

- GT: February 14th, 1973. My name is Gloria Thompson and I'm interviewing Mr. Ray Gesell about some of his activities as a Minnesota state legislator. This is for the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center. As I said earlier when we were talking, I'd just like to ask you a few questions about your background. Were you born in the Red River Valley?
- RG: No, I was born in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. My mother was a Probstfield girl, daughter and, went there after marriage with my father, Mr. Gesell, Charles B. Gesell. They were in business there. I graduated from the local high school and started at the LaCrosse State Teachers. But it didn't really appeal to me and I quit after three or four weeks and came up here to the farm. I have been here ever since, with the exception of the time I spend in the Army in World War I.
- GT: What year was it that you did come to the Red River Valley?
- RG: I came here first in 1916, although I had been here as a child on many summer vacations.
- GT: What were some of the jobs you took before you were involved in the legislature?
- RG: The jobs that I took were farming. And market gardening. Of course, I was involved in many of the local activities like serving on the town board and being president of several local organizations, but outside of that, I never had an employer.
- GT: What made you decide to become a politician?
- RG: If I tell you that story everybody will get a beautiful laugh. And I think it's worth telling. One night I was at a local barroom with two friends. One of whom was Dr. Catlin, a veterinarian, and my good friend, and barber, Joe Pavlick. We were talking about state problems and we were having quite a time over a glass of beer when I seemed to come up with a few answers that pleased them. And the little horse doctor said, "Ray, why don't you run for the legislature?" It all started as a joke. I had no more intention of running for the legislature than I had for running for president of the United States so I said, "Well, sure I'll run!" Doctor had contacts with all of these farmers all around the country - doctoring horses, pigs, sheep, chickens, cows and what have you. Every place the doctor went, he said, "Ray Gesell is going to run for the State Legislature." I didn't know this was happening, and about three or four weeks later I had walked down the street and farmers from outlying districts would come up and shake hands with me and tell me how happy they were that I was going to run for the Legislature. I tried to back out and I couldn't. And so in the last days, some of them really became quite angry because they seemed to want a change and so finally I filed and that's how I happened to run for State Legislature.

GT: Are you fairly happy with that decision?

RG: Oh, yes. I wouldn't trade it for a college education.

GT: (laughter)

RG: With a smattering of a few other things that I think I have picked up during my life time, you learn to meet new people. You learn to understand people and you also develop a feeling that when you're defeated, never get angry. Never carry it against someone else, but just be the same you always were and the next time you'll have them on your side.

GT: From what years were you a legislator?

RG: I was elected in '44 and served '45, '47, and '49 at which time I felt that it was interfering too much with my business. It was a rather expensive situation. We received \$2,000 for a two year term and many times we had to pay our own expenses to go to St. Paul and then we were always subjected to what I call the freeloaders, people who would come down with some problem and expect you to take them out to dinner and buy them a few drinks. And I figure that it cost me from four to six hundred dollars each time I ran, and my compensation for that period was only \$2,000 so I couldn't see how in the world I could neglect my business and continue on and pay my expenses in the hotel and all my other incidentals. And incidentally, I am the man that started wearing Pendleton shirts in the Legislature. When I arrived there everybody had a white shirt on. So did I until my three white shirts got dirty and I had neglected to have them cleaned so I just pulled a woolen shirt off the rack and wore it to the Legislature. People looked at me as though I was a monstrosity and different fellows came up to me and said, "Ray, how have you got the guts to wear a woolen shirt in the House?" I said, "Well, it's the only clear shirt I've got and I want to wear it again tomorrow." Inside of ten days there were 20 or 30 Legislators in the House with colored shirts on. And one had an old jacket on that had patches on the elbows. It was Louis Hill, Jr., the prominent James J. Hill's grandson, great grandson or grandson. So you see, I did set a style once in my life.

GT: Sounds good. What did the people from your district urge you to do for them?

RG: Their main thought, of course, this being an agricultural area, was to do everything I could for the farmers, because agriculture at that time was far more important even than it is today. And then, of course, the educational field, the welfare field, the State Teachers College was one of our growing institutions and getting better each year and the teachers gave me very good support because they knew that I was liberal minded as far as these different phases of our economy were concerned.

GT: What were some of the particular policies that you strived for in the Legislature as representative?

RG: Outside of the different interests that I have already mentioned, I was a very strong conservationist. I had the support of every Rod and Gun Club and every conservation organization in the area. I had been active and served as president of the largest organization in the state, the Moorhead Rod and Gun Club, which up to that time was the largest. And our hopes were to clean up the environment even 25 years ago. I could cite examples of that but I'm afraid you'd run out of tape if I went on ahead with it.

GT: Could you give me one or two though, please?

RG: I can give you one. This will make you chuckle. We had a liberal in the House who had never had a bill on the floor. Every bill that he introduced never got out of committee. He couldn't understand it. I could because I knew that some people didn't like him and they were sitting on him. One day the chairman of the Conservation Committee, or game and fish people and that's the way that was labeled in those days, couldn't be there and I was vice-chairman. So the first thing I did, I lifted this man's bill off the bottom of the heap. After he'd come to me and cheerfully explained to me his problem, we passed the bill out of committee. It was a good bill. At that time Lake Minnetonka was loaded with cabin cruisers, and they were flushing all their toilets directly into the lake. And many of the people around the lake wanted the lake cleaned up and they felt that this should go in chemical tanks and take their garbage out and dump it themselves. We got the bill on the floor and it was really funny that this fellow got up and he made a strong plea for it but the opposition, the animosity, I would say, was so great that they killed it. Today I'm quite sure that's a law. We've done so much and we've heard so much about cleaning up our lakes and streams and keeping the garbage off the highways and keeping the pollutants out of the airways, that after all I consider that bill a kind of a pioneer bill.

I worked pretty hard on military affairs. We had a lot of crippled men coming back from World War II, and they really needed some legislation to help them. One of the bills that I fought, and fought hard, perhaps I was wrong, was a capital approach. The Capital Approach bill authorized the purchase of a large amount of slum buildings, far worse than the worst of Moorhead had during the urban renewal, because we were taking everything out of Moorhead. But it came to our knowledge that a certain group had bought these buildings on tax titles for peanuts and were about to unload them when the state had a pretty good price. We didn't like that, and the Capital Approach bill came out as a war memorial, a memorial, to our veterans, in lieu of a bonus. The galleries were packed, all veterans and their wives, many of them were disabled. They wanted a bonus. They didn't want a bunch of buildings as a memorial to them. We tried to substitute and had the state use the money which it planned to spend at that time for a large hospital. A hospital if not for veterans, for crippled children, or something that could really have some meaning to the memorial. Perhaps I was wrong in writing this bill. We almost appealed it. We had a few weak sisters that listened to the opposition at the last minute, and they picked up enough votes to pass it. But that bill, as I see it today, was probably alright, because the buildings that were built with that money 25 years ago couldn't be replaced now for three times that amount. So maybe it was a mistake, and maybe it wasn't.

GT: Ok. Welfare.

RG: On welfare we had many bills. There were so many bills for the good of the people, the good of the people that just really needed help. It kept us quite busy on that committee, and Charley and Laura Paulen [phonetic], who was the commissioner at that time, and I worked together to pass considerable legislation in that area.

GT: Earlier you mentioned to me a letter referring to this conflict of an old age assistance bill, and that some individuals had tried to rake you over the coals. Do you care to elaborate on that point a bit?

RG: Just shortly before election the last time I ran for office, a letter came out smearing my record. It was entirely false because the bill came out of welfare and I fought to get the bill out. And I certainly, every old age recipient in the county knew that I was for them. And this letter came out stating that I wasn't there, according to a Minneapolis paper. Well, a Minneapolis paper without a date on it would be pretty hard to trace. Then the letter was signed by a person who never existed, it was an anonymous name. We checked all the directories and telephone books and hunted all over the city's records for years back and couldn't find anyone by that name. The situation got so bad that, well, it pointed right directly at one man who had offered to write a letter to similar to that one the first time I ran in my behalf, and I refused to have anything to do with it. But he had forgotten that he had tried to get me to circulate a letter which was almost identical to the one which was circulated against me four years later. So I would say that from the time that Julius Caesar came down, that politics have had its dirty moments, and that still exists today.

GT: What were some of your most difficult times in the legislature?

RG: Perhaps one of them was difficult was the time that I spoke for my first bill. I was sitting in the corner with a sound box about eight feet from my head, and having a very heavy and powerful voice and not needing a mic at all, one of the pages put a mic on my desk and turned it up high. I had plenty of butterflies in my stomach and crawling out of my ears at the time that I stood up to speak, and the bill was so simple that I have to laugh about it now because anybody who wouldn't vote for a bill like that would take a piece of candy away from a baby.

When I finally sat down, I was just about exhausted, and some of the elder men in my row, which consisted of Ade Boze, Louie L. [Hill] Jr., and so on, came up and patted me on the back and said "Gee, you did a swell job."

It was really pitiful, but that happens to many of the new men when they come down there, and they're lacking in experience. And I think that today, generally speaking, the quality of your legislators, perhaps not in judgment alone, but their speaking ability, and feeling at home and trying to talk to a lot of people. They have it today, where we didn't have it 25 years ago. Many of these legislators worked on the farm, and they couldn't

talk above a whisper. No one knew what they were talking about, but after you read the bill you voted for it if it wasn't a dangerous bill and patted them on the back and told them they did a good job just like they did to me in the beginning.

GT: Do you recall any other stories that, or opposition from the other side in the legislature, that gave you some hard times?

RG: One bill that I introduced was a conservation bill; no need to go into it now. I passed it in the House, but when it got to the Senate, a senator was very antagonistic toward the bill. But he promised faithfully in front of the entire Senate Game and Fish Committee, that he would support the bill and vote for it, if I allowed him to put this amendment on it. I didn't like to, but from urging in the committee and from the committee chairman, they said "If you want to pass this bill you'll have to accept that amendment," and I said, "all right," I said, "then I understand that you will not vote against the bill." He said, "No, I won't." When the bill came on the Senate floor, the same person, who is now a congressman, jumped up and tried to have it sent back to committee. They finally brought it to a vote, but he was strong enough to defeat the bill in the Senate. Later on it cost him the governorship of the state of Minnesota. When he ran for governor, he forgot that he had broken his word to four or five of the most influential members of the House and when they found out that he was running for governor, they all went out against him, and they said that, "He broke his word to us. We are going to support the other man." And he was defeated by a small margin.

GT: For general information, Mr. Gesell, did you run as a liberal or a conservative?

RG: When I ran for office, many people asked you if you were a liberal or a conservative, but there was no designation on the party, on the ticket, nor was there a democrat or a republican ticket. It was a no party deal. Everybody knew I was a democrat and everybody knew that I was, what you might term, a liberal now. And of course I gathered votes from one side of the isle and lost votes on the other. But I had many, many conservatives supporting me. I believe I misspoke there. Did I say I was a liberal democrat? I meant to say, correction, I am a conservative democrat.

GT: Ok

RG: Is that alright?

GT: Yes, it's ok.

RG: I caucused with the conservatives, but I voted a number of times with the liberals when I felt that they were correct. My great concern was to save the state money. And I presume that you can be too penny pinching at times and trust me, it saves money in the long run.

GT: Is there anything in your term of office that, in retrospect, you would do differently or you wished had turned out other than it did?

RG: I can't really name specific bills, but I am quite sure that if I were sitting in the legislature today and some of the same bills came up, that my voting record would be quite a little different. I, we all make honest mistakes, and I think that most of the mistakes that legislators make, in fact I would like to say that all of the mistakes they make, are honest ones.

GT: Thank you. Mr. Gesell, when I talked to you on the phone the other evening, you mentioned to me that you had participated in appropriating funds, or well I guess it was funds, I hope I'm understanding this correctly, for Moorhead State College.

RG: Yes. In 1947, the State Teachers College received, at Moorhead, received an appropriation that amounted to around a million dollars. It was for a men's dormitory. The dormitory was needed greatly because many of the returning GI's were sleeping in the basement, near steam pipes. There toilet facilities were very bad. The air in those rooms was bad, and we had to do something about it. Now, getting this appropriation was a really a tremendous job, and I am quite sure that I never would have been able to get it without the help of Ade Boze, B-O-Z-E, who was representative from Detroit Lakes area, Becker County, and a power on the Appropriations Committee. The Appropriations Committee of the House put it in their bill, but when it came over to the Senate, the Senate tried to knock it out; that is, the committee, the Conference Committee of the Senate and the House met. And fortunately for Moorhead, Mr. Boze was on that Conference Committee. It seemed that Bemidji and Moorhead State Teachers, were having great difficulty in receiving what we felt was a just amount of appropriation to run their schools. We were poor on buildings, and Mankato, under a very able senator, was able to get real large appropriations for new buildings, which no doubt they needed because their enrollment was large. But every time a college, in those days, received new buildings, their enrollment was bound to go up. Mr. Boze, who incidentally was a sort of a roommate of mine, our rooms conjoined with doors between. When he went to this Conference Committee, he said, "Ray, you will not see me if it takes the rest of this session, unless Moorhead State Teachers gets their allotment on this building." Well, at 5:30 in the morning a red-eyed tired Mr. Boze said, "You'll never know how much it cost the state of Minnesota to get Moorhead this dormitory. But I had to agree to some things that I didn't want to, but I just made up my mind that Moorhead is entitled to it." And that's really how it gets appropriation.

GT: Thank you.

RG: Moorhead State Teachers College was very fortunate in having a man like Alex Nemzek on their faculty. Alex Nemzek probably did more for the State Teachers College than most people will ever realize. I was out at the legislature, it was either in 1951 or '53, and I had been to town with a crew of men who had been working on the farm. I was dirty, I had been on a tractor all day and needed a bath and a shave, and about 7:00, down

the street comes Sliv Nemzek on the run. “My god, where have you been?” he said, “I need you.” I said, “What’s that matter, Sliv?” He said, “Moorhead hasn’t an appropriation in the appropriations bill for \$40,000, or thereabouts, to purchase land for the expansion of the college. It’s not in there.” He said, “I just got word and it’s gotta get in there in the next couple three days or we’re lost.” He said, “There’s a train leaving at 9:00. Jump in your car, go home and take a bath and shave, and get your bag and get on that train and get down there.” Now I wasn’t in the legislature, but he knew that I had certain connections down there that might save the bill. So I went down and spent two days at my own expense and came back and four or five days later Moorhead’s appropriation was there, and it made it possible to buy all that land to the east of the college where the college buildings are expanding onto, and I imagine it’s practically all used up now. Alex Liv Nemzek saved the day for Moorhead, and I was happy to help. I presume that some people who might hear this tape, might someday consider running for the State House or Senate. My advice to those people is this: make friends with everybody, be kind and considerate and help them whenever you are able to without jeopardizing your own thoughts. But by all means never be angry when you lose a bill, and to a new man my advice is keep your mouth shut for the first session, unless something very important is on the floor. We have had some beautiful speakers, young fellows, college fellows, came down there several of them, and they made a terrific speech on their first bills or things they were interested in. And everybody complimented them and told them what a wonderful job they did and from then on we couldn’t keep them off the floor.

GT: Thank you very much Mr. Gesell.