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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

**The Honorable Robb Austin (D)**

39<sup>th</sup> District

Allegheny County

1979-1980

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**Jesse Teitelbaum (JT):** Good morning.

**The Honorable Robb Austin (RA):** Good morning.

**JT:** I am sitting here with Robb Austin, former Member of the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, a Democrat whose service included the 39<sup>th</sup> District of Allegheny and Westmoreland Counties, from 1979 to 1980. Thank you for being with me here today.

**RA:** Happy to do it.

**JT:** What I like to do is just start out by asking you about your background; tell me about your childhood, growing up; your family life.

**RA:** I actually was not from Pennsylvania. I grew up, born and raised, in Ohio, and my family then moved on to the Washington, D.C. suburbs, and that's where I grew up. I was athletic in high school and earned scholarships in basketball at, I played both at the University of Miami in Florida and then while I was at Miami, the school dropped the sport. They actually dropped basketball, and George Washington University picked up my scholarship, so I finished playing there and, and finished my education there. My father was a government worker. He worked for the Veterans' Administration, and my mother was a homemaker, and it was a pretty "Leave It to Beaver" kind of upbringing, I would say. But after college is when I moved to Pennsylvania.

**JT:** Okay.

**RA:** And got involved and active in the state here.

**JT:** Was there anyone else, say, in your family that was in politics?

**RA:** Well, my father was very involved in veterans' organizations, and he actually was elected National Commander of AMVETS [American Veterans], which is a national veteran's organization of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and he was very interested in politics, and so I think that, that was an influence on me.

**JT:** Oh, good.

**RA:** Yeah.

**JT:** I noticed early in life you were Republican.

**RA:** Right.

**JT:** And then prior to entering the House you switched to being a Democrat.

**RA:** Right.

**JT:** Did you have a lot of Republican influences as you were younger?

**RA:** I think I did. I was on the conservative side, which back when I was in office as a Democrat, that also fit. The Democratic Party was a lot more conservative when I was in office, and there's a bit of a story as to – I was a Republican, and as to why I ran as a Democrat and how I ended up being a Democratic Member of the House, which I can tell you about that if you like.

**JT:** Well, prior to you becoming a House Member, tell me about your career prior to entering politics, and specifically if there was something in the career that led you to becoming a member of politics.

**RA:** Well, I think my stint at George Washington University really got me active in politics and got me interested in politics, and it was sort of that influence being, while I was from the Washington suburbs, it was the first time I was downtown, you know, in Washington every day. There was a lot of political influences.

**JT:** Sure.

**RA:** And, and I think that really was one of the keys to why I got interested in politics and later ran.

**JT:** What were you doing for a living at the time?

**RA:** Well, when I graduated from George Washington University, I was dating a girl who was from McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and we later got married, and so after college I moved to Pennsylvania, because this was her hometown. She was a schoolteacher, and I got a job with the local newspaper, and that sort-of brought me to Pennsylvania. That would have been in the summer of 1973.

**JT:** Okay.

**RA:** So.

**JT:** Great. Now tell me about the steps leading to running for the House.

**RA:** Sure. As I said, I was very interested in politics in college, and I studied it constantly. You know, back then we didn't have the internet, or it wasn't on cable television, or there were not a lot of resources or materials, so I dove into political books, you know, and I read every political book I could get my hands on. I started with all the makings of the Presidents. You know, Theodore White's books<sup>1</sup>, you know, 1960, [19]64, [19]68, [19]72, and so I read constantly about it. I was a local newspaper reporter for the *McKeesport Daily News*, and, you know, so I covered local council meetings, school board meetings, you know. I knew the local communities, and so I was always rubbing elbows with local councilmen, school board directors, so I was – you know, and I covered elections, of course, for the paper, so it was a natural progression. And after being a reporter for five years, I felt it was time for me to move on, and

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<sup>1</sup> American journalist; best known for his wartime reports from China and his accounts of the 1960, 1964, 1968, and 1972 Presidential Elections.

so I started looking at, sort-of, my career options, if you will, and one option was maybe to go to a larger newspaper, maybe get into television, you know, maybe some other form of the media, public relations, you know, something like that. But in the back of my mind was always the idea of running for office, and I was 26 years old, and I thought I would look at the local scene to run for office. So, as I was studying this career move, and I wasn't sure what the career move would be, I, you know, I said, "Well, let me, let me look at possibly getting involved in politics."

**JT:** Great. Now tell me about the switch from Party to Party.

**RA:** Well, I was a registered Republican, but, you know, again, I had never been a committeeman, I never was active in politics personally, you know. I was a newspaper reporter.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** And so, as I looked around, I wasn't 100 percent sure of the district that I even lived in, you know. I mean, I was, again, I was a newspaper reporter. My wife and I lived in Elizabeth Township, Pennsylvania, so as I started researching options to run, and I started focusing in on, "Okay, I'm in the 39<sup>th</sup> Legislative District. Let's look at that." I studied past elections, and it was overwhelmingly Democrat, and the deciding factor for me was when I looked at the 1972 Presidential Election, I went down to the county – again, these things weren't readily available for you, so off to the, the Election Bureau I went, you know, on my day off one day, down to Pittsburgh, and I, and I got this, you know, the statistics on the [19]72 Presidential Election between Richard Nixon [President of the United States, 1969-1974] and George McGovern,

which was a landslide, overwhelming victory for Richard Nixon that year, but George McGovern carried the 39<sup>th</sup> Legislative District, so I said to myself, “There is no way that I can win this seat as a Republican. It can’t be done,” and so I decided I wanted to be involved. I wanted to run. I wanted to serve, and it was clear to me the only option I had, was to run as a Democrat. So actually, in January of 1978, before I announced – you know, the Primary was going to be, I think, in May, as I recall – four months before the Primary, I went down to the county in Pittsburgh to change my registration and became a Democrat.

**JT:** And it worked.

**RA:** It did.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** Because it was my belief that people didn’t care about that, you know? That they really didn’t. Now, it was a different media then, you know, it wasn’t really – I mean, outside of sort-of the whispering sort-of campaigns that go on in a campaign.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** You know, the general public really wasn’t knowledgeable of how I was registered a few years ago, and I didn’t think they would care anyway, so.

**JT:** Did you enjoy campaigning?

**RA:** I really did. Yeah, I really enjoyed it. I felt like it was something I was good at, and I loved going door-to-door. I spent most of my active time going house to house, and I loved the strategy of the campaign. I loved the, the mechanics of the visuals of a campaign. I loved the strategy of the public relations side of it, you know, signs and, you know, door knocking and just the nuts and bolts of it. I really enjoyed that, liked it, thought I was pretty good at it, and, you know, it was good.

**JT:** You had a lot of help from family, friends?

**RA:** Well, I didn't have – that's a good point. See, again, I had only been a, a resident of Pennsylvania for five years.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** Because I'd moved up there in [19]73. Five years later I'm running for office. I had been a newspaper reporter. You know, people really don't know, you know, sort-of your byline, and that doesn't really mean anything, so I didn't have any name identification. My wife's family was very prominent in the community in that, you know, they'd been born and raised there, and it was a large family, and she was a great asset, and her family was a great asset in terms of as a starting point, you know, recruiting volunteers and that sort-of thing. But unfortunately, I didn't have any personal family up there, so I was starting it from scratch, and, you know, it was

starting out, of course – like a lot of people, I wasn't supposed to win, and nobody gave me much of a chance. (*laugh*)

**JT:** Right. Was it a difficult election?

**RA:** I won by a two and a half to one margin. I won overwhelmingly. I won every town, every precinct, and there were eight candidates in the race besides the incumbent. The incumbent was a fellow by the name of George Misceovich [State Representative, Allegheny and Westmoreland Counties, 1975-1978, 1981-1984], and he'd been in two terms, and then there were a host of other candidates, so it was quite a smashing victory, and like I say, it wasn't close. I won every precinct, and in the city of Clairton, which was the largest voting community in the district, I actually won one precinct 100 to nothing.

**JT:** Wow.

**RA:** You know, the incumbent didn't get a vote. So, it was quite an overwhelming victory.

**JT:** I'll say.

**RA:** Yeah, it was exciting.

**JT:** Can you describe for me the 39<sup>th</sup> District, both in geography and in constituents?

**RA:** It was about 12 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. It was an Allegheny County district. It had a portion of it, one community, it was called Sewickley Township, was in Westmoreland County, and it was a typical Mon Valley – that region’s called the Mon Valley – it was a typical Mon Valley community; It was working-class; It was a lot of steel workers. They were old communities. The families had been there for years and years and years. My opponent, George Misceovich, he used to kind-of, you know, needle me. Occasionally when we’d bump into each other, he’d say, you know, “Up in Glassport, I speak Polish to them up there,” you know, which meant, you know, which meant I was an outsider. I had no chance is what he was conveying to me. And so, Clairton was the largest community, City of Clairton, and then it had the communities of Glassport, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Township, Liberty, Lincoln, and Forward Township, and those were the communities. It was a great district. The people were very friendly in that area, and it was a real joy to run and, you know, get to know everyone during the campaign.

**JT:** What kind of issues were important to your constituents?

**RA:** Well.

**JT:** Were there issues that were specific to them, or were they general working-class issues?

**RA:** Well, see, it was a very exciting time to run, and I think this is important to know about the campaign of 1978. While I understand, even today, that people are always fed up with the Legislature, they were really fed up with the Legislature in 1978. The preceding budget cycle

the State had gone – Milton Shapp [Governor of Pennsylvania, 1971-1978] was the incumbent Governor, at the end of his term, very unpopular. The infrastructure of the communities was crumbling. I mean, I know roads and bridges are always an issue in Pennsylvania. You can't imagine what kind of issue it was in 1978. I mean, the potholes in the roads and the bridges. The Legislature, there'd been corruption. There'd been all kinds of various investigations, and there was a budget fiasco in 1977. I don't think it's ever been compared to since. They went seven weeks after the deadline, the fiscal deadline. They didn't pass the budget until August, and schools were borrowing money at high interest rates to keep the doors open. Welfare checks weren't going out. Employees were laid off. It was a total fiasco.

**JT:** Oh wow.

**RA:** And so, that particular election cycle, if you look back, in Allegheny County alone I think there were about eight or nine or 10 of us freshmen who came in in a wave that year. Many of us defeating incumbents, entrenched Democratic incumbents.

**JT:** Do you remember your Swearing-In Ceremony?

**RA:** I do. I do.

**JT:** Tell me about that.

**RA:** You know, it was very exciting, and I wasn't prepared for what it was. It was very festive. It was, you know, all the families came from all the Members, and they come to the House Floor, and, you know, they're right there with you, and there's, you know, people, constituents, key constituents, and family members send flowers, and bouquets of flowers are on the desks, and it's a very exciting time. Very ceremonial, exciting, very joyous, everybody's very happy on both sides of the aisle, and then, of course, there were a lot of receptions inside the Capitol that are festive and fun, and it was exciting.

**JT:** Do you remember your first impressions of just coming into the building itself?

**RA:** Well, I do, because, see, I never came to Harrisburg before I was elected (*laugh*), so I never saw the building. I didn't attend, you know, things weren't real sophisticated back then. They didn't have any kind-of, you know, come to Harrisburg, we want to show you around before the General Election, you know, and I'm not sure not sure I would have gone anyway because I didn't want to really be tainted, you know, by that, meaning, you know, to get involved in the status quo, because that wasn't the kind of candidate I was. So, the first time I walked into the Capitol Building was after I was elected, and I was stunned by it. I mean, it was really beautiful, and I remember coming after the election, before the Swearing-In, and it was Christmas season, the big Christmas tree in the lobby, and I was really struck by – because it was the first time in my life where wherever you would go – I mean, the reverence that was shown to Members, to me, was all new and different. You know, by employees, by security people, by staff, just by everybody, and, you know, the, “Yes, sir,” the “No, sir, this way,” and it was pretty heady.

Because I had a birthday in December – I was elected, I was 26, and I had a birthday in December, so I turned 27. I was pretty young.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** So, it was pretty heady.

**JT:** I'm sure. Do you remember who sat around you on the House Floor?

**RA:** I sat next to Emil Mrkonic [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1975-1992] who was a good friend of mine from – and he represented the City of McKeesport, and Emil had been an incumbent. He'd been in about, when I got in, I think he was elected in [19]72. He was right next to me. In front of me was Mike Dawida [Michael; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-1988; State Senator, 1989-1996] who later became a Senator. Tom Murphy [Thomas; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-1994], who was also elected the same year I was. Tom later became Mayor of Pittsburgh, and those were the people around me. Behind me was Joe Wargo [Joseph; Lackawanna County, 1949-1984], a gentleman who'd been there, at that time, for 30 years and campaigned on the premise that if you reelect me I'll save you money because you don't have to pay my pension and a new salary to somebody else (*laugh*), and also Bud George [Camille; Clearfield and Centre Counties, 1975-present] sat behind me. Now, and I don't know that's Bud is still in or his son? I'm not sure. There is a Bud George that serves today. Is that the same?

**JT:** The same.

**RA:** Bud George sat behind me, and that was sort-of who was immediately around me. I sat in the back, you know. The Democrats were in majority in the Session ending in January of [19]78, but the election, and the Republicans took over by just a narrow margin. I think one seat, maybe two at the most. And usually, the majority, I'm told, sit on the Speaker's right, if I've got this right – this is what I was told when I got in there – but the Republicans didn't want to move. They would have been on the Speaker's left, and they said, "No, we'll stay where we are," so, I sat in the back. You know, we sat by delegation, so the Allegheny County delegation was quite large, and it extended towards the back, and I sat towards the back.

**JT:** Did you share an office with anyone?

**RA:** I did. Our offices were on the fifth floor of the Capitol. I'm not sure many people could find them today, because I don't think the elevator didn't go straight up to the fifth floor. I think it went up to the fourth floor, and then you had to maneuver around and go up some steps. You couldn't find it. It was a fire trap. You couldn't find it. Nobody could find it, and we shared a secretary. We each had a little cubby hole. That's what we had. We didn't have a real office. You just had a little cubby hole, and there were about eight or nine of us in one large room, and we all had this little cubby hole thing, and I shared a secretary with Brian Clark [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-1990] who was from Allegheny County and was elected, a new Representative like myself, was elected in [19]78, and Brian and I shared a secretary, and Brian went on and later married her, by the way. Anyway, but that's a side

(*laugh*), which it was great for them, but Members shared a secretary. We had no staff. There was no individual person to help you, just the secretary that would do typing for you, take dictation, stuff like that.

**JT:** Sure. Did you also have a district office?

**RA:** I did, and, see, primarily, I ran – I was the first full-time Legislator in the 39<sup>th</sup> District, and that was a huge part of my campaign; that I would be a full-time Legislator. My predecessor, and all the predecessors before him, they all had second jobs, and they would come home from Harrisburg on Wednesday night or whatever, and on Thursday they would go into their, you know, they worked in, maybe, the local plant or maybe a lawyer, whatever they did. And so, the salary then was 18,720 dollars. That’s what a Legislator was paid. And I ran and I said, “That’s enough. That’s a pretty good salary and that’s enough to be full-time,” and so, that was a huge part of my campaign, as was that I would have a district office. Because, if you wanted to see your Legislator back then, you could call them on the phone, and maybe you’d meet them at the local coffee shop, or maybe, you know, whatever. I’m not sure what they did. But, there was no office, and the 39<sup>th</sup> District never had an office. So, I ran to be a full-time Legislator, and I said I would have an office open daily with staff, which I did. So, most of that was – I wrangled a little bit of money out of Jimmy Manderino [James J.; State Representative, Westmoreland County, 1967-1989; Speaker, 1989], because he controlled everything, you know, the budget for Members and that.

**JT:** Sure.

**RA:** And so, he gave me a little bit of money, and then I used some from my campaign to open this office in the city of Clairton that was staffed every day. So, I had a – and the girl that I had working for me was – I went to the local high school, and she was a senior at the local high school taking secretarial curriculum, and they recommended her, and she came over, and so she worked for me and came over, and she got credit for it, as I recall. She would be there when I wasn't there. She was there, like, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday.

**JT:** Okay.

**RA:** Yeah, that's how we worked it.

**JT:** When you started, was there anyone in particular that you saw as a mentor?

**RA:** I was with a whole group of Legislators, new, young Legislators at the time. Billy DeWeese [H. William; State Representative, Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties, 1979-present; Speaker, 1993-1994] from Greene County. Bill Stewart [William; State Representative, Cambria County, 1977-1988; State Senator, 1989-1996] from Johnstown. Joe Steighner [State Representative, Butler County, 1979-1994] from Butler County. Mike Dawida, Tom Murphy, Tom Michlovic [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-2002] from Allegheny County, and Bob O'Donnell [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1973-1994; Speaker, 1991-1992], later became Speaker, from Philadelphia. And Alan Kukovich [State Representative, Westmoreland County, 1977-1996; State Senator, 1997-2004], who later became a Senator from

Westmoreland County. These were young Legislators who wanted to change the way Harrisburg worked: open up government, put restrictions on lobbyists, tighten regulations on utility companies. And that was the crowd I ran with. Abolish the Pennsylvania Compensation Commission, which authorized raises for Legislators. They didn't have to, you know, vote on. So, these were the people that I, sort-of, looked to them for, in one way, legislatively. In terms of my district office, Emil Mrkonic, who sat next to me from McKeesport, he ran a terrific district office, and was really a wonderful casework Legislator, and that's the other side of the job, and so I sort of emulated what he did in his district office, and he was a mentor for me in that regard.

**JT:** Good.

**RA:** Yeah.

**JT:** Getting into your House career, what types of legislation were you drawn to? Which bills did you sponsor that – ?

**RA:** Well, the bills that I was primarily involved with were what I mentioned a little bit earlier, which was abolishing the Compensation Commission, which was very controversial, tightening regulations on lobbyists. Back then, there really wasn't much reporting. They didn't have to register with, you know, with any agency.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** And expanding the Sunshine Law, you know, opening up meetings, opening up governmental meetings, agency meetings to the press and to the public. All those things that we really take for granted today. All those things that were really, you know, “Of course I can attend this meeting. It’s a public meeting.” Back then, they weren’t all public; they weren’t all open. So, those were the things I was most interested in. That, plus I got very interested in health care, which, looking back on it, it’s hard to believe that I was advocating health care for every Pennsylvanian back then, (*laugh*) but it is. It’s in my literature. It’s in my brochures. I sponsored legislation to do that. It’s in speeches I made. And there were two primary areas I was involved with; the one was bringing doctors in to underserved areas, in both rural and urban areas that, you know, where there was a shortage of physicians, primary care physicians, in those areas; and the second one was, I was the prime sponsor along with K. Leroy Irvis [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1959-1988; Speaker, 1977-1978, 1983-1988], to include treatment and research of Sickle Cell Anemia in the State Health Plan, which had been omitted that year, and I sort-of got wind of that, and I testified before the Council who was developing the plan, and I got involved in that, and that passed overwhelmingly. But, we were in the minority and I was a freshman, so we weren’t going to really be, you know, getting a lot of things through too easily, but I offered a lot of amendments on the Floor, a bunch of which passed and got into legislation. So, I thought just in the one term I served, I can point to several things. I was very outspoken, so I can point to a lot of – I really thought that I helped move the House in the direction that I was talking about earlier, and I can point to a number of legislative achievements that I got through in the amendment process and in some other ways, too, so.

**JT:** Would you say that most of the bills that you prime sponsored were constituent-based?

**RA:** They were. They were, by that, meaning?

**JT:** Were, were they based on someone from your district coming to you and say, “This is really important to me. I really need you to step up and say something on the House Floor about it.”

**RA:** Well, how it worked for me, and it is – as I’ve said earlier, when I campaigned, I went door-to-door. I went to thousands of doors and talked to people, and I really sort of got their ideas on what they wanted me to do, and I had my own ideas, but I also heard from them, and I’d listen from them, and I know it sounds a little cliché, but in my case, a lot of my thinking really came from their thoughts. I really made their thoughts part of my own, and that was very important to me. And, a lot of them were based on what they said to me, and I took that to heart. So, in that regard they were constituent-based. If I was approached by a lobbyist to put a bill in, I don’t recall, you know, circumstances where I was. I didn’t react too favorably to that. I didn’t react unfavorably necessarily, but that really wasn’t – I thought there were enough Legislators that sort-of dealt with that, you know. I wanted to come up with my own ideas and, and listen to my constituents, like the Sickle Cell Anemia resolution that passed. I remember it passed unanimously, and I was the prime sponsor of it and when I put it in the hopper, I remember Jimmy Manderino coming to me and saying – because K. Leroy Irvis’s name was not on it; you know, I just put it in under my name, and I didn’t, you know – and he said, “Why don’t you go show this to Leroy,” and I said, “Oh, sure,” (*laugh*) so I took it into his office, and he looked at it and said, “Oh, yeah,” he wanted to be part of that. So, the resolution, he and I were the sponsors

of it and it passed unanimously, but it got the treatment of Sickle Cell Anemia into the state health plan, but the point is; the city of Clairton had a significant African-American community, and so my interest in that was directly as a result of my constituents all over the district, and perhaps principally in the city of Clairton, where I had a very strong and active African-American constituency.

**JT:** You mentioned that you spoke against the compensation. Do you remember what your arguments were?

**RA:** Well, my arguments were two or threefold. One, it was a way that the Legislators could point to an entity and say, “They made us do it. *(laugh)* They thought we deserved a 20 percent pay raise,” you know? And so, while I was generally against the pay raise at that particular time and spoke out against them when they were proposed, because the State was in bad fiscal shape, and the roads were crumbling and just things were not, you know, I didn’t think we deserved a raise at that particular time, I certainly felt that if the Legislature wanted a raise that it should come from them. They should stand up and present something to the people. Bill Stewart, from Johnstown, always said to me, “You never can be beaten in a campaign for a vote as long as you can explain to your constituents why you voted that way. They may not agree with you, but if you can explain it, then that’s half the battle.”

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** Well, you couldn't explain why some others, this sort-of outside group, had to come up with the pay scale (*laugh*) for Legislators, you know, other than, well, you know, it was just a bad deal, and later it was abolished, so.

**JT:** Right. One of the resolutions that you spoke on, or at least offered an amendment to, was House Resolution 53, which proposed a special committee made up of several Members to discuss reducing the size of the Legislature.

**RA:** Right, right.

**JT:** What are your thoughts on that?

**RA:** Well, my principle thought about the Legislature, at that time, was that it was too unyielding; it was too big. It was chaotic, and it should be reduced. We had too many Members. We were paying too much money for all these Members. We represented, at that time, about 60,000 voters or constituents, and there was a move afoot, and I was part of it, to reduce the size of the Legislature. I don't recall the exact numbers, but I was strongly in favor of it at the time. I thought there were good arguments to reduce it. It never got done. In reality, in retrospect, it was never going to get done. So, whether that's for the better or not I'm not sure.

**JT:** No thoughts on whether or not it's still too big?

**RA:** You know, I think it is too big, and we were, at the time, I had information, which I don't recall today, about, you know, all kinds of other states that had much smaller legislatures. But I think there's also an argument to be made about staying close to the people, about not representing, you know, 150,000 people, and it was an argument that I wasn't as open to 30 years ago. I see that argument a little clearer today, and I think it's probably for the better that it worked out the way it did. That would be my take on it today.

**JT:** While you were in office, you served on both the Federal-State Relations Committee and the Labor Relations Committee.

**RA:** Right.

**JT:** Did you have a favorite of the two?

**RA:** I liked the Federal-State Relations Committee. I liked the interaction with the Federal Government. I'd grown up in the Washington, D.C. area, and so I had a keen interest in the Federal Government; what was going on there. And, it wasn't a real active committee, which was unfortunate, but it did involve itself with everything; it involved itself with revenue sharing, for example. It involved itself with any constitutional amendments that might be proposed on the Federal level. So, that was probably my favorite committee. The Labor Committee was tough. Organized labor opposed me when I ran for office, which was fine. And then when I won, they were always very skeptical of me, which was fine, too. But, I just found it to be a tough committee. The issues were tough. I thought the issues sort-of collided with, you know.

Organized labor's concerns and my constituent's concerns didn't always match up, but I think when it was all said and done, I think that labor felt that I was fair, and I think they thought I was a good Member for them in the end.

**JT:** Was it a difficult procedure starting in committee or basically getting the topics together, going to committee, working that, and then finally going to the House Floor? Did you run into any obstacles with trying to get some of the legislation through?

**RA:** Well, we were the minority, so the Labor Committee under the Republicans was not a real active committee, you know. Not a lot of things were getting through. So, we didn't have that many meetings, you know, we certainly didn't have the votes to get anything through, so the process was – I don't recall it to be that difficult. Now, that might have changed had I stayed in office, but my term, committee work wasn't a major part of my –

**JT:** Okay.

**RA:** – life. I was more focused on being a different kind of Legislator, being a full-time Legislator, kind-of focusing on case work back home, being available to my constituents, looking out for them in Harrisburg and in areas of open government, less government, ethics legislation, regulatory legislation, you know, that sort of thing. Committee work was more of a backseat that first year to me.

**JT:** Did you notice a lot of difficulties being in the minority or also dealing with seniority?

**RA:** There were a lot of difficulties. I never got to the majority, but it was a razor close majority, as I say. It was like, 103 to 100 or 102 to 101. It was very close. But, again, moving legislation, it was all controlled by the Republican Party, and so, yeah, legislatively it was difficult to get things through. Where I think I was able to make headway was working with these other Legislators, who I mentioned to you; young Legislators who wanted to change government as, you know, the old boys school network, and we did change it. I mean, it was really the first – it was when things started to change, in terms of more open government and so forth. And then, on the amendment process; I remember a very – at the time, I thought it was a very important amendment that I got passed – the No-Fault Divorce Bill was a big issue when I was in the Legislature, and we ultimately passed it. That was a huge issue – and I remember getting an amendment inserted in that bill that became part of the law, and that had to do with if the assets of the couple went to a judge for settlement and distribution, that sort of thing, my amendment said that the retirement package of either spouse had to be taken into consideration by the judge. Because my theory at the time, now this might seem dated – in fact it would be dated – but at the time, my theory was, you know, there were a lot of stay at home moms back then. In fact, that was the predominant way, stay at home moms, and, you know, the husband was working, you know, would ultimately come out of things with a pension from his company or his business or whatever. The spouse who was taking care of the home front, taking care of the kids, taking care of the home front, you know, wasn't working.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** Wouldn't have a pension, you know. He or she would kind-of be left out on that, so I thought it fair that that be taken into consideration when – in property – in dividing the property, and it passed, and it became part of the law.

**JT:** Good.

**RA:** So, that's how I was able to, you know, that's really in the minority how – and especially as a freshman – if you came up with common sense things, you know, they'd pass it.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** So, you know.

**JT:** It was a good feeling to see, you know, your works get passed.

**RA:** It was. It was, yeah. It was, and because, again, you remember, we didn't have staff. You know, the ideas came from yourself and from talking with other Members. You weren't sitting down with a Legislative Assistant.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** You know, you weren't sitting down with a Press Secretary, you know, trying to figure out how that could help you – publicity might help you. You were sort-of coming up with the idea

yourself, and that's one thing I learned, by the way; I mean, a bill's really just an idea, is all it really comes down to. And, I'd run it down to the Legislative Reference Bureau, and I'd tell them what I had in mind, and then the lawyers there would sort-of work it up into something that was presentable.

**JT:** Okay.

**RA:** As I remember the process. (*laugh*) I don't know if it's changed, but it was a good feeling.

**JT:** Yeah. You mentioned earlier that you were pretty outspoken. Did you enjoy speaking on the House Floor?

**RA:** I did. I did. In fact, I spoke a lot, because I had, you know, my goal was really to sort-of move the House, you know, to think a little bit out of the box. You know, at times it was, you know, there's a status quo, I mentioned that earlier – because I never went to Harrisburg until after I was elected; never saw the Capitol – because, there's this sort of this pecking order, you know, a lot of Members are shy about saying – they think one thing, but they sure don't want to get up and talk about it, because the Leadership might frown on them or this sort of thing. I never concerned myself with that ever, and so I would speak often, and I didn't overdo it, but I spoke when I felt strongly about something, and I wasn't afraid to take on an issue, whatever it be, if I felt it was going to adversely impact the people I represented, you know, and again, I felt, and I would think this way; I looked at it as though one of us from the 39<sup>th</sup> District had to get in

their car on Monday morning and drive to Harrisburg and vote and represent the people back home. You know, we all couldn't do it. (*laugh*)

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** The process is one of us does it, and I was the steward, you know, I was the guy doing it. Yes, I had my own opinions and yes, they counted on me, ostensibly because I had more information than they had, so I had to make some judgment calls. That's all true, but in the back of my mind was, you know, if I didn't feel strongly about something, my position was what I thought the people I represented would want me to do.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** And that's how I did it.

**JT:** Good. How was your relationship with the media, both in Harrisburg and in your district?

**RA:** Yeah, it was good. There was not a lot of, you know, it wasn't like it is today. It wasn't so intense. I mean, the major dailies, you know, the *Inquirer* and the Pittsburgh papers covered things, but I was a freshman Legislator. I also had been a newspaper writer myself for the *McKeesport Daily News*, so the Pittsburgh papers kind-of left me alone. They didn't really cover me. They would sort-of, you know, each Sunday they had a thing on how you voted, that sort-of thing, but they focused on K. Leroy Irvis, who was our leader from Pittsburgh, Jimmy

Manderino, who was also our leader from Westmoreland County. They sort of focused on them, and that's an interesting story, too, by the way. You know, when I was first elected, Jimmy Manderino was going to announce to the Caucus that he was going to take on Leroy Irvis to be Leader, see, because Irvis had been Speaker, so the Republicans had taken over, and it all had to do with, you know, funding and the budgets and the office space and the staff and all this sort-of thing. And Jimmy Manderino felt that he should be the Leader, and I mean, even though you'd say, well, Leroy was Speaker, so he's going to go down to Leader, Jimmy had been Leader. He's going to go down to Whip, you know, that's sort of natural. But Manderino said he started out to oppose Leroy Irvis, and I got a phone call from him before I was Sworn-In, after I was elected, asking me to vote, because the Caucus decides these things, obviously, asking me to vote for him as Leader, that he was going to challenge Leroy Irvis. I'll never forget what he said to me. He says, "Robb, I'm going to do all the work anyway." He said, "So I want, I want the title. I should be in charge," and that's exactly what he said to me in the phone call. He said, "Now you have," now I was, of course, mostly an Allegheny County Legislator, but I had this sliver of Westmoreland County, and Manderino said, "Now, you represent part of Westmoreland County, so I want you to think about this," you know? He says, "I want you to talk to these other Members," and he gave me some names of people to talk to. "You ask them; ask them, who will be the better Leader? Ask them, who will do more for the Caucus? Ask them who does the work," and so on and so on. I said I would. Now, it turned out what they did was among themselves they got together. They avoided the fight. Leroy Irvis had the title as Leader. Manderino had the title as Minority Whip, and they divided the money right down the middle, staff, money, you know, Leadership money I'm talking about.

**JT:** Right, right.

**RA:** Which in the Caucus and all that that's important to them, and it's important, period, because, you know, they run the Caucus and they have to provide resources for us and for the Caucus and that sort of thing. But, I don't know if people remember that or not, but I think it's worth you knowing. (*laugh*)

**JT:** Yeah, and thank you for sharing, yeah. Since you've left office, there's been a number of technological advancements on the House Floor.

**RA:** Right.

**JT:** There's the constant video streams so that people can watch it PCN [Pennsylvania Cable Network]. Every desk has a laptop now.

**RA:** Right.

**JT:** Do you think that's a good thing to be so advanced and with all the technology?

**RA:** It probably is. We had, which I still have, you know, the old switches. In fact, before I left, they went to another system that's probably been changed again even, but all we had were the old switches. It probably is. I don't know what they do with the laptops. I guess they check their email, and I guess they do everything: check email, maybe look at bills....

**JT:** Yes.

**RA:** You know, and that sort of thing, so that's all good. It was all paper with us, you know. I mean, you had these reams of paper, and so it probably is good, you know, and I don't think there's any stopping it, you know.

**JT:** The constant feed, people can watch the goings on on the House Floor on a regular basis. Is that something that should be available to the public?

**RA:** Oh, definitely. Oh, absolutely, yeah. You know, I think that's all good. As I recall, we had something called Public Television, something called The People's Business, sort-of, filmed. I don't know if they filmed the entire Session or just parts of it, but, no, I think anything that opens up the government is really important.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** And I felt that way then. I feel that way today. And so, yeah, I'm sure it's good.

**JT:** Yeah. How was the camaraderie among the Members, both during Session and even after hours?

**RA:** It was good. I mean, I'd describe it as good. There were not a lot of, you know, there weren't a lot of organized activities or anything like that after, so to speak, after hours or whatever. Members would get together, probably run in little groups, you know, which I did. Like I say, I was, I was close to Bill DeWeese, Bill Stewart, Joe Steighner. These were people that I gravitated to, and we'd, you know, do things together. It was, however, between Parties, it was very amiable, you know, between Republican and Democratic Parties. I mean, there wasn't – I guess the word partisan – it didn't seem as partisan back then. There were disagreements, but nobody was disagreeable, as I recall, and then we had a new Governor. Dick Thornburgh [Governor of Pennsylvania, 1979-1987] had just been elected, so he came in, and he wanted to do things, you know. He had a lot of ideas, so there could have been some tension there. There really wasn't. There was disagreements, but it wasn't too disagreeable.

**JT:** Why did you leave the House?

**RA:** Well, from the, from the time that I got there, I could see that – well, I liked it. I enjoyed it. It was an honor to serve. It was a heady experience, and so forth. I knew instantly this is not the career I wanted. I didn't want to be a life-long Legislator. You know, I didn't want that to be my career, so I knew that I would not serve, you know, I just knew that I wouldn't serve forever. *(laugh)* In some ways, you know, especially today, and I think even a lot of cases back then, you sort-of have to carry them out, you know.

**JT:** Right. Oh yeah.

**RA:** They just don't want to leave, (*laugh*) you know, and I never had that. I looked at it differently. I looked at it like, I wanted to make some changes and change the direction of the Legislature. I wanted to, but it was, you know how there were 203 Members. It was like, it was chaotic. Essentially, the House is a disorganized, chaotic place, and I'm sure that hasn't changed too much, and it's hard to get things – you do have to line up for seniority. I mean, you have to be a Member, I think, for a minimum of 10, 12 years before you really start to get some, you know, seniority on committee assignments and that sort of thing, and I knew that I wasn't going to serve that long. Now, I initially thought I would serve more than one term. I thought I would serve a couple terms, two or three terms, that sort of thing, but. So, I was never really looking at this as something that I would be doing for a long period of time, just maybe a little bit is my makeup, a little bit of just when I got there, you know, I could see a lot of Members that had been there a long time, and they were, you know, kind-of going through the motions on things, and it wasn't – I just knew that. I was young too; I was 27, so I certainly didn't look at that as the pinnacle of my (*laugh*) –

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** – life. You know, that wasn't the end-all. Now, maybe if I'd been elected when I was 56, I'd say, "Okay, I've reached the top," you know, or something, I don't know. But, at 27, no, I didn't see it that way. I didn't have any master plan, but I knew instantly that this is not where I wanted – I wasn't going to spend 20 years there.

**JT:** Yeah, but you did make a run for the Senate?

**RA:** I did. I did. I served one term – and I would have been reelected overwhelmingly. I mean, I'm sure I wouldn't even have been opposed. Now, I'm not saying what would have happened later, you know, the longer you're in, you know, things happen. But, at least in that first term and so forth, I'm sure that I would not have been challenged by the old incumbent. I'm positive of that. I don't think I would have had any opponent. You know, I did a good job, and I kept my commitments to my district and was very enthusiastic. I worked 24/7, not only in Harrisburg, but back home as well with, you know, case work and that sort of thing. But, our State Senator was Ed Zemprelli [Edward; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1963-1968; State Senator, 1969-1988], who had also at the time was the Senate Majority Leader, so he was, you know, a powerful voice in Harrisburg, and Ed had been in for a long time. He'd been in 18 years. He'd served about 10 years in the House and two terms in the Senate, and he had – there was a lot of pressure on me and others, I think, to, you know that this – we needed a new Senator. I mean, that was, you know –

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** – how it works. So, I started looking at it. I initially didn't want to do that, but I started looking at the prospects and talking with a coalition of people that asked me to consider running. I was a very popular local Legislator, even though I'd only served one term, and so they came to me and asked me to consider it and that sort-of thing. So, those were the initial seedlings of things. Can I go back before we proceed on with this? Can I mention something that I didn't get to mention that happened –

**JT:** Absolutely, oh yes.

**RA:** – earlier when I first got to Harrisburg? I just think it's worth noting. I'm trying to remember the month. I guess it was February of [19]79, or maybe it was March. Closer to March, I guess. A group of us freshmen Legislators were asked to go to the Governor's Mansion, where Dick Thornburgh wanted to meet with – there were only about eight of us – freshmen Legislators, Democrats, from Allegheny County, to talk about his budget proposal, which at the time was, you know, kind-of controversial and so forth, and the Legislature was so tight that he was throwing out votes, and while we were having breakfast in the Governor's Mansion, and he had his budget director there with flip charts and going over the budget and everything, in walked a State Trooper and, you know, passed the Governor a note. We were at a long table. Like I say, there was only about 10 of us at this table, and he looked at it, and he gave it back to him, and the trooper left. The meeting went on. After the briefing, got in our cars, and we're driving back to the Capitol and had the radio on is when it was being all over the radio, Three Mile Island.

**JT:** Yes.

**RA:** And, and I later, in a national broadcast years later, saw Dick Thornburgh being interviewed, and they asked him when he found out about Three Mile Island, and he referenced the breakfast, and he said that he was having a budget briefing with freshmen Legislators, and that's when he first got word about the catastrophe at Three Mile Island, you know.

**JT:** You were there.

**RA:** Yeah, and so, you know, I just wanted to mention that to you because it's of interest. I know Thornburgh has said, because I remember seeing it years later in an interview, that that's where he said he –

**JT:** Wow.

**RA:** Yeah, so that was kind-of interesting.

**JT:** I know.

**RA:** I wanted to mention that to you.

**JT:** That is great. Thank you very much for that. Very interesting. Was there an aspect of the job that you would say was your favorite?

**RA:** Yes, two things. Communicating with the constituents back home. That was by far and away my favorite thing, because I felt the district, and I think all the districts, it wasn't just my district – but, you know, again, see, up until that time, most Legislators were part-time. Most Legislators did not have a district office. Most Legislators were, you know, just reelected, reelected, reelected on name identification, and the public was starved to have Legislators who

would hold town meetings, which I did, and that was a first for the 39<sup>th</sup> District. I mean, have the district office, and that sort-of thing. So, you know, communicating with my district, being back home, and town meeting forums, which was a first, was far and away the favorite part of my district because, you know, just letting them know how their government was working and what it was doing for them. That was probably my most favorite part of the job. And I think the interaction with colleagues and speaking on the House Floor when issues came up, I think that was also a good part of the job that I liked very much. But I do think, and it wasn't me, *per se*, but it was this sort-of this class that came in that year, I think from that point on – at least I know this is true in Western Pennsylvania, where we had people like myself and Tom Michlovic and Tom Murphy and Mike Dawida, Frank Pistella [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-2006], who later served for years and years and years, and a whole group of other Legislators – changed the way, you know, never again was somebody going to be elected from the 39<sup>th</sup> District and be part-time. (*laugh*) It was never going to happen. You had to be a full-time Legislator. You had to have the semblance of an office. And so, I think that's one of the last legacies of that class of [19]78 that I was part of.

**JT:** So, you'd say that would be part of how you would like to see your tenure be remembered?

**RA:** It is. Yeah, it definitely is, you know, no question about it. Just the idea of communicating and staying in touch back home and really bringing Harrisburg, you know, to the voters back home. And opening government up, and, you know, there was just this aura of Legislators back then that, you know, they were sort-of the fat cigars and, you know, back rooms, and they'd be in Harrisburg cutting deals. I'm not saying that that's all true. I'm not saying that, but that was the

image. And so, to a group of us, we were, you know, the new group of Legislators, and Billy DeWeese and Bill Stewart and others around the state were the same way, you know, Bob O'Donnell from Philadelphia, and so forth, and it became a different kind of legislature. Even, actually, in Caucuses and on the Floor, frustrated people like Jimmy Manderino and Leroy Irvis. They, when I say – not frustrated them in a bad way. It just sort of made them accommodate. It made them turn a little bit, you know, from the old way of doing things, and I know that impacted the senior people as well, when this new group came in with, you know, different ideas.

**JT:** What have you been doing since you left office?

**RA:** Well, I stayed in politics. I lost the Senate race in 1980. It was a very competitive race, and a lot of people thought I, you know, I had it going my way, but in the end, you know, taking on the Senate Majority Leader of your own Party.

**JT:** Yeah.

**RA:** You know, this wasn't a General Election. Again, this was a Primary. It's tough, you know, it's tough, but we ran a great campaign, and I think we had it won there actually until the end, and we lost. It wasn't razor thin, but it was, but we got a lot of votes, and it was a good campaign. I then stayed in politics. I became Chief of Staff to a Pennsylvania Member of Congress by the name of Gene Atkinson [U.S. State Representative, 1979-1982], and I, you know, kept my residency in Pennsylvania, but I was back-and-forth to Washington, and I got

involved in Washington politics at that point. Gene Atkinson was from Beaver County, who I met during our interactions with Members of Congress when I was in the State House, and we became friends, and when I lost, he called me up and said, “What are you going to do now?” And I didn’t know. I really had no idea, and he said, “Why don’t you come to Washington and be my Chief of Staff?” And gee, I thought, wow, that would be great. So, I did that. So, I went, went to Washington and became his Chief of Staff, and that got me involved in kind of a Washington political experience, and then in the mid-[19]80s I formed something called Austin Communications, which was a political consulting and media consulting group that still exists today. We have offices in Pittsburgh.

**JT:** Right.

**RA:** And that’s what – I head that up, and we still do that, and we did a lot of campaigns, Congressional campaigns and gubernatorial campaigns, and then also represented various companies with their media fairs, outreach, and so forth and so, I’ve stayed active in politics even though I never ran again. (*laugh*) Never sought office again, you know.

**JT:** Do you follow current Pennsylvania politics?

**RA:** Not too much. You know, well, let me amend that. I follow it, but I’m not, you know, I don’t follow the day-to-day –

**JT:** Sure.

**RA:** – minutiae of it. I follow national politics pretty well, and I follow the sort-of the trends on what's going on with in Pennsylvania with the budgets and the processes and who's running and that sort-of thing, I'm not really active in Pennsylvania politics any more.

**JT:** I just have one more question for you.

**RA:** Sure.

**JT:** For someone who may be interested in running for the House, do you have any advice for them?

**RA:** Yeah, the advice I would give is probably, you know, the same advice that people have heard before. I would be true to who you are as you're running. You know, I remember when George McGovern ran for President. He ran a couple times. I think the last time he ran was like in 1984. It was very late, you know, he, he took another stab at it, you know, and he did respectfully well, of all things. But, I remember people, you know, they didn't vote for him because they said, "Well, you've been around for years," but in one of the debates, he said, "Don't throw your vote away. You know, "If you like my ideas, even though you think I'm a has-been," is basically what he was saying, you know, "give me your vote. Don't throw it away just because you don't think I can win," you know, and I guess that's what I would do. In other words, you know, somebody who is running for the House or comes into the House, you know, stay to who you are. You know, don't necessarily gravitate to the status quo just because that's,

you know, it's the easier way to go. You know, it's a little tougher to stand out and sometimes just follow your own instincts, and so forth. But, I still think that in the long run that's how you can make an impact. So, that's the advice I would have.

**JT:** Excellent.

**RA:** Yeah.

**JT:** Mr. Robb Austin, I want to thank you very much for sharing your stories with me today and for taking part in our Oral History Project.

**RA:** My pleasure. It was nice meeting you.

**JT:** I wish you good luck with everything.

**RA:** Thank you. It was nice being here.

**JT:** Thanks.