

THE LITTLE GUY IS GOVERNMENT

KING COUNTY GOVERNMENTAL HISTORY PROJECT - ACCESSION 88-3-1

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN THOMAS O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: ESTHER MUMFORD

DATE: OCTOBER 14, 1988

Interviewee: John Thomas O'Brien
Interviewer: Ester Mumford
Date: October 14, 1988

Mumford: ...interview with John T. O'Brien for the King County Governmental History Project, October 14, 1988, Ester Mumford, interviewer.

Would you please state your full name, date and place...

O'Brien: My name is John Thomas O'Brien, and I was born in New Jersey in 1930, came to the Pacific Northwest in 1949 to attend Seattle University. I was elected as a King County Commissioner in 1962, and took office in November the 23rd of nineteen hundred and sixty two. I spent 12 years either as a commissioner or as a King County Council member which changed its form of government in 1969. Ah, from that point on, I left to become a part of the Kingdome Management staff and recently retired from the County after 25 years at the beginning of the 1988 year.

Mumford: I would like to know something about your family background, please.

O'Brien: My grandfather came from Ireland. And he married a lady named Theresa Finley, so we're Irish all the way through I guess. My dad was one of 12 children and they were born in New Jersey. My mother was also from South Amboy, New Jersey and she was one of four sisters who were orphans. So there's very little in the background of my mom's family. Dad's family, of course, we can

trace back into Ireland. Of the 12 children of my father's family, there's only one left--my Aunt Jewel who is a Sister of Mercy nun back in New Jersey, and she's 83 years old now. On my mom's side, the only one that's left is her sister, Eleanor, who lives in New Brunswick, New Jersey and she's in her eighties also. They uh, it gets interesting as they get in their eighties, and part of maybe, your project too, is they start to remember things back--way way back--which is becoming a bit helpful. Aunt Jewel, that's the nun, she'll send letters every so often remembering things that we had never heard before. And I guess this, in a sense, is a part of--the way your project is going.

I never knew until last week that my grandfather brought his mother over from Ireland to South Amboy and where she lived and eventually died. And so that's getting to be an interesting part of trying to find some things out. But my mom died at 47 and my dad at 52, so, they were not along...with us as long as we had hoped. And we didn't find as much out about the family as we would have liked to.

Personally, I married a local girl from West Seattle in 1954, and we have seven youngsters, and we have lived up here on Capitol Hill since, uh, well actually all of our married life. Either on 17th. At that time it was North which is now East, and then we moved here on 21st in 1960--across the street and three houses

down that way, and then in 1970 we moved here across the street. So, we've been Capitol Hill people all our life.

Mumford: I would like the names of the grandparents, great-grandmother, and your parents', please.

O'Brien: My grandfather was Michael O'Brien and his wife was Theresa Finley. That's about as far as I can tell you going back that way. And my wife's maiden name was Kumhera. Jean Kumhera. And I have three brothers and a sister--a twin brother, Ed, a brother James, a brother William and a sister Teresa. She lives in Moscow, Idaho and the four boys are here. When we graduated from Seattle University, the other three members of our family, Jim, Bill and Teresa, all came to Seattle University to go to school and eventually found that this area to their liking as we do. So we're kind of transplanted New Jerseyites and we will be going back, which is interesting, in a way [] at the end of November to the 40th reunion of our high school class. And that's gonna be something else 'cause we haven't seen most of those folks, you know, in the whole 40 years. It'll be interesting again to--and we'll probably hear some things that we've forgotten about a long time ago.

Mumford: Were you a product of Catholic schools?

O'Brien: Yes. We were taught by the Sisters of Mercy who showed very

little, uh, all the way through grammar and high school--back at St. Mary's High School in South Amboy, New Jersey. And then, of course, the Jesuits taught us at Seattle University.

Mumford: How was it that you happened to come to Seattle University?

O'Brien: On an athletic scholarship, and we had done well, athletically well, in New Jersey, and we were in hopes of getting a college scholarship. However, we were kind of small and there were two of us, which was a bit of a problem in regard to scholarships. So we actually stayed out of, between high school and college, one full year, and we were playing semi-pro baseball with five different teams, one of which was the New Jersey State Semi-pro baseball champion for three consecutive years. And that entitled us to go to Wichita, Kansas in the national tournament. And in the middle year, which would be forty-nine, I believe it was, the representatives of the State of Washington were the Mt. Vernon Milk Maids. Well, Al Brightman, who was the basketball coach and baseball coach at Seattle University was the first baseman on that club. And there was a fellow on the Texas team named Bobby Bilgrave, who was the admissions registrar at John Hopkins University and had been in the service with Brightman. And between the two of them talking, Brightman talked to Ed and I, and about three weeks later we received a letter from Willard Fenton, who was the athletic director, that if we so choose, we had a scholarship to Seattle University.

Well, we were on the next plane and out here and been here ever since.

Mumford: ...your major...

O'Brien: Uh, majored uh degree in Economics and major in Finance.

Mumford: Okay. And that was what year that you graduated?

O'Brien: I graduated in 1953.

Mumford: Nineteen fifty three. What did you do after your graduation?

O'Brien: Ah, the day that we graduated we signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates and then played professional baseball through 1960--six and a half years with the uh, in the major leagues with the--most of the time with the Pittsburgh Pirates and then a short stint with the St. Louis Cardinals, Philadelphia Phillies and the Milwaukee Braves in 1959. Nineteen Sixty I played with the Seattle Rainier in the Pacific Coast League.

Mumford: That was you and Ed playing?

O'Brien: Yes. Ed actually was four and a half years with the Pirates, and then he was with Hollywood in the Pacific Coast League and then

he left at that point, baseball, to take over the athletic directorship at Seattle University, where he served there for 23 years.

In the meantime, in 1969 when the Pilots came in--the first major league baseball team we had here--he and I had a leave of absence from Seattle University for that year and took over as the bullpen coach for the Seattle Pilots.

Mumford: Okay. So after you came back to Seattle with the Pilots, were you just playing baseball or did you start to get involved with citizen....

O'Brien: No, I was never with the Pilots. Ed was. What I was doing between baseball season, I worked two--first two years I was back East. In the winter time I worked with the county actually. In the coroner's's office. And then after that the next few years, I worked between seasons with uh, was at that time Glacier Beverages, which is now Alpac Corporation. I was with them at the time, in 1962, the World's Fair. And I was running the World's Fair operation for Glacier Beverages, and that was Pepsi, 7 Up and the Canada Dry products at that time. And uh, one day I received a phone call from Leo Sowers, who was the coroner at the time, asking if I would meet him in the office of Bill Boeing the next day. And I got my work done down at the World's Fair and zipped over there wondering what the heck was

going on, I should say. And Bill Boeing and Ned Skinner were there, and Al Howell, Tom Pelly, Leo Sowers and myself. And the gist of the conversation was that they asked me to consider running for King County Commissioner. I was looking to get out of the door as fast as I could, and uh, well I said, "Well, you know, I'm really not that much of a political being," but uh, well anyway they were persistent; I was more interested in not being involved than being involved, but in a weak moment I said yes. Not that day. It was probably a week or so later. And I got into the thing and ran and was elected. And that's basically how it all started in regard to getting involved as a Commissioner. I was definitely not a self-starter.

Mumford: No previous interest?

O'Brien: No. Really I would say none. I had a tad of experience in working with the government system in working in the coroner's's office, but, but I had not really uh, pegged my life style on getting into the political scene. And I actually told those folks in the meeting that, you know, I'm not a political being, I--and they said they, they perfectly understood it. They just wanted somebody they thought was electable that could go in and do a decent job. I said, "Well I'm happy with your thoughts but I'm still not convinced that's the direction I want to head." And uh, I'm still not quite sure why I ever said yes. Probably because of Skinner and Boeing who were top notch people of the

community showing an interest in myself, I guess; that probably was the predominate thought more so than the label of a Republican or a Democrat or anything like that.

Mumford: It's not like you weren't unknown; that you were unknown here.

O'Brien: I think that is basically the only reason I was first elected. Because if you had stacked me up against uh, Bob Ford was the fellow I ran against, sixty-two, who was a veteran of the uh--I believe he had been in the legislature. He was the appointee to the position of commissioner when Howard Odell had resigned. Uh, and if you stacked up his background and his experience against mine, there was basically no reason why I should have ever been elected, because he was clearly, you know, a capable type person. And uh I think it was name familiarity based on uh what had happened with me in the sports community that gave me identification enough to generate the votes to squeak by Bob. It was by no means a runaway. And uh, then I was elected two more times and in those I felt I got elected on my own. The first two I said it was basically it was the benevolence of the Board [sic].

Mumford: Was there ever a time in during that campaign when you felt like, "What am I doing here?"

O'Brien: Not so much during the campaign; it was after I was elected, and

the reason--I've mentioned earlier that I took office on November 23rd is because Bob and I were actually running for the unexpired term of Howard Odell. And I had run again in sixty-four. And, uh, I think the thing that was most amazing to me is that there was a very short time between--the election was over, say November 7th, just for the sake of saying, and two weeks later I was in office. I didn't really think about that; I would guess would be the way to say it. At the time of the thing I was--you know when this--if I win I'll sit down and get this thing on program. Well, before I knew it, I was sitting down there in an office that was as big as these two rooms there, and I'm sitting behind this desk and I basically said, "Now what the hell do I do now?" But the thing that became most apparent to me is that I had myself as is probably happening in this political campaign now said a little speech--and you know we could all give one another's speech after about three time around the trail on this thing. And then when I got into office, I pulled out that sheet and I found out about eighty per cent of the things that I had promoted and wanted to do were illegal or could not be done under the system of the way we were, such as having meetings at night out in the district and all that which the requirement was you meet at least once a month in the King County Courthouse and things like that. And that was kind of startling to me and I think it gave me an awareness that for the first time that what you think you say in the campaigns and what you hit when you get to the institution that you've been allowed to work in may not be as accomplishable as you think it

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as accomplishable as you think it is. And it was an awakening right at that point.

And in those days we had a very different type of government than you have now. There were three commissioners. And we served basically a tri-functional role. We were administrators; we were at the same time legislators, and then we had a limited quasi-judicial function. And that was when we ruled on appeals and rezones and things of those nature. Uh, we would--I would say our workload was probably eighty-five per cent administrative, ten per cent legislative, and maybe little more than that, let's say 70, 25, and five per cent in the quasi-judicial. We would, uh, we would meet on Monday mornings, and we would have up to a hundred and forty to a hundred and eighty items on the calendar. And what we did in preparation for that, we met on Fridays with all of our department heads and reviewed that calendar. And uh, the way it worked best in those days was you hired a person on as an airport director; you hired a person on as public works, basically all of the departments you have now. We were not in computers at the time; we went into that just a bit later. And you said, "Alright. Go do this job. And get it done." And I think there was more of a dependence on your people and giving them--and it was more free rein for them to do their job. I think the new system is more interruptive. And I say that because there are more legislators and administrators at the top level now than there were at that particular time. Both systems

worked. I don't think there's any system of government that doesn't work. It's just how effectively you make the system work that you're involved in and the people that are involved in it.

So we were extremely busy during those times. It was to me a fast way of doing business. I liked it. I liked it actually more than when I spent some time in the legislative branch. And, uh, we would take what information we had and say "yes" or "no" and that was the end of it. I think now you have uh, you have broken the county into almost legislative districts, in a way. In those days we just--there were only three of us and we represented the whole county. And more surprisingly, and most surprisingly, my district was almost entirely within the city limits of the City of Seattle. It was kind of funny. You could only be nominated by district, but you were elected in those days by the full county vote. So in effect, the people that would nominate for the central district, as a commissioner, were only the people who they would elect somebody to represent the county that hadn't--very little to say that was happening in the district that they elected the person because that person really fell under the jurisdiction of the mayor and the city council.

So it was kind of an oddball type of a situation, but it worked. And I think it, even today, government works. I think it's a little slower and that may be good too. But I think it's slower because you have more people involved. I think it's gotten a

little provincial in a sense of--with nine people. I saw that when I was a council person...I think you have more of an interest by a legislator being, in saying, "I need this for my district," rather than when we were commissioners, it was so wide and encompassing, you never thought of that. You just made a decision and said, "Hey! This is good for the county. Go ahead and do it." Now I think the form has been set up that way, which may not be that bad, but I think that sometimes--I don't want to use the word "pork barrelling", but I think that sometimes that the legislative district person saying, "I'm getting only elected in this particular...I want to make sure something good happens in this area to hang my star on the next time."

Mumford: Is it easier, do you think, with this present form of government than it would have been under the commissioner form?

O'Brien: It's easier to be more available, if that's the right word, because you're representing less people. And you actually make decisions that are all encompassing, but you are--and, and let's take the take the county now. It's a million one hundred [?] thirty-seven thousand or two hundred thousand. You've got nine council... break that up, er, three hundred thousand, for example. Ah, no, no. Nine legislative districts. It should be a hundred and--Say you're representing a hundred and thirty thousand people. Well in our days we represented basically a million, one. And so, I would think easier now for a person to

get to a council person and get a little time, because of the fact that there are more of them...I think that, in effect, gives the patron the thought, at least, that he is getting better represented, and he has a better chance of talking to the person who really represents him. It was more difficult in our days because we were dealing with so many more things. And our time was--there just wasn't enough time to meet with everybody.

Mumford: Your district was always primarily an urban...area

O'Brien: Yes.

Mumford: ...as you've mentioned, and there were probably more Democrats in your district; you were a Republican. Did that have any, uh--how that affected your deliberations or your voting on the Commission? _____.

O'Brien: It was that strange situation once again that that--when a person in my district had a problem, he very seldom thought of taking that problem to me because he had a mayor and a city council to take it to, who were really his closest form of government. So I was kind of in a limbo situation in the way we used to be set up. There was much more a demand in respect to the patron, if you want to refer to it as the word, to Ed Munro and Scott Wallace originally, and then Ed Munro and John Spellman later on, because they were representing a great deal of unincorporated area. And this was to those people in those areas, the closest person to

them in government. If the fellow was out North, say about a hundred sixtieth. He'd say, "Well I got a problem. I got to get ahold of Spellman." If somebody was out in Burien, they'd say, "I've got a problem. I gotta get a hold of Ed Munro." If somebody had a problem down on 23rd Avenue, they'd say, "I've gotta get ahold of Sam Smith or George Benson", or "I gotta get ahold of Charlie Carroll." So, in a way I was fairly isolated in the de--my decisions that affected the urban area were not the person-to-person type decision; they were the overall regional government type decision. And so, in a sense, the person in the City of Seattle dealing with King County government, he was sort of disenfranchised, in a sense, of having county representative on the little issue. But, on the other hand, he had another form of government that was closer to him to do it.

Mumford: You came to the council [sic] in 1962 when a lot was happening. Seattle had, all of a sudden, become a city that people, whose name people recognized, as related to the World's Fair. Other things that were happening here; it was a time when things were happening for civil rights, activities nationally as well as locally. The far-right was on the rise and all that. I'm wondering what that meant in terms of the county. How the county perceived that, how the county reacted to some of the changes that were...

O'Brien: It was interesting in a way. At the time I went to the

courthouse, the two governmental units used to be in the courthouse. Space and the expansion of government, the expansion the community dictated that the city had to go find their own way, which they did. And it was kind of interesting in a way how we would do some of the things we did. We were looking in our area to the suburban problems, uh, much of our decision-making was involved in what cities were doing. And the City of Seattle in those days was having discussions, arguments--you name it--whatever you want to call it in regard to open housing for example. Civil rights was going on. There was heated debate going on and all kinds of things like that. This we were not the leaders in because all the attention was being directed to the city--the inner-city, the core city--where the minority was living and was expressing his displeasure with things that he wanted to match up.

We, in the county government, were not focused on... in respect to the urban problem. We were focused on in regard to the suburban problem and part of that was the expansion of the then existing cities. Bellevue was a good example. We would be faced with road expansion, roads and things, and it would almost seem that Bellevue would dictate where they were going to annex based on when we did the roads. And things like that. And, and, it was an interesting thing. Bellevue would contain their total expansion, business-wise, in the downtown area. But they were growing. They were growing with people and it was getting

obvious that they were not going to contain that totally downtown at some point. And so we had a lot of activity in that.

We had a lot of activity in storm drainage run-off, which was becoming a big problem in the county. There was so much expansion going in the outer areas, and that was denuding the property. The trees were going all of sudden. Now the rainfall was starting to cascade down off of these hills which the trees-- which were taking some of that moisture not there to do it any more and it was wiping out stuff down there on the beach part and houses and all that. So it was storm drainage problems.

We were converting into the computer age. We were getting modernized, and we were doing these things at the time the city was involved in their, let's say civil rights area. So we kind of, in a sense, took the lead in that from what the city did. And, And, uh, expanded on what the city would do. And the city went into open housing, we passed the resolution. We did it, technically, illegally. But we did it. And it was done a day before a vote was going to take place in the city. And the Prosecutor said, "No you can't do this without a public hearing." So we had a two to one vote, and I said, "Hey. We can't do this." Well, well, it didn't mean a hill of beans anyway...So we would follow the city's lead in all these things. Landfills and stuff like that. We were getting very involved in that. We were trying to dispell the fact that where you put your garbage is no

longer a garbage dump. It's not a big open pit. It's now a landfill. Once that garbage was in there, dirt's going over the top of it. We had those kind of things going on.

We had remodeling going on of the courthouse. We went into an accelerated plan that we were just running out of space, and we went into a development program. We had had a courthouse remodeling that turned into a reconstruction. And then we built the other building across the street and the garage. That Administration Building is only half finished action. That was built to have seven more stories on it. All from the outside. The shafts in there for the elevators and everything else that were put in the original thing so that when you needed the space, you could come out from the outside and never interrupt an office. But that never wound up being done.

So we were growing and expanding in those days. We had so many things going on, it was just...So--And the other big thing that was happening on the other side, which I think was the closest thing to the complete involvement of the city and the county for example, was the Forward Thrust Bond Issue. This was probably the closest and I think the best example of the governmental bodies all saying hey, there's no territorial rights or anything else. This is something that's good for all; let's get together and do it.

As a matter of fact I went back to New York with Braman who was the mayor then, and Jim Ellis and Dwayne Kreger and a whole bunch of us to speak to the investment bankers on Wall Street on the first sale of the Forward Thrust bonds. And it was kind of comical in a way. We went back there and we met with the coordinator of this group, and he said, "You're going to be at this luncheon." He said, "Here are the roles you will play." I thought I was in the Army. And he said, "Mr. Braman, you will talk about the city's involvement." And one of the things they wanted to know was, where is the city on civil rights? How does the--is the policing proper in regard to the _____ and stuff like that. "Mr. O'Brien," he said, "you will speak for four minutes on the role, the cooperative role of the city and the county in these things." He said, "Mr. Kreger, you will speak on the bonds investment monies and stuff like that; and Mr. Ellis, you will talk about the program [inaudible]..." And so-- Then he said, "Here's what's going to happen." He said, "We will go to Wall Street at such and such a time." He said, "At 11:30 we will be at this big banquet room" or whatever it was. He said, "There will be two hundred and thirty one investment bankers." He said, "They will come in at 11:30; they will have two cocktails." He said, "They will sit down exactly at noon." He said, "The lunch will be over at 12:45; you'll begin speaking; at 1:45 they will all stand up and leave." Okay. Only one thing happened. And to me it was interesting. Everything went exactly as he said until the program started.

And we got up and did our thing, and they started to ask some questions. And they became so interested in how well this was working, they never left 'til 4:00. The guy was just--he couldn't understand. He had never seen that happened. The end result was at that one meeting, we got those bonds at about five and a half per cent interest, because those bankers were so impressed as the way, the cooperation of the city and county were having at this time; the interest of the community in jumping in front of the problem. I believe that places like New York and Boston can never catch up to their problems; tlet them go too far. And so they're always putting a band-aid on. I believe that the Pacific Northwest recognized the need to do something at a time it could be done to be the major improvement that it wound up to be. And that is to the credit of the Jim Ellises...

End of Tape 1, Side 1

Mumford: Go ahead.

O'Brien: And I think that that really kind of--is what it's all about. There's got to be visionaries in the community. I don't really see, and I would say myself, number one, as a visionary, when I was an elected official. Again I point out that 85 per cent of our work was administrative. I don't see a heck of a lot of visionaries today. I think most of your visionary work--comes from the community itself. And I think the political body, has

been recognizant of that. If they see someone with an idea, maybe there's something--there's something. Ah, Sims, for example, has got some good thinking. I think he's got...but there aren't too many that are in the political scene themselves that I see as visionaries today. And in my time too. But I think the fertilization of these good ideas is always started in the community itself. And I think that there's been a fair response to that from the political body as the--Alright, now, this is a decent idea. Is it workable, and how do we go about accomplishing it? And, again, that gets--boils down to the people having the confidence that if they come up with something, that it will be listened to and responded to. And a responsiveness of [unintelligible] .

We always believed when we were commissioners that if you had a person in front of you, and we used to talk about this when I was with Monroe and Wallace and John later on, that the person in front of you deserves a yes or no. I'll take an example of a fellow contractor. Let's take a contractor, for example. He comes in and he presents his case. He wants to get an upgrade of his property or he wants to get a building permit or something like that. And he presents his case. And then you have your technical and professional people give their response and their

opinion. And I believed at that time, and we believed, that that was the time to tell this person yes or no. Because if you string that fellow out for six months, you may have taken him out of the building season, and now all of a sudden, what happens. He eventually gets his yes but he's out of the building season; now he's got additional cost later on. Going the other route, if you tell him, if you tell him no; he says, "Okay, that's it. I'll go do something else." But if you string him out for six months and then tell him no, now you've got an angry person. So we always tried to take the position, take all of the information that's in front of you, say yes or no and get on with your business. And we felt, especially in our type of government which was a bam! bam! bam! bam! bam! And there wasn't a hell of a lot of time to start debating or send it off to a committee because we were a committee. There wasn't anybody after us. I think when you get into legislative things with more committees, there is the possibility of a delay process. And I think you have to be careful to avoid that if possible.

But I think that what's happening in this community has been good. I think it's been responsive; I think it's been fair. I think we're going back to a time of the civil disturbances; going back to the demands of labor, for example, throughout the years and all that. I don't think anybody has ever gotten all they want. But at the other time I think that--I think all the demands and the requests had been looked at and the

accomplishable has been done so that progress has been steady. I don't think there's been any homeruns, but there's been a lot of single and doubles. And they've all led to runs that'a happened over the years.

Mumford: You've cited the wonderful example of your Wall Street presentation and the unity between city and council government, as well as interested citizens. I understand that there was from--the beginning of the council, a strong call for this kind of working together in order to avoid duplication and repetition. Was this a single case that you cited, or was this the result of this actual working right along from the beginning of the council?

O'Brien: No. I believe, from a personal stand point, when there were contacts to me in respect to a problem--And I think the best way to approach, if you're a political person, the best way to approach a person that comes to you with a problem, and say that person has a chuckhole in the road in front of his house. Well, realistically that person at that time doesn't give a damn if Reagan and Gorbacher sign the IFM Treaty. His biggest problem with government is that chuckhole in front of his house. And when I used to get calls, I would tell the patron--And I always used to call them a patron because I thought we were service organization--I'd say, "Let me see what I can do for you, but it will not be done by me because of the jurisdiction situation."

And then I would get on the phone and call Charlie Carroll or Sam Smith. And--something was done. [unintelligible] . If you call Charlie Carroll and said, "I've got Joe Jones. He's such and such. He's got a chuckhole in front of his house." Charlie Carroll would say, "It's taken care of," and that was the end of it.

Mumford: And this was pretty much the way it was from the time you...

O'Brien: Yeah. Those were my two basic contacts in the city. When I became the chairman, then I worked on a kind of a different level in a sense. I worked with Braman on certain things, and we didn't win them all by any means.

Mumford: So this actually goes back before the establishment of the county...the council form of government.

O'Brien: Yes.

Mumford: It precedes that into the Commissioner days.

O'Brien: Yes. And we didn't win them all by any means. Braman, who was the Mayor, and I were--I remember one incident where we really believed that the GSA building should have gone down in that block, which I believe is south of where the new jail is, the county jail. What our thought was that all the governmental

bodies should be in a complex...the city was here; the county was here; uh, if you put the federal government there with that brand new building, now you were making a governmental core; a governmental complex that a person could kind of put all his apples in a barrel and go down there. And it would be better for the lawyers and things of that--'cause everything would be in the same area.

Maggie was the senator and Maggie didn't want it there. He wanted it where it is. [laughing] And you talk about getting overmatched, you know. But--but we had the opportunity; we went in and we spoke our piece; we fought for the thing. And we lost and so we said, "Que' Serra," on to the next thing. But I think there was time for expression. There was reasonable debate. And when a decision was made, I didn't think, in the days that any animosity situation, you know. Say Hey, [unintelligible], go to the next thing. And I think probably the force in the number of our business activities made that easier to do because it was que' serra. I mean there was no time to sit back and get too enamored about this or too discouraged about that.

I think now...I was not the strongest proponent of the changed government, and...we put in on the ballot, the commissioners--we were required to put it on the ballot--we did all that, but I spoke to the group and I said, "I don't agree with some of the

things that you are saying that this is"...and I said, "I don't agree with how you're doing it."

Mumford: Is this the freeholders?

O'Brien: Yeah. I said, "To begin with," I said, I used the term, I said, "If you breakdown the workload," I said, "I think we're eighty percent administrative 15 per cent," I said "legislative and five per cent quasi-judicial." So I said we need...what you've got set up here...is you've got one person to do 80 per cent of the work and nine to do 20." And I said, "Now you're saying you gonna do this with less people and you're gonna to be more effective." I said, 'Maybe you're gonna be more effective, but you're not gonna do it with less people. Because one guy isn't going to handle 80 percent of the workload. And if you get nine more people in there that're gonna handle the 15 per cent, what's gonna happen? They're gonna have people work with them..."

The last year we were commissioners was 1968, before the change. At that time we had 2,933 employees. There's approximately 5,000 employees now in King County. Not that the force of numbers has made it a bum situation. It's how this increase has been responsive to the public. And that--I really can't answer that because I don't know. I've been out of the inner-political scene, if you wanna say that, for 15 years.

Mumford: What was the basis for hiring heads of departments and other agents under the Commission??

O'Brien: In our days the first basis was who had the most vote. And I say that from the standpoint of the commissioners. When I first got elected, I was a Republican and Ed Munro and Scott Wallace were Democrats. So basically I had the opportunity of sprinkling holy water on the things that they did. And, but they were very fair; both of them. They would never throw a surprise at me. They would say, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this and this is where we're gonna go." And they had the votes to do it but the same time they didn't isolate me. And so when John Spellman got elected and I was chairman, I did the same thing with Munro. I said "Ed," I said, "We got the votes now." I said, We're gonna keep you apprised of where we think we're heading in these particular directions so that you can get your input in and things like that." And that was the way we operated.

And then when we had openings, we were just then, at that point, whoever, for example, when they was a vacancy in some department, when I was the low man on the pole, Ed Munro and Scott Wallace would go and find the person they wanted in there. And then I would have the right to vote for him or against him. It didn't make any difference. When Ed Munro was the low man on the pole and Spellman and I, then we would make the determination of who was going to be the airport manager, for example, and who was

going to be the Department of Public Works and who was going to be this and that. And then Ed would have the right to come along with us or not. So basically it was a political situation in there. But either way the person selected was the best we could find. And what we tried to do, if possible, was come from the department. We thought that was good morale; we thought it was time saving; we thought it was more effective. It didn't work all the time, but for the most part we would try to work from within the department.

In response to, in the reflection, even the decisions that were made, for example when Ed and Scott would pick somebody, I would say 80 per cent of the time or more I voted for that particular candidate, showing that in my mind that they had [unintelligible] I think going the other way when John and I were there and Ed was there, I think he voted about 80 per cent of the time for the particular candidate that we had selected. And so I thought in a sense that was our own way of running a barometer on ourselves that politically it didn't mean that much; that the response was being made based on whether the fellow thought this guy was a good guy to do the particular job.

Mumford: The charter which authorized the council gave--stipulated political partisanship, and I'm wondering if that was more--did that cause more division on the council than...?

O'Brien: My recommendation was that the Counsel and the Executive be non-

partisan at the time. I thought--they talked about it being less political doing it this way. And by, you know, having the Council--and I said I disagreed to begin with, that it was political I said, because, I said, "I'll give you a great example. When John Spellman was elected, and Ed Munro then became the minority member of the board," I said, "at that time we had twenty nine hundred employees." And I said, "Spellman and I replaced four of them. Four." I said, "Now that doesn't seem to me like this is a great big political thing that's happening when you're based under a commission form of government." And I said, "The other part of it is we very often have retiring parties." And I said "We're sitting there and we're looking at a fellow that's been 30 years, 40 years with the county and we're giving him a watch or a plaque or something." And I said, It suddenly dawns on us that this particular person has gone through about nine or ten different administrations who some were Republicans, some were Democrats. So it seems the basis of job stability is job performance. And that the statistics don't back up the fact that we're doing this to get out of politics. But," I said, "if you are," I said, "then my suggestion is you go non-partisan." My third suggestion was to make the sheriff separate from the executive. And that went over very well (laughs). I had to put my two cents in.

But I really felt that if one of the things that they were talking about was to take the politics out of politics, then take

the names off.

Mumford: Okay, so now can you see--could you see the divisions based on politics and since they...

O'Brien: Yes. I saw divisions in a sense in a different way. Uh, in one of which and part of which was redistricting. See, we did redistricting in those days. And I saw at that time the politics of the political scene coming in because at the first time it was done, there were five Republicans, four Democrats. And the next thing you know there was a big computer running out who's voting where and all this kind of stuff, and there's all kinds of percentages I'm looking at and all this stuff. And--But the meeting with my four fellow Republican members at the time, and they're talking about going this way and going that way and all this stuff and everything else. And I'm sure that tends to bring up a problem or a concern that I don't think redistricting should ever be done by the politicians. Because it's just built in that way. If you give the person the right to make his own district stronger, he's gonna do it! Whether he be a Democrat or he be a Republican unless, you know, they say, you know, "there are those with the power and the number of votes vote, the other guys cry." So, if you want to be the fairest about how you break up things based on territory and population and all that, it shouldn't be done by the politicians. That would be my thinking. Because it'll be done but maybe it won't be done the way that you like

it.

Mumford: The first Council took some time for things to kind of shake out. The Council has made some significant contributions. In the earlier years were some observers or critics, I guess you could call them, who saw more indecision than strength in the Council, in the legislative process. You were experienced, Ed Munro was experienced, others had had experience in different realms. Uh, what was that first, let's say the first year of deliberation like? Was it a "let's try this" approach, such as some critics said it was? Or was it somewhat more sophisticated than that?

O'Brien: I think part of the first year was either consciously or unconsciously a territorial battle between what the Executive thought were his rights and what the legislative body thought were theirs. And it was interesting in a way to both Ed Munro and myself I believe, and I can't speak for Ed but I would believe, he kinda felt like I did. We were not the most experienced legislative people on that Council. We had Ed Heavey and some other people that had been in the Legislature. And they were legislative people. And we were not really accustomed to the legislative style because most of our work was administrative. So we were in a learning process ourselves, 'though we had time and grade[?], we didn't have a legislative experiencing grade[?]; we were administrator type people and so there was always that territorial or turf battle that goes on

between the Executives saying 'I want to do this' and the legislator saying 'wait a minute; you're stepping on our feet', and then the learning process and the working process went into nine new, brand new people. So, yes, the first year was a feeling out year. Very definitely in my mind.

We were--we didn't generate a lot of stuff. I thought we responded to things because we were more in the business of trying to figure out one another and doing our thing. It eventually gets--start to getting better. But the first year I thought it was the feeling out process, the learning of one another; the learning of the new form of government. It was totally changed, and the interpretation that continually went on in the minds, and if not going up and asking the prosecutor for an opinion of whose right it was to do this or to do that. And that took some time. And I think that was--I don't think it was so much indecision; I think it was learning, in that first year.

And I don't think it ended in the first year. I think it took more than a year to get, kind of get everybody knowing what their role was. Though there was some that never stayed within that role anyway; that they felt that, you know, the Executive was sending over stuff that "wasn't his business to do; that's our business," you know and that kind of stuff. And then there was always still the political situation.

Now people are representing a district. 'I got these hundred and eleven thousand people out here and I want to show them I'm doing something.' So now all of a sudden things are coming out of left field and you're trying to keep peace in the family, and you had the other thing of a five/four split. So one person--Okay [talking to other person across room: You heading out now? Tape turned off.] A five/four split, so there was no lock in regard to votes on things. Everybody had to stay where they were. So-- and there was a lot of time spent in finding out where people were going to be.

And then there were people that had interests. For example, Tom Forsythe was an aviator, and he was very interested in the aviation area. And Tom and I--and I agreed with Tom on Sandpoint for example, when they eliminated the air strip at Sandpoint. We felt that was the dumbest thing that ever happened in the deal. An the covenant when that land was donated by the federal government or whoever donated it, that it will always be used for flying purposes or revert back to federal government or some things like that. And it was very safe coming over water but you had the Windermere folks against it, and Tom and I were in this battle again because we saw that Boeing was getting a little too overcrowded. Here was a perfectly safe airport. And so we ran up the flagpole with that, and we got the hell kicked out of us, but we felt that we were right and we took it upon us. So there were people that were always in their area of comfort; their

comfort zone--what they like to do. And then sometimes you say, "Wait a minute. Get out of your comfort zone; we got this to take care of, and who's here on this and what's your problem," and all that. So there was a great deal of discussion, if that's the way, to where people were in regard to--because now you had for the first time nine councilmen, but now you had five or six different committees.

So then it was the chairman's responsibility--I was the chairman--to set up the committees. And then an item would come in and it would get referred to a committee and come back. So now you're in this--I don't want to say delaying process--but now you're in a so called "further exploration" process and you're wondering what the heck the committee is gonna do. So the committee set up is very important in a legislative body. And what I did, I kind of tried to bring some harmony to the camp. I had six committees; I made three Democrats the chairman of three of the committees, and three Republicans the chairman of three. And I broke it down so that--and not that I wasn't unpolitical in a way too because on the stronger committees I had more Republicans on it. The Finance Committee and some others are the three/two and things like that. But I tried to get everybody involved and it was working. It was working. But it was very time consuming in respect to saying you've got this fellow in; he has this thing, goes to this committee. Then getting that committee to get back, with it back to the council and sometimes

you--As the chairman, I'd look up and I'd see where this thing's been held over by the committee. Then I chase around the committee chairmen and say, "What the heck's going on here?" "Well, we didn't like it." You know. And that was bothersome to me because I thought the committees should get in there and get the information and get it back to the council. And I think that probably was a comeback from the experience I had before of saying yes or no and move on. And so I was not totally comfortably ever in the legislative system; I thought it was too slow. Not that it's worse. It may be more effective eventually, but I thought it was too slow. I thought that you'd get the things, look at the things, make an answer and go on to your next situation.

So the first year--I would say more than a year--those were the kind of things that we had facing us. Learning one another, turf battles or turf interpretations, committees and just a kind of... organized the entire thing. And it worked, and it got together reasonably well, based on the fact that you're taking a former government that was 85 years old and said "Goodby; this is your new form of government." And that took place in about thirty months because we had the election, November; started....So, there was a good deal of finding out what it's all about going on; a good deal of new people; a good deal of people that, in a sense, sometimes a type of misfit. You had administrators, legislators, politicians, new people, veteran legislators,

somewhat veteran administrators. And you're saying, "My God, what am I going to do with this bunch?"

And then they had their own particular areas of comfort. Again. And they would express that to me. Bernice Stern, for example, was very interested in land use and things of that nature. And she expressed an interest in being involved in any of those areas. And then I tried to fit her into those because I thought that she not only was a good worker, but she had good sense. And she did well at that. And that was the other part of trying to learn these people; to see where they liked to be and put them there. If you're gonna work together as a group, take the benefit of everybody's strong suit was the way that I tried to approach that, and it worked I would say, but it was not something that was built to work immediately. It was built to work as good and as fast as you could get it working, quickly and efficiently. And I thought it worked from the standpoint of being efficient, it was within reasonable time.

Mumford: From time to time over the existence of King County government, there's been the issue raised of consolidation of city and county, from time to time, both inside and outside of government, and I'm just wondering whether that was something that you considered as a commissioner and as a council person, or even now as a private citizen.

O'Brien: I felt, whether incorrectly or not, that the introduction of charter government was the first baby step to metro government. That was my own feeling. Ah, it's never happened. And I'm not sure it ever will. And the other point, I'm not sure it would be the most effective either. And I think it's probably the thing that as happened recently that would put the kind of a Kabash [sp] for the moment at least on it is the Metro council itself. When you have there something in the neighborhood of forty some people which now has been because of the problems of working governmental structure with 43 votes has now been cut to 27, which I think is terribly, still terribly ineffective in regard to getting any timely decision made, I think that kind of experience would be a negative influence in respect to going Metro government. I felt that--do you remember back in those days that Dade County had gone into--in Florida was...I think the first was in Metro government--They were having all of the problems that a regional government faces going in. Today I don't know whether that's proved to be an effective form of government or not 'cause I really haven't paid attention. People, I think, get a tad scared or a tad discombulberized[??] in respect to saying, "My God, I've gotta deal with big government. I wanna be able to get on the phone and call my Charlie Carroll; I wanna call my Sam Smith; I wanna call my John O'Brien; I wanna call my Ed Munro; I wanna call my Spellman." I don't wanna have to get through 55 different people and I think that is really what the folks want nowadays. They wanna say,

"Hey, if I got a problem, I can call Joe Doakes and he's gonna be able to do something about it."

So I think Metro government is probably not going to happen here and I think one of the reasons has been the somewhat effectiveness of this system as it works now. I don't think we've got the greatest set-up in the world, but at the same time I think we've been fairly efficient. And I think we've been fairly represented. And as long as it stays that way and improves, I don't think you're going to see a consolidation of it.

Mumford: Uhm, you mentioned Bernice Stern and I'm just wondering--I've tried to look at women in county government down through the years particularly in this century. Uhm, can you give me an appraisal of where women were in terms of county government at the time that you were in county government?

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

O'Brien: We started...as commissioners. And I'm speaking about Munro and Spellman and Wallace and myself. I think we were the first ones that started appointing women judges. We appointed Carolyn Dimmick; we appointed the lady that's on the Supreme Court now; we appointed several minority, Black judges. And I think that that's--I don't think we were any great shakes in leading the

way anywhere, but I don't think in our day there was the great awareness, if that's the right word, for this revolutionary type change that uh, you know, when a situation evolved. There wasn't anyone breaking down the doors saying you've got to appoint a Black, you've got to appoint a Hispanic, you've got to appoint a woman, you've got to do anything that...They pretty much kinda let us on our own. I thought we would--We started to be responsive in our judicial appointments, and I don't remember--the department--I don't remember if we had women--can't remember.

Mumford: Okay. You said "responsive". Was there a deliberate policy to say, "Let's have a Black judge. We haven't had one," perhaps, before. Or was it just that this person had a certain amount of seniority, or what was the basis for that?

O'Brien: Well, it was kinda interesting in a way. Um, Ed Quigley. Remember Ed? Ed wanted to be a judge for years. And I think part of it goes back to that. The self-starting of those folks that wanted to be involved in that. And there was a vacancy opened. And this was when Spellman was Commissioner and I was and Ed Munro. So the three of us were sitting in my office, and we said alright now, we got a vacancy in the court. And I said, Does anybody have a recommendation?" And Spellman say, "Well, no." He says, "I don't have anybody."...And I said, "Well, I really don't either." And Munro said, which was kind of interesting in a way 'cause he was the minority member of this.

He said, "You know?" He said, "Ed Quigley's wanted to be a judge for a long time." And he said, "We've have openings and we appointed Dimmick and we appointed some other people." And he said, "I know I haven't got the votes," he said, "but, you know, here's a guy that's interested in being a judge and I think he'd be a pretty good judge." So we appointed Ed Quigley.

And so really our decisions weren't based on meeting quotas-- Women, men, Blacks, Whites or anything else. It was just kinda of, you know, 'whose time is it' type thing. And it would work reasonably well. There was no--Back in those days there wasn't anybody championing for women. And it was just the start of the championing for minority appointments.

Mumford: O-kay. Umm. There's a few miscellaneous questions...

O'Brien: Ohhh, let them fly.

Mumford: ...let me just wrap them up right quickly. There was a quest-- You were on the commission when the courthouse restoration took place, weren't you?

O'Brien: Correct.

Mumford: Okay. And that got to be rather problematic for the commission, shall we say?

O'Brien: Yes. That project started probably about two years before I got there. When I got in there, this thing was boiling over. In reality what happened there, in my mind, was this thing started out as a redecorating project which evolved into a reconstruction project with nobody paying attention to what the hell's going on. So all of a sudden a three million dollar remodeling, or redecorating, turns into a twelve million dollar reconstruction project. And nobody's watching the ship. And when I got in there, that was--I got involved in that right off of the bat, and I got to fightin' and yellin' and it just didn't--just exasperated itself to, to in in the...The day I'll never forget, we're sitting there when the bids came in for that thing, and I think the low bid was eleven million dollars or something. And I said, "What in the hell is going on?" And I mean, so did Ed Munro and Wallace. "What is going on?" And all of a sudden--that's what happened on that.

And then it went to the point of even a grand jury went through that whole thing. And that was a great experience having to go up there and sit down for that thing for a couple of days. And basically what came out of that was that the uh, the jury decided that the stupidity overruled any good judgment. And the thing got wild catted--they turned it over to an architect and the contractor and we didn't pay attention to what the heck was going on. And makin' these big plans and knockin' out walls and

finding another room behind'em. And before you know it someone's gonna end up with the cost. And they were returned one charge on that thing against the architect which was later dismissed. So, it really was a non-thinking type situation that started out, eventually get pulled back into order. When Spellman came in, I got with him and we went and built the building across the street. We finished off the remodeling, which was kind of unique. We set a budget for that thing and brought it in below the budget and on time. But that's what that whole thing was about. It was just nobody paying attention to what the heck was going on. That was really a...

Mumford: I'm curious about how that could of happened with your your regular meetings and you seen to have been on top of everything before.

O'Brien: You see, your architect, well, I wasn't there at the time when it started so I don't know how they set the thing up. But the architects and the contractors were never a part of your meeting with your directors. They were, they were hired out separate [unintelligible], and, and they would meet with the--I never met with them because I [unintelligible] what they were doing, but they would come in once a month or something like that and say well, what things are going along. But who really knew until that thing was exploding. It was interesting when, when, uh, Spellman and I tried this other thing. We met every single week

with the architect and the contractors. Every week. They were in my office and sitting there and they gave a report. And we asked the questions we wanted to do. We hired a clerk of the works. That was a fellow that hired by us to monitor them. And we paid him big money in those days. I forget what it was, but he was well worth the money. And if there was supposed to be three nails in the wall, at this point there were three nails in there. He checked the plans and he was on the project the entire time. And that was bad management in the front part; it was, I would say, good and effective management when we got to the later part. And of course that was learned by mistake in some areas. But that thing, there was nobody watching the ship on it. Somebody hired these architects on and they just went wild and nobody was paying attention. And then the got brought up short. And so when Spellman came in and we had the opportunity to do the things. Actually the thing was needed.

What happened was that's what they should have said in the first place. "Hey! We've got to expand this whole place. We've got to reconstruct!" It started out and maybe, maybe, whoever made the decision was afraid of the fact that they were talking large money. But talking large money is better than explaining large money, which eventually had to happen. And the thing that disappoints me a tad is that that building was never completed; the one across the street. I think that should have been explored... 'course the architect died, but, you know, the plans

are there and it was all set to go up. Both the city and the county are running into massive problems in regard to housing and housing their people. And uh, you can't fragment it too much; people want to go to that area. "I want to see my city people; I want to..." The day will come where they're either gonna have to build another jail next to the one they got on that piece of property which they just purchased from the credit union and they own the rest of that block, uh, or go to administrative or functional buildings or a combination of both. And you got to contain it in an area where the person is going to do all his business. You start satelliting too much, you know you call the city or you call the county and..."This is Joe Jones; this is Sam Jones; this is Mary. I've got a problem." "Well, come to the Artic Building, or come to the Smith Tower." And you say, "Wait a minute. I thought I was going down to see the County Government." So you can't spread it out too far because the person will say, "Gee, this will work good 'cause then I could go get my license; I can do this; I can do all that." They like to have it all in the same area.

Mumford: How influential was public opinion on your deliberations, on the actions that you took at county government? Were you always aware of it?

O'Brien: We had public meetings. Of course every Monday. And anytime there was a hot issue, there was opinion there. And especially if you tried to form a drainage district on Burns Avenue with all

the Italians down there who'd come in and that was funniest meeting. They were all screamin' and shoutin' at us, and we formed the district. But, no, we would let the people say what they had on their mind. We had all kinds of meetings; all kinds of...

But the strange thing was we would have a meeting in regard to Sears opening a store up on Aurora Avenue. The place would be filled. And we would have a meeting on the formation of the drainage district down on Burns Avenue, and the place would be filled. We would have a meeting in respect to something like [unintelligible] Then we would go into the budget meetings, where our budget is a hundred, in those days, a hundred and fifty million dollars, and we're looking at empty seats. There's no one there. And these meetings go on for two weeks. And there's nobody there. And it always use to get to me. I'd say, "My God!" Here, here--and I really think it said, in a sense, what happened. The chuckhole in front of the house is the biggest problem of government. It isn't the hundred and fifty million dollars.

Now that--a hundred and fifty million dollar budget has in it somewhere the yes or no to whether that chuckhole is ever gonna get fixed. But that gets beyond the thinking line of the electable, I mean your electorate. And it's always been surprising to me, even when we turned into a council, nobody

showed up for the council when you have the budget hearing. And this is the life-line of how you're gonna run your government for the next year. You take that item that is small in regard to the overall picture and that's big in the mind of the person.

And I think that's something the political person has to look at. He has to say, "Hey!" If you're gonna work the political scene, and you're gonna do a job, you think of the guy that's on the end of that phone 'cause there's--he's talking to you; you're government to him. Reagan isn't government to him at that point. Kruschev isn't a government to him. Bush is the _____; he could care less about him. He cares about what are you going to do now for the fact that he has a problem and you're the guy he expects to make some response to or to give him an answer. And I think if that attitude is taken, I think more effective interest in government takes place. I think in regard to budget processing, the department heads have to take into consideration what the so-called little guy has in his mind when they make their presentations to the council. He'll say, "Hey! These roads are gonna--we're gonna get--I'll make an estimate. We're gonna have 500 chuckholes this year and I need such and such amount of money to handle those." That's where your department heads gotta come in there. He's gotta figure out what is going to happen that is gonna be a one-on-one situation to the political person that he's gonna have the funds to handle. Because when you tell the guy, "We don't have the money to do

that." Now, all of a sudden, he says, "Wait a minute! I remember reading in the paper you got a eight hundred million dollar budget, and you're telling me you don't have a thousand dollars to fix the road in front of my house?" Now he didn't give a damn about that at the time that was coming up, but now, all of sudden, he can get the numbers in his head.

So, everything that happens in government should be broken down to the response to the electorate; to the guy who you might say is the little guy. Well the little guy is government. Do your thinking there. Do your overall planning with him in mind. And basically, in the long run, that works.

Mumford: What are you doing now that you're retired?

O'Brien: Well, I retired at the end of the year and I for two months I just retired. I was just having a hell of a time. And then I formed a little consultant company with my two brothers. And we were just _____ we were _____. And then the Dome called me and I went to lunch with Neil, and he said Martin-Klein [Ron Klein], who was the maintenance manager, had left to go over to the Convention Center, and he asked me if I would come back and run the maintenance department. I said, "Neil." I said, "You put a hammer and screwdriver down there, it's gonna be fifty-fifty if I'm gonna guess which one is what." And he said it was simple to you can manage[?] it and also we need to put the



budget together for the next year.

Mumford: Are you going to be working on that?

O'Brien: Oh, I did that.

Mumford; Umm.

O'Brien: Yeah. And so I said, "Well, how long is this gonna take?" And he said, "Two months. At the most." I said, "Alright." I said, "Let me talk", I said, "I want to talk to my brothers." I said because, "We're a company now."

I went in one day and I said, "Neil, the vote was two to nothing for me to go back to work." So I went down there and the two months became three months. And it worked out fine. I did the budget for next year for them and stuff like that and get the thing in order, did different things like that. And so then-- actually, we've just kind of got organized on the thing, and the money I made there we put into the company, and my brother, Jim, he retired from the county and my brother Ed. And we got a little office over in Bellevue, and that's what eventually we'll be doing. We'll probably kind of get into it full time right at the first of the year.

Mumford: So you're all just starting this really?

O'Brien: Yeah. And the nice part is Jim has a pension coming in from this State, and I got a pension coming in from the State, so we're our own bosses and, you know, we'll take our--we'll do it as we wanna do it. And, you know, we've always felt that we're perfectly capable of screwing everything up by ourselves, so we don't--And so--It's gonna be a lot of fun.

Mumford: Who else now? Jim. You and Jim and then who else?

O'Brien: Ed.

Mumford: And Ed.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Mumford: Um-hm.

O'Brien: And Ed. So we meet when we feel like it; we uh--I haven't been over to the office in a month.

Mumford: It's like retirement then?

O'Brien: Yes. It's kinda nice.

Mumford: You've got kids at home. Occasionally anyway.

O'Brien: Well, we have seven youngsters, and they're home and they're not home. And, uh, our oldest daughter, Anne, is in San Francisco. She's married down there. Our daughter, Julie, lives down on 26th and she's married, and our other daughter, Mary, she's an aerobics instructor and she lives down on the lake down there. And then there's four boys. John, Jr. He works up in Alaska and he's up there now making a bid for a job. Frank, who you just saw, he's a flight attendant for Delta. And he goes to Korea three times a month. He's over there all during the Olympics and stuff like that. And he lives actually in Vancouver 'cause he works out of the airport. He transferred to Portland; he was working here. He transferred to Portland and picked up that Korean run. And that just working out nice for him. So, I never know when he's gone. Patrick just graduated from Western Washington with a degree in Economics. So he's gonna go out into that cruel hard world. And Joe is a junior just finished his junior year at Western. So. And Joe's home, but the rest of them, you know, they're here; they're not here, but. This is a big old house, has 19 rooms. So, there's space.

But the really interesting part is for the most part of this year, with the boys up at school, Frank there, John gone and the other gal's gone--just Jean and I are here alone in this house with nineteen rooms, and the interesting thing to me is when they all wind up here. What happens to the food bill; it's just

unreal. I never really realized it, but Jean and I, we'll would go out and grab a bite or something, or we put a little something on. When they come home and I said, "Jean, you have been to the grocery store every day this week." She said, "Oh yeah. The boys are home." But it's nice, though. You know. We enjoy having them.

Mumford: Are you involved in any civic or volunteer organizations?

O'Brien: Oh yeah. I work with the Forgotten Children every year. And we'll get started on that pretty quick. I'm one of the Santy Clauses in that. Then I've been working with those little youngsters up at the hospital that are having those bone marrow transplants. And that's been kind of rewarding doing that. Actually I haven't been up there in a month and a half because the--I'm also taking violin lessons. And my professor's wife is a recreational therapist up there. That's how I found out about it. So I went up there and started going up there every Wednesday and seein' those youngsters. And there was one little guy that loved baseball, and he damn near died. And his favorite was Roger Clements. So I waited 'til Clements come in and I got Clements' autograph, a ball for him, a picture and everything else. And I'd go up there on weekends, and he hadn't smiled in three days and he damn near died the night before. Yeah. He had a bad reaction to the transplant and all that, and his entire

insides was ulcerated. And he smiled, and and and I couldn't even touch him 'cause of all the plastic stuff there. Well a month and a half ago he went back in Houston. All cured. And they had him down to the baseball teams and all that stuff. And when he finally got--he went a hundred and nine days without eating...And then when he finished, his stomach was only that big [showing circle formed by forefinger and thumb]. And they told me he couldn't leave the hospital 'til he got up to 800 calories a day. And he couldn't eat. And I'd have him down to the Dome to the games and he'd order nachos, and he could eat maybe two nachos, if that. And his mom was there with him. And finally he got to the point where he could eat a little more and a little more. And when he started--the first time I saw him, he was layin' there in the bed, and he had dark curly hair. Two weeks later he was balder than a cucumber. And his face was all bloated. And I went in there and he got the pillow over his face and he says--I said, "Get that off of there." I said, "Let me tell you something." I said, "Most of the guys I know don't have hair, aren't ever gonna get it back." You know. The whole thing was to keep the--And then--I--the Mariners were very helpful. They'd give me all the surplus handout stuff and all like that. I'd be like Santa Claus, going into the rooms and giving all the kids this stuff, and it worked out pretty nice. And this youngster from--but he was that

close to death when I was--I get involved in that. And I'll start that again pretty quick. Umm. But I bring some of the players up, Alvin Davis and uh Davis and Reynolds were very good. They'd go up to the hospital with me. And then, whenever I'd bring him down to the games and bring him in the locker room and all the coaches....It's great fun to see kids' eyes get that big. And the Mariners were very very helpful...And he made it.

Mumford: Wonderful. Did you have music lessons as a child?

O'Brien: Never.

Mumford: You didn't describe your childhood at all.

O'Brien: We were very poor; lived in New Jersey. As a matter of fact, Jim, Ed, Bill and I, that's our other brother, we were in one room. It wasn't the size of this room.

Mumford: This is about what?

O'Brien: I don't know.

Mumford: Haha ha.

O'Brien: But it was about from here to the wall. Down this far.

Mumford: Not quite as--well, a little more than a nine by twelve?

O'Brien: Yeah.

Mumford: That's four boys.

O'Brien: Yeah. And it was really funny. The closet, you'd open the closet up and all you would see in the closet would be baseball uniforms. But we--You know what? Someone asked, when the World War II started, "what were you doing". And I remembered what I was doing. Ed and I were down at the railroad tracks picking coal. The coal trains would come by and spill all that coal. And we had a coal stove and we'd go down and pick bushel baskets of coal. And we would haul'em up. And I remember my mother was leaning out the window, and she said, "The Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor." We said, "Oh?" And we dumped the coal in and went down and got another bucket of coal. But uh, yeah we uh, we just--all we did as youngsters was play sports and go to school. That was it.

Mumford: You picked the coal. Did you have jobs, otherwise?

O'Brien: We ran newspaper routes and worked for Vic Morgan in the grocery store and stuff like that, you know. And the year we stayed out we were--we worked in a terra cotta factory. That was funny. We

worked in construction 10 hours a day, six days a week and playing baseball at five different baseball clubs.

Mumford: What did your father do for a living?

O'Brien: He was a deckhandler on the tugboats for the Pennsylvania Railroad. And then later, um, during the war, he was making a little over a hundred dollars a month with us five kids. And later on he became a foreman, a Marine foreman, on the docks down there in our hometown in New Jersey.

Mumford: Did your father and mother own their own home?

O'Brien: No. We lived in an apartment. And when Ed and I signed with Pittsburgh, we got a bonus back in '53 and we took the money and we bought our dad a house and a car. And he never--we bought--we were the ones that bought the house and the car. And he never did have a driver's license. My sister, Teresa, used to drive the car.

Mumford: He didn't drive.

O'Brien: [unintelligible] He was proud. And so we gave him the money and bought--but that was...

Mumford: So was life, as you remember early life, a struggle or a matter

of making ends meet?

O'Brien: It was making ends meet. But it was happy though, you know. It wasn't--we didn't think we needed any more because we weren't thinking that way, I guess.

Mumford: Was everybody else that you knew pretty much in the same boat?

O'Brien: I was thinking the--in our high school, there were two cars. McCne and O'Toole had cars. No one else had a car, in the whole high school. And that was about it. Nowadays you can't get into the schools because the cars are blocking everything. Now we're from a poor family and it--And I don't think anybody was thinking that they don't have anything. [phone rining] You know, you were kinda _____ with what they had, 'though it wasn't much.

Mumford: 'Little better idae about your growing up years?

O'Brien: Yeah and we uh--What I remember is doing the chores that were set-up by the chief. That was our dad. We called him the chief. And he had a system of discipline that worked. It was called fear. We'd do our chores and we played sports and we'd go to school and that was about it. And we were just happier than clams. That was all we wanted to do. And uh, it went like that. We played baseball all the time, and then when it got to

basketball season, we played basketball. Did our homework. And I never forget. Every time we got our report card from the Sisters of Mercy, we'd bring that home and he where the marks were. He looked on the other side--Department, conduct. And we weren't right there, we were in deep trouble. And uh...

Mumford: What was punishment like?

O'Brien: We'd get whacked around pretty good, or he'd take our baseball stuff away from us for a week. That was kinda like the ongoing _____ . And my mother was--Mother was very sickly her whole life. She was a very small woman. And she's kinda--and dad was the typical Irishman. When he'd get mad, he'd get mad and he'd get rough on us. And my mom was just so quiet..."Oh Ed, now. They're just youngsters..." [laughs]

But there wasn't much of--There wasn't nothing spectacular in our childhood but there was nothing that we regretted either. And we just--We were enjoying ourselves and we didn't have anything to speak of, but we did feel wanted. And it worked out fine.

Mumford: Sounds like it's been a good life.

O'Brien: If I had it to do it over again, I'd do it exactly the same way.

Tape on and off. Mr. O'Brien begins with response to question regarding

funding of county department operations:

O'Brien: ...submitted their budget to us and we were the ones that had the budgetary control.

Mumford: This is commissioners.

O'Brien: Yeah, commissioners.

Mumford: Uh-huh.

O'Brien: So we had a running battle all the time with the different elected officials on their budgets, but we would make the final determination. Yeah, I'll never forget one time we had the judges and I think it was the district courts. And their chairperson was a lady judge at the time. And she spent a considerable amount of time arguing for a typewriter that we had taken out. And just going on and on. And one of the other judges said, "Judge, if you had've read that budget a little further, you'd found out they took out the secretary, so we don't need the typewriter." (laughter) So, that ended that question. (more laughter)

End of Tape 2, Side 1