



THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI RESEARCH CENTER-KANSAS CITY

K0266

Reform Movement Oral History Collection

1988

10 cassette tapes

Oral interviews with individuals personally active in the Kansas City reform movement in opposition to the Pendergast Machine and for good Municipal government from the 1920s through the 1950s.

BIOGRAPHY:

Kansas City politics in the 1920s and 1930s were run by the political machine of Tom Pendergast. Corruption in the form of election fraud, political favoritism, and widespread gambling and bootlegging abounded, making Kansas City notorious throughout the nation. The power that the machine wielded was so absolute and oppressive that, by the closing years of the Depression, a group of citizens known as the "Good Government Association" formed to take action. This group desired to improve Kansas City's inner political system and its outer image as the 1940s approached. After the rigged election of 1936, the justice system was finally able to begin dismantling the Pendergast machine. Following Mayor Bryce Smith's election to his fifth term in 1939, Republicans and Democrats launched the non-partisan Charter Party. By their efforts and the efforts of other groups who made up the United Campaign Committee, a new reform government was elected into office in 1940, with John B. Gage as mayor. Shortly afterwards, Gage brought in L.P. Cookingham as city manager. In 1942, the Charter Party and United Campaign Committee became the Citizens Party. Reform efforts remained strong in city government until 1959, when the Citizens Association lost its council majority.

PROVENANCE:

These records were collected as a SHSMO-KC (WHMC-KC) project conducted by Patricia Needham, accessioned as KA0470 on June 30, 1988

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DESCRIPTION:

The collection consists of ten cassette tapes containing interviews with people active in the Kansas City reform movement from the 1920s through the 1950s. Following the inventory are outlines of major points discussed by each of the interview subjects.

INVENTORY:

- Tape 1. Duggan, Jerome T., Assistant City Counselor. Kansas City, Missouri, April 15, 1988. [K0266-A0001]
- Tape 2. Moore, Judge James A., Lawyer. Kansas City, Missouri, May 5, 1988.
- Tape 3. Moore, Judge James A., Lawyer. Kansas City, Missouri, May 5, 1988.
- Tape 4. Cookingham, L.P., City Manager. Kansas City, Missouri, May 6, 1988.
- Tape 5. Frost, Earle W., Municipal Judge. Kansas City, Missouri, May 11, 1988.
- Tape 6. Frost, Earle W., Municipal Judge. Kansas City, Missouri, May 11, 1988.

- Tape 7. Davis, Mayor Ilus W., Lawyer. Kansas City, Missouri, May 13, 1988.
- Tape 8. Gage, Marjorie (Mrs. John B.), Mayor's wife. Kansas City, Missouri, June 10, 1988.
- Tape 9. Gage, Marjorie (Mrs. John B.), Mayor's wife. Kansas City, Missouri, June 10, 1988.
- Tape 10. Smith, Edmund B., Municipal Judge. Kansas City, Missouri, June 10, 1988.

JEROME T. DUGGAN
April 15, 1988

Note: Mr. Duggan's eyesight, memory and general health are deteriorating

Side 1:

Note: Mr. Duggan began talking before tape was running; Mrs. Duggan on telephone in next room

- 1939 charter amendment
- experiences in Good Government Association and other associations
- reflections on parental political views
- the Kansas City Star's influence on politics
- federal investigation of vote fraud
- personal involvement in politics after college
- selection and experiences as city prosecutor, 1938
- concern for personal safety
- City Hall after Cookingham selected

Side 2:

Note: Duggan (during long pause) tries to find a particular picture in scrapbook

- how 1940 election changed Municipal Court
- effect of World War II on Kansas City
- types of businesses the machine impacted
- gambling, alcohol and prostitution in Kansas City
- relationship with Gage
- Kansas City Power and Light strike, 1940
- original agreement on mayoral position
- approached in 1948 to run for City Council
- selection process involving Cookingham

JUDGE JAMES A. MOORE
May 5, 1988

Note: cat in room during interview, occasionally rubbing against microphone

Side 1:

- biographical data
- family traditions in Democratic Party
- historical background of Democratic Party in the county
- Governor Stark's anti-machine appointments
- personal experiences with the state's 1939 Permanent Registration Act
- "Fortune Club" case
- involvement in Charter Party activities
- recall movement
- Gage's church speech and charter amendment proposal
- reform workers received compensation during campaign

Side 2

- extent of 1934 machine activities not widely known
- feeling towards individuals not in Democratic organization
- approached to run for municipal judge in 1938
- prosecution of Pendergast seen as eye-opener for Democrats
- credit given Pendergast for judicial appointments
- Municipal Court during machine era
- loss of people during World War II
- Gage asks him to organize veterans in 1946
- Midgley refuses to run for office/religious beliefs
- the Republican business community and the machine
- credit given to machine for building projects and jobs

Side 3:

- organized crime/Pendergast's gambling/downfall of machine
- individuals involved in gambling
- non-partisan aspect of judiciary
- apathy of populace and the sell-out of Republicans
- independent Democrats' initial attempts at fighting the machine
- difficulty of local non-partisans when dealing with county, state, and federal parties
- women's involvement in 1939
- discussion of Ilus Davis and Jack Gage

Side 4:

- involvement in pure milk producers
- case involving Henry Wallace

L.P. COOKINGHAM
May 6, 1988

Side 1:

Note: Mr. Cookingham resides in a retirement community, and their morning announcements interrupted the interview

- first trip to Kansas City in 1939 at request of Mayor Bryce Smith
- second trip four months later at request of Mayor John Gage
- did not want to be involved in the mass firings at City Hall
- selection of individuals on his staff
- how the administration had to "sell" themselves to the populace
- impact of World War II on Kansas City
- details regarding the constant pressure to fire employees
- handling City Council and various committees
- personnel and finance critical to City Manager
- how the machine handled the infiltration of the water and fire departments
- first impressions of Kansas City
- deficit faced by the reform government- how it was created and handled
- personal concern for safety

Side 2:

Note: Mr. Cookingham received a telephone call, after which he changed chairs

- immediate staff and how they operated within priorities
- mechanization in the city government's financial system
- handling differing views from politicians
- reaction when he expressed "everyone, including Pendergast, will receive the same service from the city"
- opinion regarding change of power in the 1959 election and why he resigned
- experiences in Fort Worth
- why he and Mayor Gage stayed longer than two years
- relationship between Council/Mayor/City Manager
- reflection on Gage

EARLE W. FROST
May 11, 1988

Note: Mrs. Frost was present during the interview. She speaks on sides 2, 3 and 4.

Side 1:

- biographical information
- why he came to Kansas City in 1923
- how political factions functioned during the 1920s
- political activities in Republican politics
- impact of Prohibition and Depression on politics
- impression of the 1931 Ten Year Plan
- Police Department under machine control, 1932
- appointment as Special Assistant Solicitor for US Department of Agriculture
- had difficulty getting business as a Republican lawyer
- reasons for formation of Lawyers Association

Side 2:

- machine impact on business
- National Youth Movement and successors
- description of 1934 election
- vote fraud investigations after 1936
- outlines multiple influence of coalition ticket, Pendergast indictment, and Police Department's return to state control
- political factions form non-partisan United Campaign
- recall campaign activities

Side 3:

- women's involvement in 1940 election
- personal activities in recall/charter amendment
- process of candidate selection under non-partisan platform
- activities during 1940 campaign
- Mrs. Frost's (in her own words) personal experience in 1940
- findings upon assuming court duties
- change in types of court cases during first term
- significance of 1940 election

Side 4:

- Citizens Party defeat in 1959
- impact of World War II on city government
- Mrs. Frost expresses view of people being ashamed of Kansas City

ILUS W. DAVIS
May 13, 1988

Note: Mr. Davis is soft-spoken, and he held his hands over his mouth for a large portion of the interview. He also tapped on the table at which we sat.

Side 1:

- biographical information
- awareness of political issues through parental discussion
- Ten Year Plan (1931) through parental views and personal experiences
- firsthand encounter with machine/slot machines/gambling
- national economic collapse coupled with rise of machine power
- when populace began effort to counteract machine's power
- Dietrich asked him to assist in effort to elect Gage
- reform government unprepared for what they found in City Hall
- non-partisan aspect of 1940 election
- Citizens Association defeat in 1959

Side 2:

- World War II military service
- impact of World War II on business outlook
- changes occurring through new city government in 1940s
- staffing of reform government
- impact of corruption on internal structure of city's government
- decision to return to Kansas City in 1946
- decision to enter city government
- city plans put on hold because of World War II
- mayoral terms (beginning in 1963)/city still recovering from influence of machine
- recollection of parental discussion on airport development in 1926
- building programs of the 1930s

MARJORIE GAGE (MRS. JOHN B.)
June 10, 1988

Side 1:

Note: Telephone call. Floor fan on during interview

- biographical information
- involvement in tennis
- activities as secretary at Election Board/Republican, 1920s
- city affairs during the 1920s
- when signs of corruption began to appear
- experiences during elections, police activities
- how reformers tried to handle voting in 1940 election
- populace apathy during 1934 election
- 1938 election
- recall/charter amendment petitions
- financial situation at City Hall, 1940
- reformers not prepared for extent of corruption at City Hall

Side 2:

- involvement in World War II bond campaign
- John Gage's commitments at Kansas City Law School
- continued apathy/fear of populace through 1940 election
- Gage's plan to leave city if defeated
- personal threats to the family
- experiences at speaking engagements during campaign
- merging of factions into non-partisan group
- background of Gage's decision to run for mayor
- women's activities in Citizen's Association
- populace feelings regarding non-partisan aspect of election
- opinion regarding H. Roe Bartle's administration

Side 3:

- reform council members attempt to establish their own machine
- description of how machine dealt with transgressors
- Truman's election to Senate
- the machine and the business community
- 1937 personal experience with McElroy and city administration
- how reformers began clean-up of City Hall
- impact of World War II on Kansas City
- involvement of women during World War II

EDMUND B. SMITH
June 10, 1988

Note: Judge Smith extremely soft-spoken

Side 1:

- biographical information
- how he became politically active in 1938
- Edgar Shook's influence with Governor Stark
- significance of being Catholic candidate
- experience as election judge at polling place during 1934 election
- machine's impact on his own law practice
- individuals, in general, concerned with changing political situation
- why he ran in the election of 1940
- Ken Midgley's role as Acting City Manager
- recall/charter amendment issue
- formation of reform ticket

Side 2:

- women's involvement in reform campaign
- situation when he assumed duties in 1940
- types of vice and corruption in the city
- impact of World War II
- impact of machine on practice of law during 1930s
- overview of impact on the city
- populace reaction to non-partisan aspect of reform movement
- local newspapers' political input
- discussion of Harry Truman
- how John Gage dealt with keeping "spoils system" out of city government