Mustang Ranch [laughter] and was an ex-felon; he wanted to pass this in order to help him. So I went back to my office, and I shot off a letter to Paul Price to the effect that once one passed a piece of legislation, he cannot determine who would take advantage of it. [laughter] That was my answer to him.

But that's when I found out that people who you think are going to do you a good deed might not be doing it just for you. They might have some other things in mind, as Slattery did. He had in mind helping Joe Conforte. I guess he must have told Joe Conforte that was my bill because after that, Joe Conforte tried to get me to come down and have dinner with him. I would never go. He tried to give me a free pass to his ranch. I would never go. So he had a preacher [chuckles], a guy by the name of Willie Wynn, one of those Holiness preachers from up in north. Holiness Church was in my district, and I knew his bishop very well. We called him Bishop Webb. Wynn came to me one day during session and asked me to meet him for dinner. I didn't have a problem meeting him for dinner, so we went out to eat. There

used to be a little place just out of Washoe Valley—a little restaurant in a steeple-type building. I drove down there, and he brought in this blonde, white lady. I’m sitting there wondering who this person was and who this Joe was they were talking about. All of a sudden, I asked him who this lady was, and he says, “This is Sally Conforte.” [laughter] I was meeting with this man’s wife! He had tricked me to meet his wife. I didn’t want to have that association because I knew who Joe Conforte was. Well, you read the newspapers, and you know he ran this big Mustang Ranch up there. I didn’t want to have anything to do with it.

Joe and Sally Conforte owned the Mustang Ranch brothel in Storey County, just outside Reno.

Going back to this piece of legislation. Slattery had worked with most of these guys, but he hadn’t been reelected because reapportionment had taken him out. So he knew most all these guys—knew what they had in the closet. Bill Raggio and I were elected the same year, 1972. He was the only one who voted against that bill when it passed. I knew that he was a district attorney, so why would he vote against this bill? Later [chuckles], I was to find out that he knew Slattery and knew of his association with Joe Conforte and that this bill was going to aid Joe Conforte. I found out later that when Raggio was district attorney, he had burned down one of Joe Conforte’s whorehouses in Storey County. He had gotten a court

order to do that. I was not aware of all of this at the time, but I kept wondering why he had voted against it. I found out that he and Joe Conforte were not too good of friends. Of course, I found all this out later. [laughter]

Dealing with this same subject for a moment. We have in this particular state an option law that deals with prostitution. Counties that do not want it can pass an ordinance to prohibit it. Clark County is one of those counties that prohibit prostitution. Storey County is one of those counties that do not. Raggio, still wanting to fight with Joe Conforte, gets this bill in my second session to outlaw the prostitution houses. There were about five Mormons out of 20 in the Senate: Jim Gibson who was a very respected leader at that time, Keith Ashworth, Robbie Robinson, Mel Close, and Lee Walker. B. Mahlon Brown was convinced to go along with this, so Raggio had ten votes, and he needed my vote.

This affected Joe Dini's district, so he was fighting the legislation. Joe Dini came up and asked me to help him stop this bill. I said, "Well, maybe. Maybe." I realized that I'm kind of like the key person. My thought was if the county wanted to outlaw this, let them do it because they had the law right on the books to do that. I didn't want to participate with Raggio in trying to destroy it. But on the other hand,

Dr. Robert E. (Bob) Robinson (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1972 to 1982 and in the Senate from 1982 to 1986.

Lee E. Walker (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1970 to 1976. He passed away in 2006.

Joseph E. Dini, Jr., (D-Lyon) served in the Assembly from 1966 to 2002. He was Speaker a record eight regular sessions and named Speaker Emeritus in 2001.

they had gotten my bishop—I'm Catholic—to sign a letter [laughter] that he was opposed to all of this. So I'm sitting in this quandary, and I'm wondering how to handle it if I oppose this thing. A no vote would have been easy but if I opposed the legislation—

I decided that the best thing that I possibly could do was to just laugh this thing right out of the Senate, so I got up and started telling jokes. I think they've still got that tape around there somewhere. I started telling jokes, and the Senate was just rolling with laughter. When the vote came [laughter], Raggio lost the thing by one vote. He couldn't get angry with me because he saw what I had done to him—had made it funny and just laughed it right out. And it relieved me of a hardship in the future in terms of dealing with these people because they all had to go back and listen to these jokes, and they would tell them to other people. [chuckles] I guess Raggio and Joe Conforte never did get along, and when he became Majority Leader, he still liked to put a lot of pressure on Joe Conforte. But that's the long way of answering all the questions about how I thought about the first session and all that.

A Senator since 1972, William J. Raggio (R-Reno) was Washoe County District Attorney from 1958 to 1970.

Bennett: You mentioned at the beginning that you were concerned about how you might be received in the Senate and in the Legislature. What happened? How were you received?

Neal: They looked at me, and I guess they judged me on the standards that Woody had exemplified in the Assembly—a quiet person; go along to get along. I did not do that. As a student of political science and the legislative process, I realized that once you were on the floor of the Legislature, you could talk and say just about anything you wanted, and nothing could be held against you. Just be careful when you walk off the floor, or you could get sued. [laughter] So I would take legislation that was introduced by other legislators, and I would pick it apart. I would find things that they had not considered, and I would get up and give a speech on that. They would just get *mad*.

I remember Snowy Monroe got so mad with me one time. He got up and challenged me on a piece of legislation of his, and he accused me of not wanting to enforce the criminal laws of this country. I told him that I don't have a problem enforcing the criminal laws of this country, but I do have a problem in creating an authoritarian government. He didn't like that [chuckles] because that's like boom! [smacks hand] Right there to your head. I always had those little quips that I could come back on.

Snowy was from Elko, and he had a problem with Indians. He had a prejudice against Indians, and I could transfer that to myself, to my own thinking. If he was opposed

Warren L. (Snowy) Monroe (D-Elko) served in the Senate from 1958 to 1976. He passed away in 1987.

to Indians, he must be opposed to blacks also. That was my thinking about it. Anytime his anger and his opposition to the Indians would come up, I would take it and just tear it to pieces.

We had about 17 Indian tribes that wanted to be part of the State of Nevada. Then legislation was passed in Congress in the early 1970s to allow them to repatriate back to their reservation and become a sovereign nation, so to speak. About 13 of them did that, and about three did not. [chuckles] Snowy wanted to tax the Indians because they set up these smoke shops. When I first went into the Legislature, the Indians came to me and would lobby to get the contracts extended with people who had contracted with them. I said to them, "Why the hell are you guys lobbying for other people to sell cigarettes on your reservation when you are on it and you can do that yourself? Why would you want to have a contract with anybody other than yourselves?" I said, "I can't support you." So they went back [laughter] and when those contracts became due, they got out of them and set up their own shops. Now Snowy Monroe wanted to tax the Indians, but they had their smoke shops only on a reservation, so I knew that he couldn't do that because we cannot tax a sovereign nation. The United States can't tax Canada. [laughter] They introduced that legis-

lation, and I got up and argued against it, but they passed it. The Indians took them to court and beat them. Then they tried to tax the cigarettes before they got to the reservation. Since it was a reservation, it became an issue of interstate commerce, so I got up and argued against that. They passed it. The Indians took them to court and beat them. They fought on with that until finally they just gave up. The Indians found out that I was one of the people in the Legislature who really, really supported them. In fact, I have lifetime hunting and fishing privileges on the Schurz Reservation because of my activity. I had very, very good friends among the Indian community. That was kind of like a salvation for me because at the beginning of my legislative career in 1973 and 1975, I did not have a good relationship with the white legislators. But I had a good relationship with the people in Carson City. I had a lot of friends outside of the legislative structure.

I'll tell you another thing [chuckles] that actually happened. When I first went to the Legislature, we only had one researcher, a guy by the name of J. T. Havel, and his secretary. One day, I went up to his office—I was looking to do some research—and J.T. Havel was just sitting there, drumming his pencil. I said to myself, "Nobody is using this guy." So from that first day through that whole session of

*James T. Havel was
Deputy Research
Director during the
1971 and 1973
Sessions.*

1973, J. T. Havel became my individual researcher because everybody else was using the legal folks. I would use him as a researcher. [chuckles] That guy used to turn out some good stuff for me—speeches and everything. He helped me out with the Indian thing. One of the best speeches I gave on the floor was one that he had written for me. Finally, they found out that I was [laughter] utilizing this guy, and they said, “Hell, if he equipped *him* with all this information,” so they decided to get somebody else in here. Following J. T. Havel, they brought in Andy Grose, and Andy Grose then began to develop the research people so everybody could share in this information. In 1973 and 1975, [laughter] I was the only person who utilized J. T. Havel. He decided to leave and went on to some other legislature where he could really become a big part of it. He asked me to write a letter of recommendation for him, and of course, I did.

So I always said that I *might* have been responsible for the type of Research Division that the Legislature now has [laughter] in the State of Nevada because they did not have anything. They had one guy and this girl, Mary Lou Love, who came in afterward. She was from Tennessee; she had an accent. She was there for a while. The last I heard from her, she was up in the northwestern part of the country,

Andrew P. Grose was Deputy Research Director during the 1975 Session and then Research Director through the 1981 Session.

Mary Lou Love, now Cooper, was in the Research Division in the 1980s. She’s currently at the Council of State Governments-West.

either Washington or Oregon or someplace. That's been some years ago. But she came in. Then Andy, being in the military, found out that he was getting overwhelmed, and he decided he'd better sectionalize this out and really create a research division. So the only one they had with J. T. Havel was Vivian Topken who was over in the library, which was kind of like a little separate group that was as part of the Research Division. But they just kept mostly newspaper clippings and things like that. If you needed a book, they had to order it from the State Library. But that's one of the things that I often laugh about. These guys had these fellows down there, and nobody was using them.

In the early part of the session, one or two people from the Legislature would visit other Legislatures and go to conferences. Nobody was traveling to a conference. I asked one day, "What are we learning here?" Brown was the Majority Leader at the time, and he was traveling to all these places, but nobody else was going. Finally, we began to develop into where we thought we needed to talk to people in states other than, say, California, which most of our laws are based upon, so we started to travel as a legislative branch. Being a tourist state and a tourist town, we needed to understand outside cultures because that's what

Vivian L. Topken was the Assembly History Clerk from 1953 to 1964.

B. Mahlon Brown (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1950 to 1976. He was Minority Leader for three regular sessions, President Pro Tempore for two, and Majority Leader for six. He passed away in 1995.

we're dealing with. It's not a part of any type of law, but you talk about it in your conferences, and you get people to do things.

Let me just go back to the first session. One of the things I recognized was that if I was going to let people know that I was at least trying to change things, I had to introduce bills. We needed to change one particular rule. At that time in the Senate, they had a rule that you must have two people to sign on your bill in order to get it introduced. I was looking at all these white guys up there, and I knew I wouldn't get any of these guys to sign on to the bills that I was going to be introducing. [chuckles] Senator Harry Reid was the Lt. Governor at that time so it made him President of the Senate, and this was Dick Bryan's first session in the Senate, too. In caucus, I argued that the rule to have an extra person sign on your legislation made it hard to do things that would favor your constituents, particularly if people asked you to introduce a bill for them, and you couldn't get another person to sign onto the bill. They bought the argument. But my argument was really that I was going to be introducing bills that none of them was going to be signing. But I needed to get that out and get my bills before the public because the press would help me institute some of the changes by reporting on the legislation that I was

Richard H. Bryan (D-Clark) served in the Nevada Senate from 1972 to 1978.

introducing. So we got that rule changed. Fortunately for me, I was able to introduce a lot of bills. In fact, at one time I introduced the whole Democratic platform. [laughter] I guess I introduced so many of those bills that they decided to put a limitation on the bills that each legislator can introduce.

I would introduce these bills, which was good, but not in terms of the sitting State Senators. But the public would read about it, and when the Senators would go home, they would be asked why they didn't support certain bills. So they were getting this flak from their people. I found it was quite interesting to have that done that way. Of course, my whole method here was to create a situation in the minds of the public where things could be done that the Legislature was not doing. Some of them finally caught on with what was actually happening. They would let the bills go into committee. They would kill them in committees and wouldn't let them out. Then my practice became to read their bills when they come to the floor and then get up and speak against it and just pick it apart. They didn't like that, either. A lobbyist told me that I really have an effect on the other Senators. They talked about how they were going to get a bill passed here on the Senate floor without my asking questions about it. [laughter] I said that was

good because now that we're having an effect, we can get some good legislation out. Of course, that was one of the things that I was able to get done and that helped me in future sessions.

There came a time when I had to deal with the car dealers. Mel Close was head of the Judiciary Committee at the time, and I introduced a bill called a "collectable deficiency law." This law concerned people whose automobiles had been repossessed, which was prevalent in my community. If you missed a payment, they'd come out and repossess your car. Say, for instance, that you had an automobile that you had bought new. You didn't drive it that much, and you'd just about paid it off. For the sake of discussion, the car cost \$10,000, and you've paid \$7,000 of the \$10,000. The car is worth about, say, \$6,000, and you've missed a payment. They'd repossess the car and sell it for \$6,000, and they would keep the money. The collectable deficiency law said that if they sold the car for more than what was owed on it, then they had to give you the difference. In this particular case, the difference would have been between the \$3,000 you still owed and the \$6,000 that they'd sold it for, so you would have \$3,000 actually coming to you. The car dealers didn't like that too much. Mel Close—I must give him credit for this—helped me get

Melvin D. Close, Jr., (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1970 to 1982. He chaired the Senate Committee on Judiciary from 1973 to 1981.

this bill through. He made the assessment of the legislation, and I still remember this today. He said it was like real property law when a repossessed house or furniture was sold, you could get some money back. I didn't even know that at the time. I believe that that bill is still on the books today.

S.B. 369, which limits the deficiency collectible upon a repossessed vehicle, passed in 1975.

But some of the people tried to sell the cars for under the value when they repossessed them. They would sell it for under the value of the car or for the exact amount that was owed, which they could not make any money. We found out that probably was a scheme that they were trying to exercise with a second person, and the other person would probably get their money back on it. But that's one of the bills that I passed that really changed some of the culture in which automobile dealers dealt with people. It mostly affected minority people who needed transportation. At that time, we did not have a bus system such as we have now—the CAT line—and people depended upon cars to go to work. In the district that I represented, it was mostly a bedroom community. To get to work, you either had to have an automobile or knew somebody who had one. We had a lot of cars in and out the district.

Bennett: You were there for 32 years during the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. How did you see the Legislature change over that period of time?

Neal: One of the things was that we went from one woman in the Senate to about five at one time. And I saw that change. I saw the whole big battle over the Equal Rights Amendment for women. Nobody knew that I was going to support that particular issue in my first session. Nobody knew anything about it. The only time that that issue ever got past the Senate was through my maneuvering of the rules. It passed the Senate, but they killed it in the Assembly. Here again, the knowledge of the rules aided me in doing a lot of things and protecting myself as a black individual in the Legislature among individuals who were Harvard graduates, Stanford Law graduates. Gibson was from the Naval Academy. And here was this poor little black kid who graduated from Southern University in political science—an all-black school—competing with *these* guys in terms of knowledge. I think that in many instances, I got the better of them because my concentration was much greater than theirs on these particular issues.

Of course, I should tell you the story about the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment.. This was funny. [chuckles] It was, I think, in the 1977 session of the Legislature. They had tried to pass the ERA, and then the women made a great push in getting the Legislature to the point of getting people who favored that.

James I. Gibson (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1958 to 1966 and in the Senate from 1966 until his demise in 1988. He chaired the Senate Committee on Government Affairs, 1975-1981, and was Majority Leader, 1977-1985.

They broke out with a 10-10 split—we had a 20-member Senate. The late Richard Blakemore was one of the conservative Democrats, and he told the newspaper that if the ERA ever got before the Senate, it would never pass. I was thinking about the rules and knew that, with an even house and a Lt. Governor—who was Bob Rose at that time—who had said that he would vote to pass the ERA, somebody was going to try to abstain. So I decided to look and see if that could happen. Well, it couldn't because we had a rule dated back to 1864 that, once it was invoked by three members of the Senate, would require every member within the bar of the Senate to vote yea or nay. No abstentions! Yea or nay. They had a big discussion about this in the Constitutional Convention as to why that should be the case.

So I didn't say anything to anybody. The ERA was made a special order of business for 8:00 one night. Just before we went into session, I went into the Lt. Governor's office and asked if he wanted to pass the ERA. He said, "Yes," so I showed him the rule and said, "This is how we can do it." He looked at me, and he said, "If you invoke it, I will enforce it." Came the session, and I led off the speech for the passage of the ERA. I must have talked about 20 minutes to *lull* the people. They were thinking about what they were going to do—

Richard E. Blakemore (D-Central Nevada) served in the Senate from 1972 to 1984. He passed away in 2007.

As Lt. Governor, Robert Rose (D) was President of the Senate from 1975 and 1977.

Gibson, Floyd Lamb, Mel Close, and all of them—and they weren't listening to me. At the last part of my speech, I invoked Rule 30. When I invoked Rule 30, Bill Hernstadt and Wilbur Faiss stood up with me and that made three Senators. I saw Raggio pull his rule book out and started looking at it, and he looked back at me, and he started laughing. [chuckles] I guess he knew he was going to vote for the passage of the ERA, but he didn't know how it was going to get passed.

The debate on the ERA went on for about an hour and a half to two hours, then it came to the vote. Lt. Governor Rose said, "Rule 30 has been invoked, and each Senator within the bar of Senate has to vote yea or nay. Secretary, open the roll." They opened the roll, and there were ten yes, eight no, and two abstentions. Rose again said, "Rule 30 has been invoked." He announced that the two abstentions would be placed them in the "no" column, declared the house evenly divided, and boom! he pushed that button, and the eleventh vote came up on screen. I'll never forget it. The late Keith Ashworth, who liked to tinker with the voting machine, was sitting by me, and he said, "Damn, that voting machine has gone haywire again." [laughter] And I said, "No, the Lt. Governor just passed the ERA out of the Senate."

William H. (Bill) Hernstadt (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1976 to 1984.

Wilbur Faiss (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1976 to 1984.

Keith Ashworth (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1976 to 1984. He passed away in 1996.

A hush came over the Legislature, and everybody got quiet for what seemed like a full minute. All of a sudden, everybody in the gallery broke out clapping and applauding, and I saw Gibson had his head in his hands. I just got up and walked out of the Senate because it was over. I remember running into Lamb when I went over to the Ormsby House, and Lamb was going back to his room. And he walked up to me, and he said, "You did it to us, you rat, you!" [laughter] But Gibson took it pretty hard. I didn't know why he took it so hard until after his death, and I was at his funeral. Some of the people from Salt Lake City came to his funeral and made the statement that he had told them that the ERA would never pass. Then I understood why he took it so hard.

Floyd R. Lamb (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1956 to 1983.

From that night on, I became the master of the rules of the Legislature [laughter]. On that one little issue. *Mason's Manual* is about seven hundred and some pages. I used to study that book all the time. When I was at the Legislature, I would just read it, read it, read it, read it because it was annotated with case laws and all that stuff. I became very adept in procedures and tried to understand them because that was my way of dealing with the people. I didn't come by that alone. Leola Armstrong, who was Secretary of the Senate for a long time, called me when I first got

Leola H. Armstrong was Secretary of the Senate from 1958 to 1981.

elected. She gave me her *Mason's Manual* and said, "Learn this book. If you learn this book, you're going to be able to represent yourself very well on the floor of the Senate." And I studied that sucker—studied it and studied it. It became very handy to me because many years later I was still able to do things to them that set them back on their heels and beat them at their own game when they tried to do things. I found great delight in doing that. [laughter]

I know we haven't talked about other things, but 32 years is a long time to cover.

Bennett: What was the toughest issue that you worked on during that time period—one that you couldn't quite crack?

Neal: [laughter] Believe it or not, the toughest issue that I couldn't get on that I wanted to get on with was getting rid of the Highway Patrol's radar gun. I used to drive back and forth, and a couple of times, I got caught speeding with the radar gun. I wanted to get rid of the radar gun. I had a good argument! Good argument! I brought the bill to the Senate a number of times, but I never could get it passed. We got it passed one time because Senator Lamb got a ticket, and he passed it out of the Senate, but then they killed it in the Assembly.

Neal first introduced a bill prohibiting the use of radar in 1979.

I remember one time when I had the Highway Patrol send me one of those guns. It

was clear that the rest of the Senators did not understand the radar gun because I picked it up and was showing it around, and they were ducking under their desks. [laughter] If they felt that way, why not get rid of it? But the argument was that you could train it on a tree and clock the tree going 85 miles an hour. So how could you tell who was speeding? I used to make good arguments. In fact, there were some changes made, but not in our Legislature. Changes were made on a national level because we created such a fuss that the Weights and Standards Commission got involved and made them set standards for the radar gun. The Highway Patrol could not cite you with a ticket if they were going down the road. They had to be stationary. That was one of the changes that they made. But I wanted to put something in law to get rid of it in Nevada, and I was never able to do that.

Over time, I was able to get other issues, such as the Police Review Commission. I had that put in place to review police misconduct.

The most famous piece of legislation that I was associated with came after the MGM fire in 1981. That was the Retrofit Law. I pushed it through the Legislature mainly because I was Chairman of the Human Resources Committee, which took care of all

S.B. 39, which authorizes the creation of a police review board, passed in 1999.

the fire legislation. When I was driving down the freeway, I saw all this smoke billowing from the MGM Hotel, and I thought that something needed to be done about this. When I checked, I learned that they would not have had the fire, if they had retrofit the hotel with sprinkler systems. As Chairman of the Human Resources Committee, it was within my jurisdiction to do something about that. So I got the bill and introduced it.

At that time, we had a rule that required an introduced bill to be kept on the desk overnight. They didn't want to send bills right to the committee. They wanted it to sit up there, and let people look at it. I don't know why. I always thought it was because the legislation I had started to introduce in the Senate could have made it, but they wanted to put it up on the desk and let it stay overnight. On that same night, they had the Hilton fire, and some people got killed.

I was able to get only one person to sign on to that retrofit bill, and that was Bill Hernstadt. Bill Hernstadt signed onto that bill, and we pushed that through. I pushed it through my committee with the assistance of the State Fire Marshal, a guy by the name of Tom Huddleston, who realized, more than I did, the effect of this piece of legislation. My concentration was on the MGM fire, but he saw the

Neal and Hernstadt sponsored S.B. 214, which requires sprinkler systems for fire protection in hotels and requires fire codes in counties and cities.

wider application of that. Actually, it turned out that we retrofitted the whole state! The hotels or any building over 50 feet and had 150 people enter it had to be retrofitted, with the exception of churches. We didn't deal with churches. So that bill was pushed out of my committee and sent to the Assembly.

The Governor at that time was Bob List. He sent his bill to the Assembly, and he realized the effect it would have. He wanted to get credit for it, but he sent it to the wrong committee, which was chaired by a friend of mine—a guy by the name of Jack Jeffrey. Jack Jeffrey had received my bill and the Governor's bill. He came down to the Senate and asked me what I wanted to do with the Governor's bill. I said, "Take all of the good things out of the Governor's bill, amend them into mine, send it back up to us, and we'll pass it." And that's what he did.

As a result, that became the best fire law in the world dealing with high-rise structures. There's no Legislature in the world that did what we had done with that piece of legislation by retrofitting all of the high-rises in the whole state. Huddleston became a great consultant after being the Fire Marshal, and he wrote me a letter that said that the State owes me a debt for what I had done. This bill will save lives, and it will reduce insurance premi-

John E. (Jack) Jeffrey (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1974 to 1990. He was Assembly Majority Leader in 1983, 1987, and 1989.

ums. He said that because of my bill, this state and its industry are safer as a result, and their premiums would go down in terms of their insurance costs. Of course, the hotels didn't like that bill too much. Instead of them actually paying for the retrofitting, they got revenue bonds, which meant that the whole nation paid for it. [chuckles]

So that legislation was one that I was most proud of. It became a model piece of legislation for many states throughout the United States and in countries throughout the world. That was my contribution.

During the time I was Chairman of that committee, I also helped to create the library system within the state of Nevada. We passed a \$20 million bond issue to build libraries throughout the state. One of my great supporters in that was a lady who had moved up from the Assembly—Jean Ford. She was very heavy into libraries, so we got together and passed that bond issue. When Jean left the Senate, I went on and further developed that in terms of the local people here in Clark County, giving them the authority to go ahead and build libraries. That's why you see a lot of these big libraries around the county here. Then we followed that up by making sure that all the bills that we passed within the Legislature or the ordinances passed within the county—if it's

Jean E. Ford (Clark) served in the Assembly from 1972 to 1976 as a Republican and in the Senate from 1978 to 1982 as a Democrat. She passed away in 1998.

local, county, or city—would be put in the libraries within that area. All of the laws that we pass now go to those libraries throughout the state. That was not being done, yet we charged our citizens with knowing the law. But they did not have access to the law, so we gave them access.

Bennett: You're talking about the *Statutes of Nevada* and the *Nevada Revised Statutes*—the physical books—being placed in every library?

Neal: Yes. Yes! That's what they have to do. That's what we passed.

Of course, my last big fight was with gaming. Now we've done these guys a great service by passing the retrofit law. With sprinkler systems in all the high-rise hotels, their customers are safe. But they don't want to pay any taxes. The last time that the gaming tax was increased was in 1987, when Don Mello was pushing the tax. I was on the Tax Committee when that was being done. Gaming came in with their lobbyists and said that if we let them go with a quarter percent, they'd check it out and see what they could do next time or in the very near future. The next session came, but they didn't do anything. They lied to us. I watched almost 16 years go by before anything happened in terms of taxes. Finally, after pushing and nudging and talking about them,

Donald R. Mello (D-Sparks) served in the Assembly from 1963 to 1982 and in the Senate from 1982 to 1989.

we finally got a bill passed in my last session. That was when Kenny Guinn—a Republican—was Governor. I had built that issue up in the minds of people so that gaming knew that if it ever went to a ballot question—for any type of gaming tax increase, even up to 20 percent—it would pass. Gaming saw that. So they gave a half a percent, which took it from 6.25 to 6.75 percent. That's where it stands right now.

Strangely enough, the teachers did not support me when I asked them to support me in terms of increasing the gaming tax. I explained why we were going to need to increase this particular tax, and I always had a good argument. When you bring tourists into the state of Nevada like we were doing—an average of about 45 million a year—those tourists become temporary residents while they're here. As such, they need health care; they utilize our water resources; they need police protection; and they utilize our roads. I said that we should tax gaming for those services; otherwise, that bill falls on the permanent population, which was about two million people. That argument was beginning to sell and make a lot of sense. Guinn bought it, and we increased those taxes by a half a percent, which was not enough. I thought it should go up to at least eight percent—maybe 8.5 percent—where the teachers are now trying to put it. I guess in that way it made

me a prophet because now they're trying to get it there. That was one of the big fights that I had.

One of the other fights that I had with the gaming establishment was with one particular individual, Steve Wynn. Steve Wynn came to the Legislature in the early 1990s and wanted to get an exemption from sales tax on the purchase of art, such as Rembrandts, Gauguins, and Cézannes. I was opposed to the exemption because we already had too many exemptions. See, our exemptions now exceed the tax base. If we got rid of all the exemptions—just reverse them—we wouldn't have a problem within the State. He got it passed, but he made one mistake when he got it passed, which was not in the bill: He wanted to charge the people of the State of Nevada \$6.50 each to go see his art. Now he already got an exemption from the people from paying taxes, and he wanted to charge them, too.

I went before the Tax Commission, where he was trying to get this through, and I fought him. We had four meetings. The first two were just three lawyers across the board and myself; the next two meetings, he showed up. He's a very good speaker, and I guess he thought he was going to show me. He's supposed to be the king of Nevada. He went before the Tax Commission, and nobody else

A.B. 536, which exempts certain artworks from sales taxes, passed in 1997. It was amended by S.B. 521, which passed in 1999.

was there but me. I'm the only one arguing this point. I guess everybody else was afraid of him. So the Tax Commission moved the fourth meeting to Carson City. I paid my own way up there. I was not going to give up this fight. I guess he flew up in his jet plane. [chuckles] So I got to thinking that this guy has a vanity problem and has probably said something in some major publication about how he wants to use this art. Lo and behold, a friend of mine in Carson City came up with an article from the *New Yorker* where he said that he wanted to sell the art to the high rollers. But he was telling the Tax Commission that he wanted to improve the culture of the State of Nevada and have something the kids would come to see. He made a mistake because I've examined every word. My argument was this: We'd have people go through the casinos to see the art. That tells me that he's trying to create gamblers out of our young folks. [chuckles] He responded that he'd have a separate door for them to go through.

But he lost that argument! He lost that argument. The tax people ruled against him. I remember telling some friends of ours who were sitting in the audience after that that he would institute that charge anyway because he believes that he's king of Nevada. I said that when he did, he would have a problem coming

with that. [chuckles] I said, “If he introduces that charge, he’s going to wind up paying approximately \$15 million for this tax exemption that he got.” And he did. Come the end of the year, he introduced that charge and filed for the exemption. He went before the Tax Commission to get it, and the Tax Commission would not allow the exemption. Steve Wynn hired Harvey Whittemore. As the lobbyist on it, Harvey Whittemore got this admission fee put into law. When the bill came up before the Legislature, I didn’t give a speech, like I’d done before, and Harvey wondered why I didn’t get upset. I voted against it, but I didn’t say a word.

*Reno attorney
Harvey Whittemore
began lobbying the
Legislature in 1978.*

Then Wynn applied to get the exemption, [chuckles] but the Tax Commission didn’t give it to him because the law couldn’t be retroactive, which I knew. I didn’t argue the point because he could not get it retroactively; he had to pay. And that—boom—started him going down. Kirk Kerkorian came in, telling him off, and he wound up selling him the whole concern. Now he’s coming back with the Wynn Hotel. But that was one of the things that I really liked about him.

It was kind of funny. [chuckles] Later, Steve Wynn was on television, and some reporter asked him what he thought about Senator Neal. He said, “He’s vindictive.”

[Laughter] Vindictive—no! I was just up there trying to protect the public from him trying to rob them. I think he must have had about \$300 million in art that he'd already purchased, and then he wanted a tax exemption on it. But he wanted to charge the people to come see the art. When the Tax Commission tells you not to do something, but you do it, the only thing they have is to take away the exemption.

After that meeting in Carson City, the late Joseph Foley—who was an attorney in Las Vegas, one of the Foley brothers, and Helen Foley's father—called me up early one morning and asked me who helped me with that. I said, "No one." He said, "Do you know what you've done to him?" I said, "Well, yes. If he goes and institutes an admission fee, he's going to have to pay approximately \$15 million for the tax exemption." Joe said, "You ought to come and work for me." [Laughter]

Those are the feel-good things that you go through in this particular process. You try and protect the public, and you have those things that happen. When you come out and challenge someone, you have nothing but your courage. Of course, you're not getting any support that the paper's going to write about. They're going to give the facts, but they're not going to give the editorials because this guy you're challenging buys advertisements from

Joseph M. Foley was a University Regent from 1984 to 1996. He passed away in 2003.

Helen A. Foley (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1980 to 1982 and in the Senate from 1982 to 1986.

them. All you've got is your courage to go out and try to do the best job you can.

So when time came for me— I had put my departure period at 32 years. I looked at it four years at a time, but if I made it to 32 years, why not just walk away from it? And that I did with no regrets. But what I'm being told now is that a voice like mine has completely disappeared from the process. That's the sad part. We do not have anybody to challenge those issues that needed to be challenged. And that, I find, is to my dislike. I did not think that that would happen. When I went back up for the induction into the Hall of Fame—I thought [chuckles] it was political games, myself—one Senator got up and said, "We have not had a gaming tax bill introduced in this Senate since he left." But now you've got the teachers out there fighting and trying to get something on. This time it's a constitutional amendment. So I get some solace out of that, seeing that I did reach somebody. Somebody did wake up.

I found it very strange that our Legislature did not see gaming as a privilege that the people extended to the gamblers. Wynn and those guys out on the Strip do not own gaming. Gaming is owned by the people of the state of Nevada. The Legislature, in my judgment, did not see it that way. They saw it as a private concern. Of course, the building of the hotel is

a private concern, but the gaming was a privileged right extended to the gamers. I always wonder why it was so difficult for our Legislature to see that and tax gaming accordingly. If you let gaming run amok in a state, it will make your community very, very poor because the only product that gaming creates in a community is an empty pocket. That's why the mob, when they were operating, operated on Fremont Street and the Strip. They did not allow any gaming houses to get out into the communities because the only person who makes money from gaming is the person who actually owns a casino. It's not the individual who goes in there and plays the game. It's just like the lottery. They let you win every now and then, but just think about the millions of people who put up their dollars and did not get anything. But they publicize the ones who win and keep you coming back with the idea that maybe you could win, too. So that was one of the problems.

I wasn't against gaming. I was against the way they allowed it to operate. My argument has always been: Go back to the history and see what they offered. They said that they would take care of our educational system, and they will not be a burden on the State. My argument was that gaming has now become like the miners. They take, and they give back

nothing. And that's what it is. They said that they are the highest contributors to the State. They should be because they also created the social problems that go along with gaming. See, I was talking about gaming addiction long before it was popular. If you went to these guys and talked about gaming addiction, they'd want to run you out of the place. They'd argue that we're infringing upon that individual's right to go out and do whatever he wants to do. But I said that they put it there as an attraction to tell that person he can win money, but once he loses all of his money and becomes a burden on the State, they don't want to help pay for that. And that's where we are today.

Now they have begun to set up little gaming addiction programs, but they started out having the State pay for that. What I found most destructive in terms of our whole tax system, as it relates to gaming, was that instead of taxing gaming and have them pay for the problems that they create, the Legislature increases the fees on driver's licenses, insurance premiums, sales tax, and all of that stuff to make up the difference. But how long can you do that? Pretty soon that source gets expended; it can't take anymore. I think we're at that particular point today. That was one of the things that I was trying to correct. Look at a state like Illinois. Illinois lets the gaming

houses that operate there make \$250 million and then everything they make over that is taxed at 70 percent. But you come here with a proposal, and people say, “No! No! No! No! It’s going to hurt us!” But it doesn’t hurt them because what you’re actually taxing is the gross. When a person puts his money in a slot machine, that pile of money that falls into the bucket is what’s being taxed. You’re not taxing the person who loses the money. Whereas, if you put on a room tax, you’re taxing the person who actually purchases a room because then they have to apply the tax to that person having to pay it. But the gambler who puts in a dollar is not taxed. Only the gross that falls into the bucket. That’s what they don’t want you to touch. That’s sacrosanct. And that’s what I told them. I said, “Look, we need to touch the bucket.” [chuckles] “We’re going to get more money from that bucket.” That’s why they disagreed with me, and some of the gamers who are still there—like the Terry Lannis, the Steve Wynns, and those who have been out there for a long time—just didn’t like it, even though they *knew* that they were wrong. But they just didn’t want you to touch that. Again, what I found so devastating in terms of their position was that if you tax them, they can write it off against their federal income taxes. That was the devastating part about that. So we

tax them at 6.75 percent now? They write that off against their federal income taxes. The way the gross gaming tax is structured is if they don't make the money, they don't have to pay the tax. And I sat up there, looking at those suckers, and I said, "Oh, Lord, they just get away with murder, and they're just killing poor folks." Well, so much for that.

Bennett: I hate to say it, but we are at the end of our time. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Neal: I hope I've given you enough. [chuckles]

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**RELEASE FORM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau

I, JOE NEAL hereby authorize Get Consensus, L.L.C. to
(Interviewee) (Interviewer)

record my oral history for purposes of the Oral History Project of the Nevada Legislature conducted by Get Consensus pursuant to an Agreement between the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) and Get Consensus, L.L.C., signed on January 10, 2008. I understand that the purpose of the Oral History Project is to collect digital audio tapes or video tapes, or both, and written transcripts of my interview. In addition, I understand that I may provide to the interviewer selected related documentary materials, including, without limitation, photographs, manuscripts and other memorabilia. I understand that the audio tapes, video tapes and written transcripts will be deposited and archived in the permanent collections of the Research Library of the LCB or transferred by the LCB to an appropriate entity within the State of Nevada for permanent storage as determined necessary by the LCB. I further understand that any documentary materials provided by me may, as determined necessary by the LCB, be deposited and archived in the permanent collections of the Research Library of the LCB, transferred by the LCB to an appropriate entity within the State of Nevada for permanent storage, or returned to me.

The audio tapes, video tapes, written transcripts and documentary materials produced as a result of my interview, may be used for research, scholarly and educational purposes and may be used by the Nevada Legislature and the LCB in public educational presentations, including, without limitation, books, audio or video documentaries, slide-tape presentations, exhibits, articles or presentations on the Internet or successor technologies. I agree that the LCB may use the audio tapes, video tapes, written transcripts and documentary materials produced as a result

of my interview to compile the oral histories of former Nevada Legislators and that such compilation may be made available for sale by the LCB. I further agree that the LCB may use my name, video or photographic image or likeness, statements, performance and voice reproduction, or other sound effects, for purposes relating to the Oral History Project without further approval on my part. I understand that when the material is used, proper acknowledgment regarding my contribution to the Oral History Project will be made.

By giving permission, I understand that I do not give up any copyright or performance rights that I may hold and that this permission does not preclude any use that I may want to make of the content of the information contained in these recordings. I do not give permission for my oral history and related materials to be used for purposes other than as specified in this Release Form without further written permission.

I herein warrant that I have not granted exclusive use of my oral history or related documentary materials to any other person. The only conditions which I place on the use of my oral history and related materials are as follows:



 Signature of Interviewee

04-20-08
 Date

Address: 301 Lanza Ave
North Las Vegas, Nev.

702-399-2114
 Phone Number



Nevada Legislature Oral History Project Biographical Information Form

Full name: Joseph (Joe) M. Neal

Date of birth: July 28, 1935 **Place of birth:** Mounds, Louisiana

Parents: Joseph Neal and Josephine Watson

Date of arrival in Nevada (if not native born): May 1964

Spouse (name and date of marriage): Estelle Ann DeConge
May 29, 1965

Children: Charisse, Tania, Withania, Dina Amelia, Joseph

Religious affiliation: Catholic

Education: Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, B.A., Political Science and History, postgraduate work in law; Institute of Applied Science, Chicago, Illinois, civil identification and criminal investigation

Military service: United States Air Force, 1954-1958

Year of first campaign for public office and title of office: Nevada Senate, 1973

Home address in your district at the time of legislative service: 304 Lance Ave.,
North Las Vegas, NV 89030

Occupation during legislative service: Personnel Administration, Reynolds
Electrical and Engineering Company

Activities and hobbies during legislative service: Member of community organizations, serving as Board Member and past Chairman of Economic Opportunity Board, past Chairman of Greater Las Vegas Plan, Secretary of Nevada's Voting League

Other elected offices held: None

Occupations, activities, and hobbies after leaving legislative office: Retired.
Reading.

Personal and professional achievements: Outstanding Community Service, Local Branch, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1976; A.A.U.F. of the Year, 1977-1978; Outstanding Civic Work, First A.M.E. Church, 1978, Nevada Legislature – In Appreciation, CCTA TIP, 1979; Friend of Education Award, NSEA, 1986; Service to Community, Forty-second Western Province Council, Las Vegas Alumni Theta Sigma Chapters, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., 1989; Honorary Member for Continuous Support and Dedication to the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Committee, 1989; Century Club Member for Outstanding Support of Nevada State AFL-CIO C.O.P.E., 1989; Appreciation for Outstanding Services, Loyalty and Support to All Mankind, Affirmative Action Committee; Lower Colorado Region, Bureau of Reclamation, United States Department of the Interior, 1990; Guest Speaker, Lewis F. Cottrell No. 339, 1991; Reverend Jesse Louise Jackson Distinguished Political Award for Service Rendered on Behalf of All the Citizens of Nevada, NAACP, 1991; Elijah Lovejoy Award, Order of Elks Grand Lodge IBPOEW, 1992, Support and Dedication to Working Men and Women, Local Joint Board, Culinary Local No. 226 and Bartenders Local No. 165, 1992; Outstanding Support, Alpha Temple, Paran Lodge 1508, 1992; Liberty Award, National Alliance Against Race and Political Oppression, 1992; Distinguished Service to Libraries, Las Vegas Library District, 1993; Appreciation for Support, Alpha Temple No. 1180, 1994; Outstanding Achievement for the Community in Celebration of African American Month, Clark High School, 1994; Appreciation and Gratitude Award, Friends of Clark County Law Library, 1995; Lifetime Achievement Award for Public Service, Reno-Sparks Branch No. 1112, NAACP; Lifetime Commitment Award, Nevada AFL-CIO; Civil Liberty Award, American Civil Liberties Union-Nevada; past Chairman, Greater Las Vegas Plan.

Is there any other information you would like us to know about you before we conduct the interview?

No.



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ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM

Get Consensus, LLC, is owned by Dale Erquiaga who serves as the project's manager and conducted some of the interviews. Dale is a native Nevadan with an extensive background in Nevada politics, having served as Director of the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs and Chief Deputy Secretary of State. With both Nevada and Arizona clients, Get Consensus is based in Phoenix.

Dana Bennett is the project's leader and has conducted most of the interviews. Currently a PhD candidate in public history at Arizona State University with a particular interest in the women who served in the Nevada Legislature between 1919 and 1960, she has also conducted oral histories with former Arizona legislators. Prior to returning to school, she was part of the Nevada legislative process for many years.

Gwen Clancy is the project's award-winning videographer. Based in Reno, she hosts and produces the documentary series, "Exploring Nevada," which is seen on local TV throughout the state.

Jean Stoess transcribed and indexed the interviews. A long-time Reno resident, Jean is familiar with Nevada politics in both elected and appointed capacities and has indexed several Nevada history works.