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Oral History Collection

Judge Ed Gossett

Interviewer: Dr. H. W. Kamp

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

Date: June 27, 1969

Judge Gossett: Dr. Kamp of North Texas State University has asked me to participate in the Oral History Project of that fine institution. I, of course, am flattered with this request. I suppose I would be immodest if I was to assume I might contribute anything to the project, but I am happy to undertake to do as best I can. Perhaps as the beginning I should give a little background, so-called biographical data. Naturally, those of us who participate in this program, I assume would want to put his best foot forward, and perhaps things said might be of a self-serving nature. In other words, we would not want to show ourselves in a bad light, but rather in a good light if possible.

I was born in Sabine Parish, Louisiana, January 27, 1902. I'm the oldest of nine children born to Ed Gossett. In fact, my name is Ed Lee Gossett, Jr., but I early dropped the "Jr." and dropped the Lee because I thought "Jr. was a little bit of a

deprecation. My father and mother were both born in the area of De Queen, Arkansas. My mother was Sarah Ann McKinley. My father was an only child. His mother remarried, so I have no near relatives by the name of Gossett. I assume I do have some distant relatives, although I've never been interested in geneology and have never tried to examine my family tree further back than my father and mother, both of whom I think were great people, both of whom were buried in a country churchyard at Grassland in Lynn County, Texas.

When I was six years old my mother and dad moved from Louisiana. My father was a foreman in a lumber camp. They decided that a lumber camp was not a good place to rear a family, so they looked all over Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana for a farm. Dad finally bought the sorriest farm in all three states, seven miles north of Henrietta in Clay County, Texas. While I claim to have grown up on a farm, our life was one of poverty in those days, and I never really enjoyed my agricultural life.

I determined at a very early age that I was not going to live on a farm. When I was sixteen years old I was a senior in high school, rather I had finished the tenth grade in a country school called Ragtown in Garza County, Texas. I was the only student in the

tenth grade, six month schools. I went to a little town called Sutherland, Nebraska, to work for an uncle to finish high school. That was in the fall of 1918, during the war. I remember that I was in bed with the flu when the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.

I graduated from high school, caught the first train back to Texas. That year I matriculated in the University of Texas, Austin, being the largest town I'd ever been in. I had no idea what the University of Texas was like or would be like. I thought at the time that it was the best school in the state of Texas, and I was determined that I would take two degrees, an A.B. and a L.L.B. from the University of Texas

Why I wanted to take a L.L.B., I'm not sure, but from the earliest childhood I wanted to be a lawyer, primarily, I guess, because I thought lawyers were people of status and influence and those who could make a reasonably good living. But even at the time I wasn't particularly interested in getting rich. I wanted to be in a profession that would be of public service and where I could earn a reasonable livelihood for myself and family.

Now if I brag a little bit about my university career I hope you will pardon it. When I entered the University,

I didn't know a human being who ever had been in the University of Texas. I had to work all of my way through school. The only money I ever received after I was sixteen years old was \$100 from my father that I used to matriculate at the University in 1919. Let me say here that I spent seven years in the University of Texas taking an A.B. degree in 1924, a L.L.B. degree in 1927.

I dropped out one year to teach school. I was principal of a three teacher country school known as Hackberry. The school no longer exists. It's between Post and Slaton on the south plains.

While in the University of Texas, I suppose I should brag about, if anything, my extracurricular activities. Since I was always working, I didn't excel in grades. I spent three years on the debating team at the University of Texas. I think I got more good from that than anything I did, except working my way through school. Three years while I was in the University, I sold magazines in the summertime. One year I sold Wear-Ever Aluminum. I remember the last year I was in the University I earned \$1,500, which was a substantial sum in those days. I supplemented that income by being advertising manager of the Texas Ranger

for two years. Among my other extracurricular activities at the University I served on the Y.M.C.A. cabinet for four years. I was president of the Baptist Student Unions statewide two years. I served in all branches of student government, student assembly. I was chairman of the Men's Honor Council. My last year I was president of the student association. I went out for all forensic activities. I tied one year for extemporaneous speaking, one year I won first prize in oratory, and one year I won first prize in debate.

I knew no lawyers. I had no connections anywhere. When I was finishing law school and looking about for a location, I heard of the town of Vernon. I knew Vernon to be a city of some 10,000. I assumed that I could make a living there. I wrote the best, what I thought to be the best, law firm in town, and asked for a position. I wound up as the junior partner of the law firm Berry, Stokes, Warlick, and Gossett. I walked into the law office with my name on the door the first time I'd ever been in a law office. It was one of the happiest selections of my life, because my partners were all fine lawyers and fine gentlemen. They took me in with open arms. I got along very well.

In 1932 I went in for District Attorney and was elected. That was the forty-sixth judicial district, composed of Ford, Hardeman, and Wilbarger counties. I served two terms as District Attorney in that district.

In 1936 I elected to run for Congress. As a matter of fact, always being interested in public affairs and public service, having been a campus politician at the University of Texas, I moved out to Vernon with the intention of ultimately running for Congress. However, I didn't make that ambition known. I thought then and think now that if you lay out a blueprint of what you intend to do in politics, it's a very bad practice because you ordinarily get cut down by somebody who has counter ambitions.

At any rate, in the 1936 campaign there were seven people running for Congress against the incumbent W.D. McFarland. There were two other candidates from the town of Vernon. Nobody had ever heard of Ed Gossett, so I had to start from scratch. I wound up carrying eight of the fifteen counties in the Thirteenth Congressional District, and I was in the run-off with incumbent congressman, W.D. McFarland. He defeated me in the run-off election, I've always said primarily because of my amateur operations and that I wasn't sufficiently

indoctrinated in the ways of politics. At any rate, after my defeat I congratulated the winner and told him I would be a candidate in the next election in 1938.

In the meantime, my term as District Attorney having expired, I moved to Wichita Falls, the biggest town in the Thirteenth Congressional District.

In the 1938 campaign I was more successful. However, it was a hard, arduous campaign. I recall that Franklin D. Roosevelt came through the district at that time. The biggest crowd I'd ever seen assembled around the train as it stopped in Wichita Falls, and he put his arm around the incumbent W.D. McFarland and gave him his blessing. Notwithstanding this disadvantage, I did win and was elected to the congress in 1938.

In that campaign I remember I had a large bulletin board in which I had place exhibits that Mr. McFarland had used against opponents in previous campaigns. I pointed out that all of his opponents had been labeled as nincompoops, nitwits, and so on, and that it was something strange that no person of ability or status or character would ever run against Mr. McFarland.

I brushed off the presidential endorsement by saying that this was a democracy in which each voter had a right and a duty to make up his own mind and vote

for the person he thought could do the best job, that we didn't subscribe to the divine right of kingship. The king, whoever he might be, couldn't point to the humblest citizen and tell him for whom he could vote. That seemed to appeal to the voters, among other things.

Mr. McFarland was an ardent supporter of the New Deal. He had voted for all the New Deal legislation, some of which I attacked at that time. I remember he had a bill that I called the "horsepower" bill. One often gets beat in political campaigns by what you might call irrelevant and immaterial issues. The "horsepower" bill, which Mr. McFarland had introduced, proposed to levy a tax of \$15 per horsepower on every industrial motor. The Thirteenth Congressional District was an oil district in which many of the operations in the oil fields were run by motors, and I pointed out that a tax of \$15 per horsepower on these motors would put all these people out of business. So I used Mr. McFarland's "horsepower" bill rather effectively in that campaign.

It might be interesting to point out just here that that was 1938. There were three incumbent Texas congressmen defeated in that campaign. Incidentally, Texas rightfully was rather proud of its delegation, as it's always been. Texas has by and large had a very

fine delegation in the Congress. At that time, because of the seniority rules in Congress, Texas had more chairmanships of major committees than any other delegation in the Congress. I remember Mr. Hatton Summers was chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Mr. Fritz Lanham was chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, Mr. Marvin Jones was chairman of the Agricultural Committee, Judge (they called him Judge) Judge John Joseph Mansfield was chairman of one of the important committees, and Texas had ranking membership on many of the other major committees in Congress.

But in that election Mr. Paul Kilday of San Antonio, Bexar County, defeated Mr. Maury Maverick, who was also one of the favorites of Mr. Roosevelt, and he had endorsed him in his trip through Texas.

Mr. Lindley Beckworth from over in East Texas defeated the incumbent in that area, so we had three new congressmen who were members of the seventy-sixth Congress which convened in January, 1939. Mr. Beckworth and Mr. Kilday both served in the Congress a good while after I resigned in 1951.

Dr. Kamp asked me about campaign financing. That was always a problem. In my first campaign in 1936, I

would up in debt. I had very little campaign contributions. I probably spent in the entire campaign, we'll say, in the neighborhood of \$10,000. In the 1938 campaign financing became a great problem with me. My father conveyed to me his farm at that time, and I mortgaged the farm for \$3,500 to start that campaign. I had more contributions then than in '36 because people thought I had a chance to win. People always want to put their money on a winner. That's not entirely unreasonable, but it's sometimes very unhappy for the person who's running for public office. It's always been a sore spot with me that people who have money to spend politically, and I think they should spend money politically, ought to put it on the person that they thing would make the best officer.

However, they seem to want to place it on the person they think is going to win. I guess that brings up the old adage that nothing succeeds like success. If they think you're going to win they want to get on your bandwagon.

So in the 1938 campaign, I again ran it on a shoe-string. I had to go into a run-off at that time, so when I was elected I imagine in that campaign we may have spent in the neighborhood of \$15,000. At any rate,

when I was sworn into the Congress as a freshman in January, 1939, I was \$8,000 in debt. I had \$8,000 less than nothing, and that was considerable money at that time and probably still is.

I married in 1939, after I went to Congress. I married a young lady for whom I had gotten a job teaching school in Vernon, Mary Hellen Mosley of Quanah. She taught school there during both of my campaigns. If I had been elected in '36, we would have probably gotten married then, but we couldn't afford it. We started having children pretty soon after marriage. This may be a little out of context, but I married in May of 1939, a few months after I had received my seat in Congress. We started having children shortly thereafter. Our first son was born in January of 1941. Then we had two daughters in short order. Within the next seven years we had become the proud parents of five children.

I might throw in here that's one of the reasons we had to leave Congress. We got to the point where we couldn't support a big family and make all the trips back home that we had to make. Times have changed considerably. At the time I resigned from the Congress we were getting \$12,500 per year, and the Congress paid for one trip home per session. Now they pay for one

trip home per month and the congressmen receive in the neighborhood of \$40,000 a year, plus some tax exempt expense allowances, plus a good many other fringe benefits which probably are not of great concern at this time.

Of course, when I went to Congress we were just coming out of the so-called depression. One of the distressing things to me at that time was job applications. I'd get letters from a lot of fine friends in Texas, my district, wanting government jobs. As a matter of fact, I had lots of lawyers write me saying, "Ed, I'm not making a living. Can't you get me a government job?" They would write me on a confidential basis. Being a rather sympathetic individual, this worried me considerably. My files in the early years in the Congress were completely filled with people who wanted government jobs. Many of them would come and sit in my office. Naturally, I did the best I could, but I couldn't get too many of them jobs. That situation changed, of course, with the advent of the war, and I assume that members of Congress now are not harassed particularly with people who want government jobs, but in those days it was a big item.

Those were the days too, of the W.P.A. and the P.W.A. and of the C.C.C. You know those of us who are

conservatives, and I count myself one of those, thought it was rather shameful that we had to spend so much money on what was denominated relief. Actually, W.P.A. was a great project. The total money spent on W.P.A. in three or four years of operations was less than \$2,000,000,000. In fact, we spend a lot more money on any number of projects today than we spent in three or four years on W.P.A. That was known as the Works Progress Administration. Then they also had the P.W.A., Public Works Administration. Public Works Administration built school buildings, highways, and a lot of public works throughout the country. Then we had the C.C.C. in those days, Civilian Conservation Corps, and they employed a lot of young people. All of this work was useful work contributing to community growth, and the folks who were doing the job were paid a living wage. Now in retrospect, even though we conservatives were grumbling at the time, the W.P.A. and the P.W.A. and the C.C.C. all were very good constructive programs and the total amount of money spent on them now is peanuts, as spent on them then, as compared to what we spend now. It seems to me that a revival of those programs might be in order, but that's a matter of opinion.

I remember that when I went to the Congress in 1939 the total federal budget was \$9,000,000,000. The interest on the public debt today exceeds much more than the total national budget when I went to Congress as a freshman. I recall when the national debt limit was \$40,000,000,000. We raised it to \$45,000,000,000. We thought that was inviting public disaster, maybe. Then we raised it to \$50,000,000,000, and, of course, all of you know that the public debt is many, many times that today.

Of course, these things are all a matter of relativity, but the point I'm trying to make is that it seems to me that we ought at least to get what in legal parlance is called quid pro quo, something in return for the money spent. Now people who are completely disabled, that's a different matter, but able-bodied people shouldn't be given handouts in this country. If there are no jobs available, if they can't find gainful employment in industry or in private undertakings, then the government ought to have some sort of W.P.A. or P.W.A. or C.C.C., so that the person could earn a livelihood and retain his self respect while he is doing it.

Oral History Collection

Judge Ed Gossett

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. H. W. Kamp

Date: August 1, 1969

Dr. Kamp: Judge Gossett, you mentioned that you had made an important speech in your first campaign concerning the primary problems of the nation. I wondered if you would care to comment on that speech before we start on your congressional service.

Judge Gossett: Well, my first campaign speech was made in Henrietta, Texas. I called that my old home town because I had gone through the first eight grades of school in a country school in Clay County called Willow Springs, so it in effect was a home town, if not the home town. I recall quite well that as a predicate to what I was proposing as remedies I announced that the three great enemies of society were war, crime, and disease. This was in 1936. I remember that I was ridiculed a little bit by some of the people because they thought that was oversimplification of matters that were being handled correctly. Of course, now that was several years prior to World War II. So I like

to look back now and think that most of the statesmen of the present era are inclined to agree with that. I noticed that in the presidential campaign they all emphasized peace as being the great objective we were seeking in the world. Of course, everybody now has the great obsessions about doing something about crime, growth and cost of crime. We're devoting more and more money, as we should, to medical research. As a matter of fact, notwithstanding the tremendous advances of medical science and technology, we all know that even today there are many things that medicine knows very little about, such as cancer and a lot of the diseases pertaining to the heart and blood system, even what to do about the common cold. I don't think anybody has figured out what to do about that. So I still think that my original analysis of what the big problems were and the things we had to fight, the evils that we at least ought to minimize in human society were and still are war, crime, and disease. If I had to start all over again today I think I'd have pretty much the same philosophy of the matter.

Now you asked me something about my first term in Congress. Of course, nearly all freshmen

are pretty well lost when they go to Congress because it's a big operation with many rules and traditions. It's a rather awesome experience. When I was sworn into Congress in January of 1939, that was before, some years before, the so-called Reorganization Bill. At that time they had around fifty committees in the Congress. After the Reorganization Bill, which I believe was in '44, the committees were reduced to seventeen major committees, and at that time you served on only one major committee and a few special committees, like the District of Columbia and the so-called House Committee on Un-American Activities. Those were special committees and you can serve on one of those committees and one other major committee. As a freshmen I was placed on six small committees: Irrigation and Reclamation, Census, Revision of the Laws, Elections, Territories and Insular Affairs, and Immigration and Naturalization. After the reorganization and the reduction of committees, the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and the Elections Committee were all merged under the jurisdiction of the House Judiciary Committee.

It might be interesting just to comment on how Congress works. I said then and I say now, or

I learned then and I am more confirmed in that belief since, that the committees of the Congress tend to become the creatures of the departments that they represent. For example, the Armed Services Committee, notwithstanding its expert staff and their personnel, depends on the armed services for their data and information. They tend to become the exponents of the armed services point of view on most things. Take the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, as it was then. They would tend to become the creatures of the Post Office Department.

I'll illustrate that by a story. During my first term of Congress they had a bill in the Postal Affairs Committee trying to plug up the loopholes in the state's cigarette taxes. The states, and particularly Texas . . . Texas way maybe losing two million dollars a year by people bootlegging cigarettes through the Post Office. They would mail them from out-of-state to some address in the Post Office Department, and they wouldn't pay any state tax on it, so this was a bill to require the postmasters to cooperate with state officials in trying to apprehend people who

were avoiding payment of cigarette taxes. That required simply that the postmaster reveal to the law enforcement officers of a particular community who was getting cigarettes through the mail. It didn't really involve anymore than getting a list of those who were getting cigarettes through the mail. I remember Pat Neff, Jr., the son of former governor Pat Neff, was then an assistant attorney general, and he came to Washington representing the Attorney General's Department. While I was not on that committee I was interested in the legislation and being an old friend and schoolmate of Pat Neff, Jr., I escorted him around and took him over to the committee and introduced him and tried to help him with his testimony. Other attorney generals were there. To show you how the committee was controlled by and relied upon the Post Office Department, the Postmaster General just wrote a letter up to the Postal Affairs Committee and said, "We don't want to be bothered with this," and they refused to report out the bill, notwithstanding the massive testimony they had from state officials. Just one letter from the Postmaster General killed the bill, and that sort

of thing went on endlessly.

Now none of the committees of Congress, and this may be a good rule, will report today on any legislation pertaining to any department of the government without first referring that particular piece of legislation over to the department for its opinion. That's just routine. If the department files a denunciation of the bill and claims that it is bad, why it's got two strikes against it before you even start.

I'll tell you another story illustrative of why the committees have become the creatures of the departments they handle. I went on this little committee called the Committee of Irrigation and Reclamation. It wasn't a much sought after committee and about half the members on it were new members of Congress like myself. I knew nothing about irrigation and reclamation and very few other members of the committee knew anything about it. The chairman of the committee was an old gentleman from Idaho by the name of Compton White. Now this is no reflection on Compton White, but he had been a railroad engineer, and he wasn't a man of any great learning on the matters of irrigation and reclamation, but he was chairman of the committee.

They had a bill before that committee that consisted of 100 pages, and it was a revision of the Boulder Dam Project Act. Boulder Dam, I guess, was the first great big dam that was built in this country. This involved a change in the water rates, change in the power rates, involved controversies between the cities in lower California and upper California and everybody along the route. In came the lawyers for the Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of Interior under whose supervision the administration of the Boulder Dam was. They said, "Now here we've worked on this bill two or three years, and this is what it does, and this is what we need, and this is what we want." They had lawyers from San Francisco and Los Angeles and elsewhere all over the country. They came in and we had hearings on this bill for three or four weeks; they had the statisticians and the accountants and experts from the Bureau of Reclamation. Not any of us really knew what the bill was all about when we got through hearing all this testimony. On the assurance of the Bureau of Reclamation that it was a good bill and that they had to have it and that they had worked on it two or three years,

the committee voted it out. It comes up before the Congress, the Congress knew nothing about it, so they said, "Well, the committee must have known what they were doing, must have been a good bill or the committee wouldn't have reported it out." The committee report was written by the experts in the Department of Interior, so the Congress passed it. The bill went through the Congress. To this good day, I don't know whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, and not one congressman out of a hundred knew anymore about it than I did.

The committees rely on the departments, the Congress relies on the committees, and unless it's something that is glaringly apparent, the committee just takes the department's word for it, and the Congress takes the committee's word for it, and there you go.

That is one of the reasons for the tremendous growth of bureaucracy in this country. As a matter of fact, we say that the Congress is one of the three branches of government co-equal with the executive and judicial branch and that they ought to do this, that, and the other. Well, it's got to the place where the Congress simply can't do

the job that it ought to do and that people expect it to do. It's too involved, too intricate, and I have a distinct feeling that the biggest department of the government now is the administrative agencies of the government. They run it; they are the professionals. They are the career people. You take some five or six hundred agencies, and no mere congressman can keep up with what they're doing or how they're doing it. Now they are good men by and large, and many of them are very competent. That brings up the subject of bureaucracy. I often say and have said many times in speeches that you can take the most conservative man in any community in the state and put him at the head of a government bureau. He has been an individual hollering for government economy and government efficiency and reduction in spending and maybe complaining bitterly about the growing size and cost of the government, but he becomes an expert in his particular field. He gets sold on what his particular agency is doing. He's got him a lawyer, and he's got him a public relation man, and he's got experts on this, that and the other. He comes into the next session of

Congress with a glowing report about how big a job he's done, about how great a job he's done. He wants more personnel and more money and probably gets it.

So it's a sort of "frankenstein" growth that apparently we are unable to do anything about, and I think it's a matter of common knowledge that the size and cost of the federal government has grown astronomically within the last two decades. Now when I first went to Washington the size of the budget was \$9,000,000,000. That was all; that was 1939, \$9,000,000,000--that was all the federal government spent. Those were in the days of the WPA and PWA and we were getting out of the depression. We thought we'd spent an awful lot of money to get out of the depression. Now we look back. There were many people who thought the WPA was a bad thing. Well, it gave people employment and all the money we spent on the WPA throughout the depression wouldn't amount to over \$2,000,000,000. Most of the things that were being done like building schoolhouses and roads were constructive. We had the CCC and Soil Conservation Service, the Youth Conservation Corps, which were

all make-work for people unemployed. While we were all startled with what we thought the magnitude of those things were they were infinitesimal as compared with a lot of these programs we're embarked on today. There is not any continuity of what I'm saying, but I think that the depression approach would be a lot better than some of the approaches we're not taking in the poverty program and all of these relief programs. At least it gave the able bodied people who didn't have jobs a chance to earn what they were getting from the government by way of relief. I regret the departure we've made from that concept.

Back to these administrative agencies of the government, they write rules and regulations that have the effect of law. As a lawyer, and I think most lawyers feel the same way, you just can't keep up with what the law is anymore. If you get an act of Congress that's just the beginning point. You've got to get the rules and regulations of the various departments.

Kamp: Judge, could I ask you while we're on this matter of agencies and their relationship with the committees of Congress, did you perceive any

improvements in the committee member's ability to deal with agency bills after they consolidated those committees and you didn't have to serve on so many committees?

Gossett: Oh, I think so. I think the Reorganization Act was a good thing. It permitted the committees to hire administrative staffs which they had not theretofore been able to hire, and the administrative staffs theoretically are supposed to represent the other side of the case, so to speak, in hearings before the committees. But even the administrative staffs became pretty much agents of the departments. They get familiar with the people down in the departments, and they become friends, and they know them and have confidence in them. Pretty soon they're going along with what the Agricultural Department wants or the Interior Department wants or the Commerce Department wants or this department or that other department wants. Everyone of them, of course, wants more authority and more money and more appropriations, and most of them are doing what they think to be important work. So that is the cause of the growing size and cost of the federal government. Now I could go into a lot of

statistics, but you get down to the place where about one out of five people work for the government in some capacity or other, and it becomes something of a menace.

Kamp: Could we go back for just a moment to the way in which committee assignments were made prior to 1946? In other words, who assigned you to these committees, and did you have some preference you were allowed to ask?

Gossett: Well, the committee assignments are made now just as they were then. The Democratic members get their assignments from . . . the Democratic members of the Ways and Means committee, they constitute the committee on committees for the Democrats. They take into consideration the state and the area. The nation is divided into areas, and then it's divided into states. For example, a freshman congressman from Texas would have really not much of a choice. At that time we had twenty-one Democratic members of the Congress from Texas, so on the major committees there were already Texans on them. Now when I went to Congress, Mr. Fritz Lanham was chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, Mr. Hatton Summers was chairman of the Judiciary

Committee, Mr. Luther Johnson was the ranking member on the Committee on Foreign Relations, which I wanted to serve on at that time. Mr. Marvin Jones was chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture. All of the major committees had Texans on them with much more seniority than any freshman would have, so the assignments were made first on a regional basis, secondly on a state basis, and all on the basis of seniority. So if you were a freshman member from a big state with a big Democratic delegation, you just took what you could get.

Now the Republican committee assignments are made differently. The leader of the Republican Party in the Congress and the Republican Whip select a committee of four or five leading Republicans and they, after having a caucus of some kind, make their own assignments. I don't know why they do it differently from the Democrats but they always have.

The whole business works then, now, and has always worked on the basis of seniority, and really there's not much that you can do about it, and I don't have any great complaint, although there's

always complaints about the seniority system. Frequently the chairman of the committee would not be the most capable man on the committee, but it avoided intra-party, intra-committee politics, and I think it has worked pretty well over the years, and I wouldn't have any serious suggestions as to changing it.

Kamp: Did Mr. Rayburn in those days watch pretty carefully, particularly the committee assignments to the House Committee on Ways and Means?

Gossett: Mr. Rayborn was very careful about the committee assignments to the Ways and Means Committee. He took a big hand in it. In fact, he concerned himself with all of the assignments within the Democratic membership because he was the leader of the Democratic Party in the House during most of the time I was there. He was very resentful, I think rightfully so, that a lot of the oil people in Texas weren't particularly friendly to him, even though he had protected the depletion allowance which now appears to be under attack and is going to be cut. He was sold on the depletion allowance. He thought it was a good thing as I do. I think it was justified, but we won't go into a lot of

detail about the depletion allowance. But anyway, Mr. Rayburn was the man who kept the Ways and Means Committee from cutting depletion for many, many years, and it was because of conviction and also out of some loyalty to the state of Texas because the oil industry was the big industry in Texas. Mr. Rayburn felt that a lot of them were not particularly appreciative of his efforts in the matter and didn't know how much he had done for the industry along those lines.

Kamp: I wonder if you could recall and comment upon any particularly important legislative proposals that you worked on in the pre-World War II years, those that came before committees that you were on?

Gossett: Well, I was always interested in restrictive and selective immigration, and being on the Immigration Committee, I had a good deal to do with holding down what I called "radical proposals" for relaxing immigration laws. I don't know that I ought to take off on that particularly because it would require some preparation. It's a matter that most people are not informed about, and I have been distressed that over the years instead of tightening immigration we have relaxed immigration restrictions. You know, we had no immigration restrictions prior

to World War I, and right after World War I this country was being flooded by immigrants. It got up to the point where about a million and a half a year were coming in without any restrictions. So Congress undertook to pass what we have since called the Basic Immigration Laws, and they set up a quota system. Now the quota system simply meant that they were going to decide how many people were coming into this country and divide that among the different countries on the basis of the nationals of those countries that were already here. In other words, if 30 per cent of the people in this country were of English origin then we would permit 30 per cent of the total that we were going to admit to come from England. It was called the quota system. These basic laws were passed in 1924, I believe, it might have been '22, but at any rate they were going to use the 1910 census. A lot of the foreign elements in the North and East, say the Italians, just raised Cain about it because they had a lot of people come in here after 1910. They would get a greater quota by a later census. So finally Congress took the very latest census, the 1920 census, figured out

the national origins of the people already here, and based the quota system on that. It's true that the quota system has always favored Northern and Western Europeans, the British, the French, the Scandinavians, and to some extent the Germans. Those are the people who settled the country. That left the Italians, Hungarians, the Poles, and the Russians. They didn't have nearly as big a quota as they thought they ought to have. So they have been harping on and hammering on the immigration laws ever since they were passed. They've been changing them and punching holes in them. I fully expect the quota system, if the present trend continues, to be totally abandoned, which I think is highly unfortunate. Without any reference to who would make the best American citizen or whether or not there are any differences in people, assuming that they are all alike, we still have a right to maintain the ethnical composition of the country. After all the people who settled it and who lived here up to 1900 were the ones that took the brunt of conquering the frontier and making a nation out of this. I took that position all the time I was in the Congress--

I made a number of speeches on it--I contended that no one who lived abroad had any vested right to come to this country, that the only criteria that we should rely upon should be what was for the best interests of this country. We owed it to the folks who settled the country and who lived here prior to the time to retain this ethnic origin basis and a quota system. It got into a lot of racial politics, a lot of emotionalism, and a lot of bad statistics as to this, that, and the other, and also I think that by and large we've made pretty much of a mess of the administration of immigration laws.

Now we've got laws on deportation, but as a matter of fact, anybody with a friend or money can't be deported from this country.

One of the other weaknesses in immigration laws that we were talking about is the fact that you can't get rid of anybody once they get here. Although there are laws on the books providing for deportation on the basis of undesirability, conviction of crime, or illegal entry, and numerous other things, if you've got any money to hire a lawyer or if you've got a friend in the Congress

that will introduce a special bill, you can stay here indefinitely.

I recall one case that came to my attention of a phony Greek priest by the name of Georgy Adis. He came into this country on a forged passport from South America. He claimed to be a priest, I believe in the Greek Orthodox Church or something. The first community in which he settled in Massachusetts he got himself elected pastor of some church. He was a pervert. They caught him in a motel room. He'd go into motel rooms and cut holes in the walls so he could peep through to see what the people in the next room were doing. They would run him out of one community, and he'd get into another. Notwithstanding that he was a phony, that he had come in under false passports, that he'd been convicted of crimes of moral turpitude and was a known pervert, it took over twenty years before he was ever deported. Two members of Congress from Massachusetts, whom I knew, devoted continuous agitation to get him deported, and finally I got hold of the list of deportation proceedings or hearings, administrative hearings, court hearings, special bills, that had been introduced pertaining to this guy. It took

three solid pages of the Congressional Record just to list the hearings. It wasn't particularly my business, but I made it my business, and I got hold of all of these lists of hearings and put them in the record and raised a lot of Cain in a speech I made, and they finally deported him. It must have cost the government three or four million dollars as a minimum and twenty years of hearings to get rid of a fellow who came in on a forged passport.

Now in this country at this time I imagine, the last statistics that I knew about, we had 300,000 or 400,000 people in the New York area alone who were here illegally, came in on ships, jumped ships, have some kin person in the country with whom they can hang out, change their name, do this, that, and the other and stay here. Now I don't know whether anyone is greatly concerned about that, but apparently they haven't been because we haven't done anything about it.

Every time we have a presidential campaign in order to get the foreign-born vote, why both candidates have started talking about the discriminatory provisions of the immigration laws. Of

course, that comes down to my old idea of the electoral college, which I won't get into at this time. The foreign-born vote in many areas is the balance of power in big states. It's a balance of power in Pennsylvania, in New York, in Illinois, and in Michigan. If you get the foreign-born vote in that particular state you get all the electoral votes of that state and you get elected President. So as a matter of politics, the presidential candidates and the political managers are always screaming about us discriminating against foreigners.

We haven't been discriminating against foreigners, they've been discriminating against us. We've been used pretty much as a dumping ground for people who for one reason or another wanted to leave or had to leave the countries in which they were born and lived. Some of their reasons would be rather interesting.

Kamp: Just before we leave those early years in the House I wonder if you had any working relationships with the White House and any impressions or recollections particularly on President Roosevelt? Once we get past 1945, of course, there was a change in administration.

Gossett: Well, being a younger member of Congress and not a committee chairman, I had no particular reason for calling on the President. I went down to Congressional receptions, met the President, and visited with him a good many times briefly, but I never went down to see the President on any projects. Of course, the President is a very busy man. He doesn't want to take a lot of time talking to a Congressman about something back in his district because that is something the President shouldn't be particularly concerned about. I had no liaison of any consequence with the White House and didn't attempt to establish any.

Kamp: I wonder about any recollections you might have of the type of service of which you were engaged in during the war. I know the Congress was almost in constant sessions and hardly ever went home during the years '41 through '45.

Gossett: The first session of Congress in which I was a member, the seventy-sixth Congress, adjourned in early August. I had married in May before that. My wife and I came back to Wichita Falls and rented an apartment. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Congress was called back into

special session on September 25, as I recall, and Congress never really adjourned any thereafter except for a month or six weeks now and then, and this has been true ever since. Being a congressman has become a fulltime job.

Now in the old days I know I used to hear Mr. Rayburn talk and Mr. Hatton Summers talk; they went to Congress about 1912. Well, the Congress was in session not over six months out of the year, sometimes it wasn't that much. They wouldn't get over two or three letters a day, maybe, from home. They could handle it easily with one secretary. It was a rather easy job. They had time at least to become experts on the business of their committees; they had time for research and reading.

Now, if a Congressman permits it, he becomes the glorified errand boy. He can't begin to read the mail he gets; he has to have expert secretaries to screen it, and most of the letters that a congressman gets now he doesn't even read them. Some secretary answers them. I know I've signed as many as 100 letters a day back in the late '40's, and it's grown worse since then, and half of them

my secretary would compose. They concerned routine inquiries about this, that, and the other.

Now, prior to World War II the congressman was harassed by people who wanted jobs, people who were unemployed. I'd get letters from good lawyers in my district saying, "Now Ed, don't let anybody know I've written you, but I'm not making a living. I need to go to work for the government. I want a government job."

When the war came along that, of course, went out the window, but when World War II was over the veteran's problems began to be the matter of great concern to members of Congress. You'd get hundreds of those a day, perhaps, and some of them were matters of which the person really needed help, and you'd do the best you could, but you couldn't give those adequate treatment.

Today it's unemployment and Medicare and poverty and government jobs and veteran's problems. Of course, the congressional staff has grown from . . . when I went to Congress we had three employees. I had two, and later three. Now, I believe they have about six as a minimum, and they're adding to it all the time.

Kamp: Most Congressmen today keep an office open in their home district. I assume that you weren't able to do that.

Gossett: No, I didn't keep an office open except when I was home, which wasn't very often. Actually they do that, I guess, as a matter of political necessity more than a practical business operation. I think keeping an office open in your home town just invites more problems. But since many of them do it, I guess more and more of them feel they have to do it in order to avoid criticism.

Kamp: Well, that gets us up to the years right after World War II. You may want to return to some thoughts that you have later about it. We could, I suppose, begin with the proposal to amend the constitution in the electoral college, if you would like to do that. It's a matter of great importance. We thought it might be helpful and very interesting if you would give some recollections of Mr. Sam Rayburn. He did quite well in his service to the Congress.

Gossett: Well, Doctor, I was a great admirer of Mr. Sam. Everybody called him Mr. Sam. When I first went to Washington he was the majority leader. Mr.

Bankhead was Speaker, and when Mr. Bankhead died, well, Mr. Sam became speaker. As everybody knows, he thereafter served longer as Speaker of the House than anyone in the history of the nation. In my opinion, everybody admired and respected Mr. Rayburn, even if they didn't agree with him politically. He was always willing to advise and consult with new members. My relationship with him was unique in that by and large I was not strictly a party man. I voted more or less as I wanted to. Mr. Sam was strictly a party man; he was of the old school. He thought the Democratic Party could do no wrong and that the Republican Party could do no right. But he was perfectly sincere and honest in his conviction. I never had any disagreements with Mr. Sam, and one of the things that endeared him to me was that he never resented anything that I did or didn't do. The only thing that Mr. Sam would fall out with you about was if he thought you were not being sincere and honest in what you were advocating or voting; then, he didn't respect you. If you ever lied to him, you were on his blacklist from then on. I could name some rather prominent

members from Texas for whom he had no regard whatsoever because he thought they had deceived him on occasion. If you tried to deceive him or mislead him, he put you down as a hypocrite and he didn't have anything to do with you after that. You were off limits as far as Mr. Sam was concerned.

The only time he ever asked me to vote in any particular way during the first session of Congress was on the Walter-Logan Bill. It had to do with administrative procedures in the executive agencies of the government. The Congress had passed the bill and the President had vetoed it because the President thought it was an impairment of his authority and prerogatives, and the question was on overriding the veto of the President. That was my first year in Congress, 1939. Mr. Sam asked me to vote sustained, the President's veto. I had no particular convictions about the bill one way or the other so I voted the way Mr. Sam asked me to vote. He never again during my whole tenure in Congress in thirteen and one-half years tried to put any pressure on me or asked me to vote any particular way, and I often voted

differently from what he did on certain important issues.

His loyalty to the party was such that he felt as Speaker that it was his duty to carry the ball for the administration's programs. Now that, then and now, doesn't appeal to me. I don't think the Speaker of the House, even though he belongs to the same party as the President, is necessarily an agent of the White House in trying to put over a legislative program which a President may or may not recommend. Now Mr. Sam seemed to feel otherwise about it, but he was a great man. He was the author of much badly needed reform legislation in the early days of the New Deal, the Holding Company Act, and the Security and Exchange Commission Act. His leadership was very valuable in correcting some of the evils of the day. The one thing that I always felt about Mr. Sam was that his integrity was absolute, that his word was his bond, and that you could depend on him to do just what he'd say he'd do. He was a great leader and a man of whom all of Texas and Texans should have been proud regardless of whether or not they went along with all of his

views and philosophy.

I've often regretted that Mr. Sam had any serious opposition at home. The only hard campaign that I know of him ever having was back in 1944. That was Mr. Roosevelt's fourth term. There was a great deal of talk through the country that Mr. Sam was the proper man to be the vice-presidential nominee. Most of us around the Congress felt that way about it. I've always been confident, although I've not read any other people's views on this subject, but it was my view that if Mr. Sam had not had a hard race at home that year he would have been the vice-presidential nominee, that the convention, the Democratic convention, would have selected him instead of Mr. Truman to the vice presidential candidate on the ticket. But Mr. Sam had to come home that year and he had a very strong opponent in his campaign for re-election. He had to get out and shake the bushes, so to speak, and make all the little crossroads and make speeches just like he was running for Justice of the Peace, and it took him out of the national campaign for the time being, and Mr. Truman rather than Mr. Rayburn was

nominated for vice president. There's so many little things in history, but for which things would have been very different. I think Mr. Sam would have made a great President. Although I'm not deprecating Mr. Truman, I think he would have been a far stronger President than was Mr. Truman. I think he knew a lot more about government and the intricacies of government and how the whole machinery operated and was much better informed than Mr. Truman was. I've always regretted that Mr. Sam didn't get that position on the ticket in '44, then, of course, he would have subsequently become President. But no one knows; that's a matter of contemplation and retrospect, but he was not bitter about it. He never complained. I don't believe he ever complained to anybody.

There was a very happy relationship between Mr. Sam and Mr. Fred Virson, who served in the Congress with Mr. Rayburn for many, many years. During the war years, as you know, Mr. Virson was the head of a good many war agencies and then became the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. They were two of a kind. They were of the old school, and neither one of them ever made a nickel

out of using his influence; in other words, their influence wasn't for sale. When Mr. Fred Vinson died, I think his estate inventoried at less than \$10,000. Now Mr. Rayburn was a little better off than that because he had the family home and farm, and he loved to keep good cattle on his farm out from Bonham, but he never used his office for personal gain. I'm a little afraid that a great many other people in public office don't follow that precedent. Mr. Sam is one of my heroes, and I think he was a great man.