

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
Number 1

Interview with
Fred H. Minor
December 10, 1964

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. H. W. Kamp

Terms of use: OPEN

Approved: Fred H. Minor

Date: June 30, 1965

©

Copyright April 17, 1968
By the Board of Regents
North Texas State University

Oral History Collection

The Honorable Fred H. Minor

Interviewer: H. W. Kamp

December 10, 1964

Dr. H. W. Kamp: We are recording in the home of Mr. Fred H. Minor, attorney at law and once Speaker of the House in the Texas Legislature. This recording is being made on December 10, 1964.

Mr. Minor: I'm sitting here in my home at 1702 West Oak Street in the city of Denton, Texas, after a day spent in my law office. And as I sat here I began to think of some of my past experiences, both as a youth and when I was endeavoring to work my way through school and try to educate myself for practice of the law, an ambition which I had had from my earliest recollections.

I recall, of course, that, like a great many Texas boys, I grew up on a little sandy land farm in the southern part of Denton County. We were poor people, and I never felt that I had much chance of getting an education; but I desired and it was my ambition to in some way educate myself whereby I might obtain a license to practice law. So, after a good many years of struggle, I worked my way through the University of Texas, both in the academic and law departments, graduated from the Texas Law School, after which I served one year as a quiz master after my graduation before returning to Denton where I entered the law office of the old firm of Sullivan and Hill who were highly respected and capable attorneys of the Denton Bar. I have continued to practice law from the day that I entered their office, which was the 21st day of June, 1917.

In about the year 1926 my friends announced my candidacy for the

legislature from Denton County. This had been done without consultation with me at that time, although in prior years I had been solicited every two years to become a candidate, which I consistently declined to do. But after having my friends announce me for the position, I became a candidate and was elected and served in the 40th Legislature under the administration of Governor Dan Moody who was then a most brilliant young governor about the age of 33 years. I not only served in the 40th Legislature under his administration, but I also was reelected and served in the 41st Legislature still under the administration of Governor Dan Moody.

During the session of the 41st Legislature the then Speaker, Honorable W. S. Barron, became ill. I had had the honor to place him in nomination for the speakership at the beginning of the session of the 41st Legislature. Speaker Barron, who had had an attack of appendicitis and had to go to the hospital, left the letter with his secretary appointing me as Speaker pro tempore in his absence. I assumed the position of Speaker pro tempore and served as such for the remainder of the Session by reason of the fact that Speaker Barron was not able to return and serve the remainder of the Session.

It was during that period of time that the legislature had what I think was one of the hardest fought bills that was introduced in the legislature during my tenure of office, which not only continued through the 41st Legislature but also through the 42nd Legislature. This was a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment whereby the State of Texas might issue bonds for the construction of state highways. There were many who opposed this legislation, but it

was a hard fight and the resolution lost. Prior to the convening of the 42nd Legislature in which I served as my third term and also was selected as the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives-- this administration was under Governor Ross Sterling who had run and was elected Governor upon one of the principal issues of having a state-wide bond issue for the construction of state highways. Governor Sterling, prior to that time, had been Chairman of the Texas Highway Commission and this was a period in which many of the fine highways of Texas were begun. In those days there were not too many highways that reached across the State as exist today, but it was Governor Sterling's belief that by the issuance of State bonds sufficient sums of money could be raised in which to construct a highway system that would be a credit to the State of Texas.

This, therefore, was one of the big issues in the 42nd Legislature during which time I presided over the Texas House as its Speaker. And during that session this fight was fought all over again, the proposed constitutional amendment calling for the authority of the State to issue bonds for highway construction. The debate over this bill lasted some two weeks, and it was a time when tempers flared and legislators at times almost fought each other on the floor of the House. It might be recalled that that was also a critical period in the history of this State in that we had just fallen in, some two years before, of the greatest depressions that this country has ever known. The depression which commenced in 1929 and in fact lasted over a period of four or five years, because the country never really began to emerge from the great depression

of 1929 until about the year 1934 or perhaps 1935. So that this time in which I had the honor to serve as Speaker was in the session beginning in January, 1931, which was in the very depths of the depression. I shall never forget some of the efforts upon the part of people to try to get little jobs in the legislature. They converged on the Capitol by the hundreds and even thousands seeking the few small jobs that would be available upon the convening of the State Legislature. These were trying times in Texas.

While mentioning my service in the legislature, I would like to refer to something that seems to be commonplace in this day, and that is Speakers of the house seeking a second term. I served as Speaker of the 42nd Legislature and was elected to that position perhaps by reason of the fact that I had presided over a part of the session of the 41st Legislature and after that service in the 41st Legislature, my friends began a campaign among the members of the House for my selection as a Speaker of the 42nd Legislature. This was something I declined to have anything to do with, it being my thought then and it is my thought today that a Speaker of the House is merely one of its members, and that he should be selected by members of the House without solicitation upon his part. I refused, despite what some of my friends wished me to do, to solicit the vote of a single member of the House. It was my position that if they wished me to serve as Speaker, I would consider it a great honor and would endeavor to preside with fairness over the sessions of the House of Representatives, but to go to the members of the House and ask them to select me as their Speaker was something

that I felt was out of place and I feel the same way today. But it has become the policy now, it appears, for one seeking the office of Speaker to make a State-wide campaign with all the vigor that one makes if running for governor of the State, and thousands of dollars are to be spent by candidates for the House Speakership in which they seek to persuade the members of the legislature to support them as the next Speaker of the House. The position of Speaker is an important one and has been all through the years regarded as a second important office in State government. Its importance exceeded only by that of the office of Governor. But I still believe that the members of the House of Representatives should select one of its members without solicitation by caucusing among themselves and endeavoring to find the man whom they believe would be best fitted to preside over their deliberations.

I was talking about the Speakership of the Texas House of Representatives. I would like also to say that in my opinion no man should be elected to a second term as Speaker. Why do I say this? For the reason that there are many capable men who make the sacrifice to serve their district in the legislature. There can be but very few men that can be selected as a Speaker and have the honor of presiding over the Texas House of Representatives. In all of the years of Texas history we've only had in the neighborhood of 60 biennial sessions of the legislature. If that be the correct number, then only 60 men could have had the honor to serve as Speaker of the Texas House if serving only one term. Therefore, if the House of Representatives selects one as its Speaker, and he has

the honor to preside through one session of the legislature, I believe it only fair to the other members of the House that he step down and someone else be selected to preside over the House of Representatives.

I made the statement a few minutes ago that the position of Speaker is regarded as the second most important office in the State. I say that because the Speaker exerts more power in the functions of our State government than any other individual save and except the Governor of the State. The Speaker has the power to control legislation in the House, just as the Lieutenant Governor has the power to control legislation to a great extent in the Senate of Texas. So, therefore, being in not only a position of honor and trust it is also a powerful office in our State government which in my humble opinion makes it all the more desirable that a Speaker serve only one term, thus giving some colleague the opportunity and the honor of occupying that high position in State government.

To give you some notion as to the power of the Speaker in the control of the affairs of the House of Representatives I might remind you that there are some 40 or more standing committees of the House of Representatives representing every phase of the activities of the legislature, such as the Committee on Revenue and Taxation, the Committee on Appropriations, the Committee on Highways, the Committee on Health, the Committee on Education, and many, many more important committees. The Speaker of the House not only names all of the members of these committees, but he likewise

names the chairman and the vice-chairman of each of the committees.

The greater part of the work of a legislative body is something that the average citizen does not observe. When a citizen pays a visit to the State Capitol and goes to the House of Representatives, he may have the privilege of sitting on the floor of the House with his representative or he may sit in the gallery and observe what is going on in the activities on the particular day that he happens to visit the legislature. But the real work of the legislature is done in committees. These committees work during the afternoons and the evenings and many times until after the midnight hour in considering legislation and in hearing those who favor a particular bill and those who are opposed to it, so that the task of the legislator is a rather trying task. He not only attends the sessions of the House from ten o'clock in the morning until 4 o'clock or 5 o'clock in the afternoons, but the work of the committees are in the early morning hours and also in the afternoon and the hours of the evening in which these committees sit for hours hearing every phase of a particular bill that is before the committee debated pro and con. So that serving in the legislature is not an easy task. Not only that, but legislators until recent years have never been paid even their expenses. I can recall in my first two sessions of the legislature, legislators were paid \$5 per day for the first 30 days and if the session lasted longer than 30 days they received a sum of \$2 a day. In the legislature in which I served as Speaker a constitutional

amendment had been adopted in the previous year by which the sessions of the legislature, their regular session was extended to 120 days and legislators received a sum of \$10 per day. I believe legislators are at this time paid the sum of \$4800 per year and not only that but certain additional allowances for expenses, even traveling expenses and expenses in serving on interim committees between legislative sessions. So we have made some progress in that respect in taking care of those who are willing to make the sacrifice necessary to represent the people of their respective districts in our State government.

In speaking of the work of the committees of the House and also of the State Senate you may wonder why and how these bills come before the legislature. At the beginning of each session of the legislature the Governor of the State comes before the legislature and delivers to the legislature a message outlining the program which the Governor himself thinks would be for the best interest of the State. And he specifically enumerates various and sundry things that he thinks should be done for the advancement of the State in its various fields of endeavor such as education, even livestock, or the oil industry, and various and sundry other lines of activity. And it's based upon that message and that outline of a program that many of these bills arise and are introduced in the two Houses of the legislature. Bills may be introduced in either House except, of course, revenue bills under the Constitution must originate in the House of Representatives. Both Houses must pass each and every bill that is introduced and finally passes

before it can be enacted into law. And in a great majority of instances if it is an important bill, the House may pass a bill carrying a different version of many parts of the bill to the one passed by the Senate. It is then that the leaders of those bills call for a conference committee, represented by two members from the Senate and three from the House, who will hold meetings and iron out the differences between the two bills. And when the conference committee agrees upon the bill in its final form it is brought back to each House to adopt the report of the conference committee. If it is adopted by the two Houses it then becomes a law only when signed by the Governor. But when the bill has finally been put into final form it is sent then not only to the presiding officers of the two Houses for signature but carried to the Governor's office for his signature.

I'll revert for a moment to the effort to submit a constitutional amendment authorizing a state wide bond issue for the construction of State highways. I've already made the statement that that was a very hotly contested piece of legislation which after some ten days or two weeks of very bitter debate, it was defeated by only a few votes. I well recall that a day or two after this bill was defeated that I was called by a former high State official inviting me to attend a breakfast at the Stephen F. Austin Hotel that a few of my friends wished to discuss an important matter with me. I wondered at the time just what it might be. I attended the breakfast and the proposal was that in as much as this was a proposed constitutional amendment that the Speaker of the House had

the power to lay it out before the House again without it being brought up in regular order as would be necessary in the case of an ordinary bill. And they begged me as the Speaker of the Texas House to lay out that piece of legislation for another try. I refused to do this and very frankly told them that if I were to do a thing like that, in my opinion I would lose the respect of the members of the House, that the bill had been brought up in regular order in accordance with the rules of the House. Each side, both the proponents and the opponents, had had a fair hearing. They had spent some ten days in debate which at times was very bitter, and although it was defeated by a narrow margin, if it came before the House again during my tenure as Speaker it would have to be brought up in its regular order. This they later attempted to do, but upon a vote which required a two thirds vote of the House to bring it up on an appropriate motion after it had once been defeated, it failed on the two thirds vote and therefore became a dead issue for that session of the legislature.

I have recorded a few scattering thoughts and recollections about my service in the State Legislature. There is one thing that compensates one for the sacrifices made as a member of the Legislature and that is the state-wide acquaintance that he makes and also the many new friends that he acquires, not only friends who were members of the Legislature but men who come from all sections of the State during legislative sessions who have some interest that they wish to bring before the committees of the legislature. And it is indeed a rich reward that one receives for

serving as a member of the Legislature even though in those days when I served it was virtually without compensation. Upon my retirement as Speaker, I also retired as a member of the Legislature and returned to the firm of lawyers who had been kind enough to support me while I was serving as a member of the Legislature, and I have consistently continued to carry on my law practice until this good day.