

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

**The Honorable Francis Gleeson, Jr. (D)**

172<sup>nd</sup> District

Philadelphia County

1969 – 1978

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**Heidi Mays (HM):** Hi. I'm here with Francis Gleeson today, who served in the 172nd District which was Philadelphia County, from 1969-1978. I'm glad you are able to do this interview with us today.

**The Honorable Francis Gleeson (FG):** I'm glad to do it.

**HM:** Thank you. I wanted to begin by asking you about your childhood and your early family life.

**FG:** What do you want to know? I mean, I came from right around this neighborhood. Our family house was two blocks away, and that's how far I got. So, I lived in this neighborhood, which is a very nice neighborhood, all my life and still do.

**HM:** How many? Your parents –

**FG:** Oh, I have a brother and sister and of course, mom and dad, and I had a little brother that died in childbirth, which I don't ever want to forget about. Go ahead.

**HM:** Was anyone in your family involved in politics?

**FG:** Well, uncle Jerry Gleeson, my dad's brother, was extremely involved and he became a Judge at the end of his career– you know, for many years. But, prior to that, he was the Secretary of Revenue for the State of Pennsylvania. And, dad was not a

politician, but he talked about it all the time and every night at the supper table me and him, we always talked about politics and my brother and sister and mother, they kind-of got bored. But, we talked about it anyway. (*laugh*)

**HM:** Why did you decide to become a Democrat?

**FG:** I was a Democrat born and a Democrat bred and when I die I'll be a Democrat dead. Well, mom and dad were Democrats and they were completely loyal to the Democratic Party. That's all I can tell you. And, that's the whole story.

**HM:** How did you become involved in politics?

**FG:** Well, as soon as I got out of law school and passed the bar exam – the way, the vast majority of people start out by running for Democratic Committeemen right here in the neighborhood. And I was extremely involved in the Young Democrats at one time when I was a kid and, let's see; I probably became a Committeeman, I think, around [19]64 and ran for the Legislature in [19]68 and got elected. I mean, it was a tough Primary. There were three or four other Democratic candidates running for legislature, and then I won the Primary. And then I had to beat the Incumbent Republican – I forget his name; Hipple, I think his name was –

**HM:** Elwood Hipple [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1967-1968].

**FG:** Yeah, that's the right name. And I beat him. And I had it for ten years and then Perzel [John M.; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1979-present; Speaker 2003-2006] came along, but, at least this – and I mean, he was a tough customer and hard to beat. I beat him once, and then he turned around and ran two years from then and then he won; he's been in there ever since. So, that's the whole story. (*cough*) Excuse me; I'm going to have a cough drop. But see, there's one thing about – I mean, I was going to say about Philadelphia, but it kind-of applies to the whole State of Pennsylvania. I mean, most of the State of Pennsylvania is either solid Democrat or solid Republican. And this area is a swing area; it goes either way. So, it has; it goes either way, but Perzel's been able to overcome that for a really long time and I wasn't so, that's kind-of the whole story.

**HM:** Could you describe your first campaign against Mr. Hipple?

**FG:** Well, after I got the nomination – I mean, it was really hard to win the Primary. But, after I won the Primary – I mean, the Primary and the General election were very much the same. You have to do an enormous amount of door-to-door and you just get the street list, you go door-to-door, say “hello” to the voters and give them a piece of literature and you usually go with the Democratic Committeemen and you get as much favorable press as you can. And, it's hard to get any press when you're first starting out as a State Legislator. I mean, it's not as though I was running for President or Governor or something like that, you know. But, I did make it. I beat Elwood Hipple and I got elected four more times and then Perzel beat me. I haven't run – I mean, aside from the

time I got defeated in [19]68 – I never ran again. But, I've been active in the Democratic Party ever since. You know, going to Democratic affairs and being Democratic Committeeman, that sort-of thing.

**HM:** Did you enjoy campaigning?

**FG:** Well, yes and no. I mean, it's really tiring. – Oh, I just found a quarter. I'll put it there. – I'd say mostly yes, but it is tiring and you have to do an enormous amount of door-to-door. I mean, more than anything, your legs get tired. But, it's good for you, [running] up and down the steps. So, the answer is mostly I did enjoy it and I did really like to meet people and I do like to see if I can get them to vote for me and people do hit you with problems and I solved as many as I could and, that's the whole story.

**HM:** Was there any one reason why you ran for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives?

**FG:** Well, to me that's where you start, compared to the State Senator or U.S. Congressman or even Councilman, that's the lowest spot. I mean, that's first step on the rung, so it started around for the Legislator. I mean, I did have in the back of my mind that I'd like to eventually become State Senator or U.S. Congressman, but it never happened. I even had it in the back of my mind that I'd like to be President – never got there. *(laugh)*

**HM:** Well, would you describe your feeling whenever you first came to Harrisburg as an elected Representative?

**FG:** Well, I loved every minute of it. Bearing in mind, I had worked up there – I was an employee of the Legislature for two years before I ran. I was an employee of the Joint State Government Commission, which we were employees of the Legislature. It was a pretty darn good job. We had to do research for the Legislature and everything. So, I pretty well knew how it worked. I wasn't really surprised in any way, shape or form.

**HM:** Did anyone help you get started whenever you were a new Member?

**FG:** You mean after I got Sworn-In? Oh, lots of people did. Especially including fellow Democratic Legislators, I had a darn good secretary – and she still works up there. Her name was Elizabeth Miller. No she doesn't. She was darn good, but she doesn't work there, I think she died a long time ago. But, I mean, she was a big helper. The other Democrats who had been in there for awhile were good help. So, I had lots of people helping me.

**HM:** Anyone in particular?

**FG:** Let me think. Well, there was a Democratic Ward Leader in those days by the name of Butch Murphy. He guided me a lot. Also, of course, our Party bosses. The Speaker in those days was Herb Fineman [Herbert; State Representative, Philadelphia

County, 1955-1977; Speaker 1969-1972, 1975-1977] and he was a Democrat from Philadelphia. He guided me as best he could. And then there was Representative [K.] Leroy Irvis [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1959-1988; Speaker 1977-1978 and 1983-1988] from Pittsburgh and he was a Democratic Leader and he was a help. And, in a way, I always had an independent streak about me. Sometimes those guys got mad at me for not doing what they said, but, that was me. (*laugh*)

**HM:** On any particular issue?

**FG:** Especially the issue of taxes. I mean, I don't like taxes and I know the voters don't like taxes and this is just not the kind of neighborhood where a lot of people are on Welfare and benefiting from the taxes. It's practically nothing but working people around here. They don't like taxes one bit and I don't like them myself, so, I was always getting in arguments over tax raises. Not really arguments, I just was refusing to vote for them.

**HM:** Could I get you to describe the 172<sup>nd</sup> District? What the people are, who the people are, the image?

**FG:** Well, it's all city; it's mostly row-houses, mostly, but then there's semi-detached houses like this and then there's even some single homes. I mean, they're middle-class people; there's not hardly any rich people and not hardly any poor people. I mean, there's plenty of Catholics, Protestants, Jews; there's a good combination of all three.

Well, I guess, I went to Catholic School myself; I didn't go to Public School, but so did a lot of other people in politics.

**HM:** Do they work in the city, or do they work locally?

**FG:** All over. Plenty of them work in the city and plenty of them don't; and plenty of them don't work at all. I mean, there's a lot of retired people around here. But, one thing that when I was here, there were more retired people then than there are now. And I think I know why that was. Because most of the neighborhood was built after World War II and there were returning GI's and they all got married, you know, and had families. And, by the time I came along in [19]68, they were all retired. But now, that whole generation has pretty well died off so, there's a lot of young people. There's more young people now than there was years ago. What else should I say about this neighborhood? I don't know. I like the neighborhood. I'll tell you this, I moved out to my daughter's house in Nevada for about a year-and-a-half and I was amazed to myself how I missed this neighborhood. I had no idea that I loved it as much as I did until I was moved away. So, I really, really love this neighborhood and I think it's – well, I know for sure – it's held up fine over the years. And, what else do you want to know?

**HM:** Could you explain what it was like to be a freshman member? What was the atmosphere like in Harrisburg whenever you first started?

**FG:** Well, I think, if I remember right, I sort-of remember that Jim Tate<sup>1</sup> was Mayor of Philadelphia at the time, and he was kind-of like the boss of the whole Party. He used to really get mad at me because I wouldn't vote for the things he wanted me to vote for.

*(laugh)* Oh, I don't know. I made some good friend in those days. I think my best friend was Steve Wojdak [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1969-1976], who was a Democrat from Northeast Philadelphia. Do you remember that name? Steve Wojdak? He was in adjoining – well, not far, he lived just further up. And, well, I was doing what I wanted to do. Most of the job was solving constituent problems; to me, even more important than the legislation was solving the constituent problems. I used to go to Harrisburg every week with a list of about 100 problems and I did my best to solve them all. If they could be solved, they got solved.

**HM:** What was your office like whenever you – ?

**FG:** You mean in Harrisburg?

**HM:** Yeah.

**FG:** Well, I didn't exactly have an office. I mean, I had one that I shared with a whole bunch of other Legislators and I had a secretary that I shared with about five or six other Legislators.

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<sup>1</sup> Democrat James Hugh Joseph Tate, Mayor of Philadelphia from 1962-1972.

**HM:** Were they all from Philadelphia?

**FG:** No, I think they were from all over the state. But, they were all Democrats. We did not have District offices. I mean, you just had 1/5 of the secretary's time. Well, her name was Elizabeth Miller and she was awfully nice and awfully efficient and awfully helpful.

**HM:** So, she was helping you with your constituent letters?

**FG:** Sure.

**HM:** Okay. Or did you type any yourself?

**FG:** Oh, I didn't – I don't know if I did any typing. I mean, I did have typing in high school, but I'm pretty slow. And the secretaries are much faster, so, I always got a secretary to do it. If a letter had to be written, I would have – what's the matter?

**Ken Myers:** I'm sorry; I want to fix your microphone before it slips off your shoulder there. I just wanted to take a quick break here for a minute.

**FG:** I think –

**KM:** Thank you.

**FG:** – if I had a short letter to do and there was no secretary around I would do it by hand.

**HM:** During your tenure with the House, were you concerned with waste in Government, in both time and money?

**FG:** Oh, definitely yes. And it was all over the place and I think it probably still is. And not just in State Government, but Federal Government, City Government, School Boards, Courts; it's everywhere. I mean, the biggest waste of all time is George W. Bush. I mean, imagine going around attacking all these countries just because they don't have weapons of mass destruction and killing hundreds of thousands of people. And, I mean, he hired his own company, Halliburton, to rebuild Baghdad – him and Cheney – and they put 80 billion in their own pocket – not million – billion, which is the biggest scam of all time. I mean, it's bigger than all of the scammers in the history of the United States put together. And he's not done; he's about to start a nuclear war with Iran. Well, that's enough of that; ask me about me.

**HM:** Okay. What major pieces of legislation were you involved in?

**FG:** Oh, I forget. Anything to help the ordinary family.

**HM:** I had one regarding generic drug savings.

**FG:** Was I involved in that? I don't know. My whole – personally inclined very much that way. And I say this, it's still true about me; I mean, I've been taking Vitamin C ever since Linus Pauling got the award – Linus Pauling got an award in 1962 for his researches with Vitamin C and the common cold, and I've been taking one a day ever since – since [19]62 – and haven't had a cold since. And I highly recommend it to everybody. And before I started taking it I would get, like five or ten colds every winter and they would last a week or two. I strongly recommend it. But it's not a secret; I think an awful lot of mothers recommend it too. (*laugh*) But generic is not just Vitamin C; there's a whole bunch of other things that are good for you and I take a whole bunch myself. Well, I know I'm in really good health. I've gotten a couple of complete physical check-ups in the last couple years – two different doctors – both of them at the end of the check-up said there was nothing wrong with me; not one thing. And I'm 68 years old. But the doctors did have the nasty attitude about it, accusing me of taking care of myself and that's why I was in good health, and I didn't; I was kind-of a hell-raiser. And the other reason I was in good health – well, the main reason was because of God and also of all the Vitamins and herbs I take.

**HM:** There was another issue regarding the busing of school children.

**FG:** That was a biggie.

**HM:** Yeah. Do you remember what that was about? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**FG:** Well, yeah. It was part of the integration movement and they were going to, like, take white kids from white neighborhoods and bus them to black neighborhoods and take black kids from black neighborhoods just to, you know, bus them into white neighborhoods, and just so that they could get to know how each other lives. And it was a way of fighting segregation. But there was enormous – I mean, the parents were outraged; and I was outraged too. So, you're right, that was a very big issue in my day and I haven't heard anything about it lately. I think they do it to an extent, but not too bad.

**HM:** And where were you on this subject?

**FG:** Oh, I was against the busing. I'm in favor of the people that live around here.

**HM:** Do you remember who was for it? What types of people were for it?

**FG:** Oh, I remember what type it was; the liberals. I mean, in those days and I guess it's still true, most of the Democratic Leaders were liberals and they were in favor of things like that. They thought of me as conservative, but I wasn't really conservative; I was kind-of ordinary – in the middle.

**HM:** Do you remember any activity regarding political activities of State employees? That was another thing that you spoke against.

**FG:** Did I? Oh, I forget what I said. Do you know what I said? I forget.

**HM:** No.

**FG:** Was I against it? (*laugh*)

**HM:** We'll come back to that.

**FG:** Well, I can tell you right now, I forget. I mean, there's a law against that sort-of thing. I forget – what's the law called? Hatch Act? No, it's not the Hatch Act, it's something else. I don't know.

**HM:** Okay.

**FG:** Well, it is questionable, that's for sure.

**HM:** Is there any other legislation that you would like to talk about, or any other legislative activities that you were involved in that you would like to talk about?

**FG:** I don't think so.

**HM:** Okay. We wanted to ask you about your service as the Subcommittee Chairman on Highways and Transportation, where you submitted a report on the subject of pot-holes in Pennsylvania, which was quite critical of PennDot.

**FG:** Well, nobody likes pot-holes. *(laugh)*

**HM:** No we don't. *(laugh)*

**FG:** I mean, we get them right here on Erdrick Street.

**HM:** Do you remember any of that one?

**FG:** Not much.

**HM:** Okay.

**FG:** But I do remember – I never met a single person who likes pot-holes.

**HM:** Yeah.

**FG:** Not even a Republican. *(laugh)*

**HM:** When you think about your experience with the House, do you have any favorite stories? Or any favorite people that you'd like to talk about?

**FG:** Well, in a way I do have one, and her name is Sandy Bennett and she's still a Secretary up there, and she's a secretary to [Representative] Frank Oliver [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1973-2010] and she was my secretary for awhile and a super good secretary, and she would be one. I should say something on behalf of Butch Murphy. He's the guy who got me the job with the Joint State Government Commission to begin with, so, I appreciate that Butch, and I'm sure he's up in Heaven. But, I mean, I actually like pretty near everybody, even to an extent including the Republicans. Well, that's my answer; I like pretty near everybody.

**HM:** Do you remember the budget battle of 1977?

**FG:** Not much.

**HM:** Okay. I have a quote from you; "I would never suggest that they are trying to hold the whole process up with a view towards the Governor's race in [19]78..." I guess the Shapp [Milton J.; Governor, 1971-1979] Administration was coming to an end, and the Republicans thought, maybe, they might win in [19]78. Do you think that had anything to do with, perhaps, your loss?

**FG:** Well, who was holding it up? Was it the Democrats or the Republicans?

**HM:** Republicans.

**FG:** Oh, the Republicans? Oh, I don't really remember much about it all – that's the truth. But at least, whatever I said, I meant. *(laugh)* And in a way, personally, I really liked Governor Shapp but he sure was a liberal and, I mean, he didn't wash very well around here. Even though the people voted for him and everything he stood for they were against, I mean, the number one thing he wanted was the State Income Tax. I mean, you never hear anybody around here saying, "Oh, I wish we had a State Income Tax."  
*(laugh)*

**HM:** What aspect of being a Representative did you like the most?

**FG:** The most? Well, I just felt that I was doing what I'm supposed to do. I mean, whoever in life gets to do whatever the occupation [that] they want to do – it was my goal in life to be a State Legislator and so, I got to do it for ten years, and that's pretty good. I mean, I wish it would have been a lot longer, but at least I got to do it for ten years.

**HM:** Was there anything you did not like about being a Representative?

**FG:** No. There was nothing I didn't like; I liked everything about it.

**HM:** Did you like to debate on the House Floor?

**FG:** Not particularly. I mean, I did once in a long while, but I wasn't one of those wind-bags. There were some wind-bags and I was not one of them.

**HM:** Do you have a fondest memory of serving in the House? Anything?

**FG:** I do have this and I often think about it, but I've been this way my whole life – like, a lot of times – and I didn't stand up to talk that often – but when I did, the members would start laughing before I even said anything and it's just the way I am; I've always been the class clown. I started off in Grammar School that way; High School, College, Law School, Legislature. Even to this day – and I don't do it purposely – but, even to this day, even as a lawyer fairly often in court I get the Judge and the whole courtroom laughing and the next word out of the Judge's mouth is "Discharged." So, (*laugh*) I won a lot of cases that way and I didn't even do it on purpose. I perform now once a week in New York as a Comedian. I don't know; it's just – I just was just born this way. I mean, all normal people think the same and comedians think differently. Somebody has to think of everything else. I mean, everybody can't be like a normal person. (*laugh*)

**HM:** Did you ever pull any practical jokes?

**FG:** Sure, everybody pulls – oh, once in awhile. I can't really remember any good ones, but I wasn't a great one for pulling practical jokes, but I did once in awhile, and I can't even remember any good ones.

**HM:** So, is there any correlation between being a politician, a lawyer and a comedian?

**FG:** Oh, no.

**HM:** *(laughs)*

**FG:** I know I became a lawyer because it had a lot to do with my father being a lawyer, and I just followed in his footsteps. That's probably the number one reason I became a lawyer. I don't think there's any connection at all between the three of them; it's just what I happen to be.

**HM:** That's just you then?

**FG:** Yeah.

**HM:** Okay.

**FG:** I'll say this about me when I spoke – which I didn't even speak that much – but, most of the speeches in the Legislature were done by wind-bags and the members didn't even listen to the wind-bag; they would be either talking to the guy next to them or reading the newspaper or sleeping. And then the wind-bag would be talking away and the members didn't even listen. But, when I got up to speak, you know, they would start laughing and at least you knew they were paying attention. *(laugh)*

**HM:** Do you have any advice for any new members that will be coming in in November?

**FG:** No, I don't think so. I'd say every single one of them knows what they're supposed to do; they're supposed to vote on legislation in favor of, you know, their own constituents and in favor of what the people of Pennsylvania want. They have to solve the constituent problems as best they can and a lot of them can be solved and a lot of them can't. I know this about legislation; I mean, an enormous amount of it is repetition. For example, I mean, it seemed like every couple weeks we outlawed drugs, and so when I was there for ten years drugs were outlawed hundreds of times and that's a waste of time. I mean just once is good enough. *(laugh)* Or, maybe the penalties were made worse or something. I do have this idea in the back of my mind, and I don't have anything to do with drugs, but we can eliminate eighty percent of crime just by legalizing drugs. And I think another thing – and I know for sure about this – you tell a teenager not to do something, guaranteed he'll be doing it. *(laugh)* If you said, "You have to smoke marijuana once a day, every day," then they wouldn't. *(laugh)*

**HM:** Is there any way that you would like to be remembered?

**FG:** Oh, I guess a good Christian boy, yeah. And I hope I get to Heaven. I hope I do. Because I heard it's really great if you get there. It's like a party that never ends. I get to party with Jesus and everything. I would like to be remembered as a good guy. That's the best I can tell you.

**HM:** Well thank you very much.

**FG:** Thanks for having me. I mean, thanks for coming.