



INTERVIEW WITH
Clyde A. Wheeler, Jr.

by

Maclyn P. Burg
Oral Historian

on

November 14, 1974

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER LIBRARY



Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of
Clyde A. Wheeler.

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I Clyde A. Wheeler, of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of personal interviews conducted on November 14, 1974, February 5, 1975, and July 2, 1975 at Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, except that the portions of the transcript indicated below shall not be made available until my death, after which they may be made available as part of the transcript. Portions to be closed are: Page seven, line seven, and page seventeen, line sixteen, last two words through line eighteen, first seven words.

(2) The tape recording shall not be available for use by researchers during the donor's lifetime. After the donor's death, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.

(3) During the donor's lifetime the donor retains all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcript and tape recording shall pass to the United States Government. During the donor's lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript (but not the tape recording) without the donor's express consent in each case.

This interview is being done with Mr. Clyde Wheeler in Mr. Wheeler's offices at 1800 K Street, Washington, D.C. on November 14, 1974. The Interviewer is Dr. Maclyn Burg, Eisenhower Library staff, and present for the interview are Dr. Burg and Mr. Wheeler.

DR. BURG: Let me ask you first of all to tell me when and where you were born.



MR. WHEELER: I was born in Laverne, Oklahoma on March 12, 1921. Laverne is in northwestern Oklahoma, at the beginning of the panhandle, where the panhandle starts in Oklahoma.

DR. BURG: Our museum curator is an Oklahoman, and I have an idea where that is. You were educated then in the state of Oklahoma.

MR. WHEELER: Yes, public schools, then I have a bachelor's and master's from Oklahoma State University.

DR. BURG: Now, what were those degrees in?

MR. WHEELER: Well, I have a bachelor's in history and a master's in government, and then I have a life teaching certificate from Oklahoma City University. I was going to teach history and coach basketball until I got into politics.

BURG: I see. At this date can you think back to anyone on the faculty that may have had pretty strong influence on you?

WHEELER: No question about it. Dr. George White, who was a professor of humanities, English born, but came over here about age 10. And he encouraged me to get my master's, which I really hadn't planned to do, and in fact I wasn't sure what I would do.

[Interruption]



BURG: Now, that man made a great impression on you.

WHEELER: He really did. I was working on a fellowship to get my master's and got a \$100 a month to help him grade papers. In fact, the only C I got in college was given to me by this man in humanities. But he was very public service oriented, and I knew that I wanted to do something in public service, teaching or something like that, and he sort of helped me zero in on government for my graduate degree. And so he had a great influence on me and did even after I left the college.

BURG: You were doing this work, by the way, just prior to World War II.

WHEELER: No, this is after World War II.



BURG: Oh, really.

WHEELER: I had already been in the service. I was in the Army and Navy both. I had training to be a flight instructor and was prepared to be a flight instructor, but concluded that I wasn't that good. So I went into an aircraft testing unit because I was unsure of myself as someone who could tell fledgling pilots that they were ready to fly; so I spent most of the time in a testing unit.

BURG: Let's go back then a bit, Mr. Wheeler. Had you completed your B.A. before that?

WHEELER: No, I hadn't.

BURG: You were out of high school then?

WHEELER: I was out of high school. I had gone to business

college in Wichita, Kansas, and I was 21 when the war broke out, World War II, and I was in it for 3½ years. I was about 25 when I got back to college.

BURG: So you enlisted then in the Army.



WHEELER: I enlisted in the Army in a flight instructor program and then transferred to the Navy in 1944 because, as I said before, I didn't think I would be a good flight instructor. Instead I went into a testing unit where we tested new airplanes. I did that for a year, and then went back into flight training to get ready for combat service. I was in flight training when the war ended. It was kind of a zigzagged career, but I was pretty well trained. I had all of the flight programs--

BURG: Were you commissioned on completion of your initial flight--

WHEELER: Yes, I was lieutenant, j.g.

BURG: Now, let me ask you what aircraft types you were testing in that test unit.

WHEELER: Testing PV 1s which were Lockheed twin-engine planes--

BURG: Neptunes?



WHEELER: Neptunes, right. That was the main one. And we had some Coronado flying boats. This was in Terminal Island at San Pedro, California, a year spent there.

BURG: '44 or '45?

WHEELER: Half of '43 and half of '44. Then, at that particular time, it looked like the war was going to last for a long time and I realized that all of my friends were in combat; so I signed up for another four years in order to get combat training the Navy way. I had had the flight instructor training the Army way, but to get navigation the way the Navy taught it for carriers I had to go back to school. So I was in the process of going back through the courses, and was in Bunker Hill, Indiana, in flight training when the war ended. I was just released in September, 1945, from the Navy instead of being discharged since I had more years of commitment to the Navy. I was in the reserves for about seventeen years and finally got out in 1962 or 3, out of the reserves.

BURG: You obviously had a multi-engine rating to be flying the PV 1s and Coronados?



WHEELER: Well, I was flying as a flight engineer, and so that is what my job was, a flight engineer. I actually didn't have a multi-rating engine rating.

BURG: May I ask when you left Terminal Island.

WHEELER: I left Terminal Island in, I think it was June of 1945 or maybe March of 1945 and then signed up for four more years--no it was sooner than that. Let's see '43, '44--I left Terminal Island in the summer of '44.

BURG: Oh, you did?

WHEELER: Yes, 1944 and then came to Liberty, Missouri where William Jewell College is located for a refresher and then went into Navy pre-flight at Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Then Bunker Hill, Indiana, where I was when the war ended in September of 1945. It has been a long time back and I haven't thought much about it for quite a while.

BURG: What interested me was that I was stationed at Fort MacArthur, San Pedro--

WHEELER: Oh, you were?



BURG: --with Terminal Island just across the water from us.

WHEELER: Interesting place and I have never been back there since. I have often wanted to go back and take a look at it. You know we tested those planes out toward Catalina--

BURG: Yes.

(A portion of this page has been closed per the donors request in the legal agreement at the front of this transcript.)

BURG: --well I wondered if our times down there had overlapped because I was trying to catch a ride back up to Seattle on one of those naval aircraft--

WHEELER: Is that right?

BURG: --out of Terminal Island.

WHEELER: Well, we were hauling people all the time; people were over there getting rides.

BURG: Trouble was there was a long waiting list; so I couldn't make it. Now, were you released from your four-year obligation in the sense that you did not need to remain in uniform?

WHEELER: That's right, I was sent back to civilian life; so I didn't have to stay in uniform. I started back to college, but my release didn't come until the end of that four-year period which, I think, was 1949. But I stayed in the reserves. My four years ran out in I think '49.



BURG: So you then embarked on your B.A. in Oklahoma?

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: Now, did marriage come along at some point in this?

WHEELER: No, it didn't come along until I came up here. I came up here with a member of Congress. In fact, when I was getting my master's at Oklahoma State University, I got involved in a Young Republican Club. Oklahoma had been pretty much a one party state up to that time. The northern part of the state was Republican because that is the part that was settled by the landrush and land settlements and people came in from Kansas and Iowa and places like that as you know. When I was still getting my master's, I was hired to put on the campaigns for a senatorial, gubernatorial and two

congressional candidates all Republicans. The northern third of the state made up two congressional districts, and all of my candidates lost except one house member, Page Belcher of Enid, Oklahoma. Mr. Belcher asked me to come up here with him as his assistant. I came up, and he brought up with him for his secretary a girl from Enid, Oklahoma who had just graduated from OU, Oklahoma University. We met up here, but she was from Oklahoma too and, in fact, I campaigned all over her town but didn't meet her until we came up here.

BURG: Would that have been about 19--

WHEELER: We came up in 1951--



BURG: 1951. The elections had been in '50?

WHEELER: 1950, that's right. I was very involved then by the time the Eisenhower campaign came along in 1952.

BURG: Now, let me ask you, who was the congressman?

WHEELER: Page Belcher. Congressman Page Belcher. He just retired two years ago.

BURG: Had you completed the M.A. by the time you made the move?

WHEELER: Yes. I had completed it in the summer. I had my thesis written, but I was late getting it in. I actually got the degree in January of '51, but I had all of the work finished when I left there in August of '50. I couldn't find a typist; so I was about two days late getting my thesis in to be in the graduating class of August, but my diploma reads January of 1951 for my master's.

BURG: May I ask you what the thesis was?



WHEELER: Well, it was on human rights. It was an amazing subject to choose for a thesis because it was about one hundred pages long, but it covered the evolution of the human rights doctrine, if you can imagine.

BURG: In a hundred pages?

WHEELER: In a hundred pages when it actually takes shelves of books to even come close to what it is all about. I have read it once, about ten years ago, and I haven't been able to bring myself to go back and read it again. I hope my kids don't find it. In fact I have it hidden in the library, and I often think I ought to go down to the OSU Library and try to find it and get it out of there, but--

BURG: If it is a consolation to you, let me say that those of us who went on and wrote the dissertations look back at the M.A.s, and all of us wish they had been written with a self destruct mechanism in them.

WHEELER: You have a Ph.D. don't you?



BURG: I do and I don't want to read my M.A. either.

WHEELER: I would like to ask you, is your Ph.D. on the same subject as your M.A.?

BURG: Yes, as a matter of fact it was. It was an expansion on it.

WHEELER: Well, that's what I thought--

BURG: I took southern Whig congressmen. At the time I wrote there was some concern that maybe the Republican Party was going to go belly-up, and I thought, "Had this ever happened before?" Well, yes the Whig party, another conservative party had indeed gone belly-up, and so I took its congressional leaders from the moment of the party's collapse and followed them in their careers until their death

to see what had happened to them, what their options were from 1855 on.

WHEELER: I think I would like to read yours. It sounds more interesting than mine.

BURG: Not the M.A. I can hand you the other and not blush too badly, but that M.A., oh, it's bad! I guess what we must do is get it out of the system. The only way to do it is write it. Now, when you got here, were you Congressman Belcher's administrative assistant?

WHEELER: Right.

BURG: So we can take it for granted that your work by and large was the typical work of such a man.

WHEELER: That's right. The title actually, he called it executive assistant, but I was his number one assistant. And my wife, who became my wife about two years later, was his executive secretary, and I was his executive assistant. It was the same thing as administrative assistant.

BURG: So you began running into some of the major political figures of Washington, D.C. in connection with your work.



WHEELER: Yes.



BURG: What names now come to mind as some of the figures with whom you had to deal at that period in your life?

WHEELER: It was very fortunate that I came up here with Page Belcher because he was anxious to expose me to the leaders that he knew. He would take me with him which is so much different than some members who would leave their staffs in the office. Of course a staffer ought to always keep a low profile which I always tried to do, but very soon we met Herbert Hoover, whom I still remember, at a fantastic dinner meeting. Former President [Herbert] Hoover spoke to the newly elected Republican members. Belcher was permitted to bring one guest, and he took me. I met Herbert Hoover and Harold Stassen (we had a meeting with Harold Stassen). Very early I became acquainted with Senator [Robert A.] Taft. At that time it appeared he was going to be the nominee in 1952 for the presidency. Interesting as it may seem, I wouldn't say I ever was acquainted with Senator Joseph McCarthy, but I met him many times. He is just one name that comes to mind as someone who stood out sort of by himself at that

particular time and certainly was by himself on his approach to things. And Harry Truman, who was President, I saw him once. Mr. Belcher used to let me represent him at dedications. Down the street from here is the American Legion Headquarters, and (I think it is two blocks down from where we are at this minute), that building was dedicated during the first year we were here. Mr. Belcher let me represent him at this dedication. I got to sit in Congressman Belcher's seat which was one of the front row seats and saw Harry Truman cut the ribbon; I remember that very clearly. General deGaulle was over here in the early 50's and I didn't get to shake his hand, but I was right near him, elbow-to-elbow. That time was fairly close yet to the end of World War II; so some of the World War II leaders were drifting back this way, and then later I saw Winston Churchill when I was in the White House, but this was several years later. To answer your question, those are the names that come to mind.

BURG: Let me ask you this question. Again it would require you to think back to your reactions. If I understand



correctly, except for your fairly fast political activity in the state of Oklahoma, here you are at the center, the political center of the United States, and it must have all been very new to you, unique in a sense for you. How do you recollect your reactions of those days?



WHEELER: It was new and very interesting. Of course I had grown up in a rural area of Oklahoma and I had never traveled until World War II. In World War II I traveled wherever the military sent me, and that was of course from military base to military base. By the time I had my master's degree in government, I still hadn't been to Washington. I thought I would come up here for one year. I thought it would help me in teaching if I could be in Washington for one year. I planned to go back to the classroom and teach government and history. It sounds sort of ridiculous, I'm sure, for anyone who has a master's degree, but I sort of had the picture that the White House and the Capitol were like in the same block and right near each other. You know I had heard about Pennsylvania Avenue, but I really don't think I had ever

seen a map of the city. I knew that the Washington Monument was here and Lincoln's Monument and the Ford Theater, but I thought it was a smaller place. I had a picture of government being a lot smaller than it was even in 1951 when I got up here--much smaller. Of course in Oklahoma, the executive branch and legislative all were housed in one building; so I presume I was comparing it to Oklahoma where we had one building. I knew there were two buildings at least, but I didn't think there were so many and it was such a huge plant even at that date. Of course then it is no comparison at all to what it is now.



BURG: Twenty years have made stunning differences--

WHEELER: Oh, yes, fantastic.

BURG: Mrs. Eisenhower, who was here prior to the war, she describes an even smaller--

WHEELER: I bet she does.

BURG: --Washington, D.C., more small-town atmosphere.

WHEELER: Right.



BURG: Did you find that it inhibited you or were you able to overcome that?

WHEELER: Well, I found it was a very difficult month, the first month. In fact I really thought about going back just before I got everything unpacked and I didn't have too much packed. I think if it hadn't been for the girl that later became my wife I would have gone back because I am sort of an orderly person, a somewhat organized person I would say. I approach my work at least on an organized basis. I thought when I got here the federal government was so disorganized it was hopeless. I thought, "why should I hang around here." because it was really hopeless. So much was happening that I was unprepared for and I felt it was just an impossible situation. It bothered me physically and mentally, everyway. I was sort of sick really; I was sick physically.

(A portion of this page has been closed per the donors request in the legal agreement at the front of this transcript.)

I do recall that

I was completely broke financially; I had just gotten out of

college and had no money. I had nothing except the two degrees, but I finally realized I would have to work long enough to be able to buy a train ticket home. But I really had thought that this wasn't the place for me.

BURG: Mr. Wheeler, did you speak to Congressman Belcher about your feelings in that first month?



WHEELER: No, I didn't. I spoke to Barbara, who later became my wife. We talked about it a great deal, and she knew what was happening to me. I was also feeling that I wasn't going to be able to have any influence on Congressman Belcher. Now he had been in politics a long time and had been an assistant to an Oklahoma Republican house member up here. I had a master's degree, and thought I could come up here and save the world in a couple of weeks' time. I wanted us to do lots of things--I had all kinds of legislation I wanted him to introduce and I also felt he didn't seek the right committee assignments. I thought everything was wrong the way he was going at it. He and I were disagreeing on what, I thought, were too many important things for me to be of

any service to him. I finally had to back up to a lesser role or what was more within the realm of the possible, and that's what he was trying to get me to do. We could do some things, but we had to get set first. The longer I was here I began to see that things were more organized really and that more things were going on in a constructive way than I had first thought. I had first thought there was nothing constructive and everything was destructive. I had thought we were losing our position in world affairs--that when the war was over, everybody, the whole wide world, wanted to be like us because we were number one in education, science and all kinds of technology and everything else. Comparing that time with now is certainly an interesting comparison. I just couldn't see where I was going to be able to do any good, and I thought I ought to get back to teaching and farming which was what I had planned to do in the first place. As more time went by I began to feel that maybe there were some things we could do and I ought to hang around for at least a year. And then Barbara and I got married. We never did buy a house because we always intended to stay just one



more year. We stayed here seven years after that, and for seven years we were just going to stay one more year. We stayed one more year through the entire '50s.



BURG: Now, would your work for the people of your congressional district in Oklahoma, would that have been largely work in agricultural legislation or would it have been oil, or was there some combination of interests that your district would expect of you?

WHEELER: Some combination. It was mainly agriculture. There was, however, quite a bit of oil; we had some refineries in our districts. It was a huge area in square miles; so we had all kinds of agriculture, all of the basic commodities and had lots of small business. It was a variety that--

BURG: Winter wheat?

WHEELER: Winter wheat.

BURG: Milo at that time?

WHEELER: Milo, we had lots of milo and had cotton in the

southern part of the district. We had alfalfa and had peanuts which is a basic commodity. Secretary [Earl] Butz is trying to get peanuts taken off the price support list after all of these years as a basic commodity, and it should be. It was agriculture and oil.



BURG: Let me ask you this, was there any sizable, noticeable amount of black population in your district?

WHEELER: No, there really wasn't. It probably had less than just about any district in the country. There was some black population in Enid and some in Ponca City, but the black population was very small, I suppose less than five per cent and probably less than that. It is like 18 to 20 per cent of the state. The state's pretty much similar to what the national ratio is, but our district didn't have very many blacks.

BURG: Now, as you continued to work here, as you stayed on past that first month and into the first year that you had given yourself, do you happen to remember any specific things that caused you to think that maybe it was worthwhile, that

the confusion might have a purpose and an end product that at first you hadn't noticed?



WHEELER: Yes. Congressman Belcher got on the Agriculture Committee. We had campaigned against the Brannan Plan which was to socialize agriculture actually and to pay farmers by check, just an out-and-out check from the government, instead of having it through the price support route. Instead of having supported prices, the farmer would get a check from the government. Belcher, being on the Agriculture Committee, was able to be influential in stopping the Brannan Plan and try to keep agriculture as free. So that was useful. Agriculture was mainly the key role. Then later I went to Secretary Benson's staff. I was into agriculture up to the top of my head then. I began to get more satisfaction out of strictly case work, servicing people who had problems, and helping with veterans' cases. Some of the real hardship cases, why I got real satisfaction from. We had many cases where people were drifting in from eastern European countries and some of the members of their families would have been in the country. We had one case in particular where a college professor had

escaped from one of the Iron Curtain countries, but didn't get out his wife and one child. It took about three years, but I took it on as a personal project and finally was able to get his wife and child to America. So things like that made it worthwhile. And I was active in the Young Republican national organization also. I was a national vice president when President Eisenhower ran; so I was actively involved in the national Young Republican activities. I was involved more than in just Oklahoma. I was working with groups here in the District of Columbia, and was beginning to make acquaintances all over the country. That was satisfying to begin to work with the people who, now even, many of whom are in positions of key responsibility, but then they were helping run campaigns and doing all kinds of work here in Washington in government and politics. Many of them played a part in the Eisenhower campaign.

BURG: Now, before I touch upon the activities with the National Young Republicans, let me ask you as a point of contrast, do you recollect what committees you wanted Congressman Belcher



to put himself on if he possibly could? I am thinking about the political education of Clyde Wheeler.

WHEELER: As I recall, I think I wanted him to get on the House Foreign Affairs Committee which didn't impress him at all because he was like 50 and I was 27 or 28. I felt very strongly about the leadership role of the United States in international affairs. In fact, my master's is in government, but I had an emphasis in international relations in graduate work. I was concerned about our leadership role, and I wanted him to get on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He thought that Agriculture was more important to that district than House Foreign Affairs, and he was right.

BURG: You came to see it that way too?

WHEELER: I came to see it that way too.

BURG: Now, I get the impression that Belcher was an understanding and tactful man in coping with a younger man who had great dreams and wasn't really looking at the political realities of Oklahoma.



WHEELER: Well, he was. Like I said, he exposed me and permitted me to be exposed to the national leaders all around because he knew I was thinking about some of the bigger things. But he committed his office pretty much to district affairs because he had lost a few races in his lifetime and he wanted to be re-elected. And so he would let me push him into saying a few things in some of his speeches that he probably wouldn't normally have said. But, still, he pretty much knew what he wanted to do and did it. But he understood I was thinking about the role of the United States maybe a little bit more than just his role as one member of Congress from Oklahoma.

BURG: Let me ask you, did he counsel you with respect to your own career? Did he advise you on these matters?

WHEELER: He did some. I don't know that he ever did know for sure just which way I was going to go because he was very sorry to see me leave. I was with him three years, and my wife was with him four years until we had our first baby. He was very unhappy with Secretary [Ezra Taft] Benson when Benson asked him to let me go because Benson, being Secretary



of Agriculture and Belcher being on the Agriculture Committee, knew each other very well. And I don't really know what he thought I would do, but he thought I would stay with him a little longer. When Eisenhower won, I had begun to look around to see if there were some other things I could do. I had kept my contacts in Oklahoma, because I thought eventually I would get back there and probably teach school and farm. I grew up in a rural area and I love agriculture. Although my academic work wasn't in agriculture I thought I could coach and teach history and run a few cows on the side, I guess. That is what I really had in the back of my mind. So when a chance came for me to go with Benson, Mr. Belcher let me go. He was sorry to see me go, and never did actually replace me. He never hired another man as an executive assistant. He went to an all female office staff. I had helped him in his campaigns, and had run his office in the district. Back then we used to--

[Interruption]

BURG: --do some fence mending?



WHEELER: That's right. I was familiar with his district and I had been a Young Republican organizer in Oklahoma when I was at OSU. I think he thought he would just bear down on the constituent service side of it and never did really have another man assistant that helped him with his campaigns and helped him run his office like I had up to that point. He was a very successful politician and was in Congress for twenty-two years. He retired two years ago.



BURG: Indeed he was. Well, let me ask you then how you came to be drawn into the national Young Republican organization. This occurred, I take it, while you were here in Washington, in the first year or so.

WHEELER: I had started out in Oklahoma at the Oklahoma State University. I had gotten to be National Committeeman of the Young Republicans for Oklahoma. Mr. Belcher had also been active in Young Republicans. When there came an opportunity for me to run for a national vice-president, there were about six national vice-presidents, I ran from a region, the southwestern region. He permitted me to do this because he was a partisan Republican and a team-player type and so am I. Now,

my mother was a Democrat but I am not hung up on philosophy. I know that Democrats and Republicans don't all have the same philosophy. But I am hung up on the two party system, and I feel like it is the best way to go. And so I was dedicated in Oklahoma to developing a two party system. I thought in a partisan way I can help nationally through this Young Republican organization. I thought the contacts would be helpful in developing some feel for the national campaign regardless of who the nominee would be in 1952. Mr. Belcher went along with that idea, and he let me have time off to go to the conventions. In fact I was elected a national vice-president at Rapid City, South Dakota. That's where the national convention was held when I was elected.



BURG: In what year was this?

WHEELER: That was in 1952.

BURG: Prior to the Chicago convention?

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: Very much prior to it, Mr. Wheeler? Was it a matter of a month or so?

WHEELER: Not too much. No, I think it was in March, and I think the Chicago convention was in May or so.

BURG: June.

WHEELER: May or June of that year.



BURG: Now, let me ask you to recollect for me if you can, who are the other five vice presidents elected at Rapid City.

WHEELER: Well, one was Herbert Warburton who got to be a House member and later became the national president of the Young Republicans from Delaware. He served one term in the House and then ran for the Senate and was defeated. He was later general counsel for the Post Office Department in the Eisenhower Administration for a time. That is the only one I can think of.

BURG: Is it possible then that the other four did not achieve political prominence outside perhaps their own states?

WHEELER: I think that is right. I think that anyone who would get to be a national vice-president would always stay involved in politics because it is like--I don't know what it is. I don't like to use the word disease but I think you never can get out once you are involved to that extent in organizational politics. Perhaps it is like the Boy Scouts, similar to Boy Scout activity. I am very involved with Boy Scouts and will always be looking for some way to help the Boy Scouts. I never get away from it or anything else that I really care that much about. So they are bound to have stayed active because you don't go that far without politics leaving a mark on you forever, I think.



BURG: Who was elected the national president of the Young Republicans that year?

WHEELER: It was a man from South Dakota, and I was trying to think what his name was when we were trying to think of names. He ran for Congress. His name was Sullivan Barnes. There was another man at my level, Mark Andrews, who is a Republican House member from North Dakota who did go ahead and he is a member of Congress now. There are many members of Congress

that I worked with in other areas. Bill [William C.] Wampler is a House member from Virginia, Wiley Mayne who has now been defeated--but they weren't vice presidents. They were active in their states. There are a bunch like that all over who have been in and out of Congress, some of them still in, that I was involved with. And here in the District, the District of Columbia Young Republican Club, is the poorest political club in the whole United States, Democrat or Republican. I still try to help them out. Ned Pendelton is the state chairman of the Republican organization here in D.C.; it is a senior group. He is a prominent lawyer here and, of course, couldn't run for anything because the District has just now elected its first delegate.



BURG: Now, if that happened in March and the Eisenhower candidacy was well underway, your congressman would have--

WHEELER: He was for Senator Taft which was playing safe.

BURG: And he would have to be running for election himself in 1952.

WHEELER: That's right, he was.

BURG: You were still with him as executive assistant.

WHEELER: Right.



BURG: So let me ask you then about 1952. Aside from the Young Republicans, let's look at you and Congressman Belcher who you have said is for Taft at that time. How did you yourself feel?

WHEELER: Well, it was an interesting thing. This may surprise you some, but I knew Senator Taft and didn't know General Eisenhower. I knew Senator Taft fairly well. And in fact I was Taft's Young Republican for the state of Oklahoma for the purpose of getting delegates for the Taft campaign. Belcher had known Taft for a long time. Ross Rizley, who was a former congressman from Oklahoma, was in charge of the Credentials Committee for the 1952 convention where you may remember there was a dispute over the seating of certain delegations from Texas, Louisiana, and various places.

BURG: Georgia was one of them.

WHEELER: Georgia, right. And so Senator Taft had asked me to be his Young Republican organizer for the state of Oklahoma because of my other roles in the state and the national, and I had agreed to do it. I was basically a conservative and had high regard for General Eisenhower, the highest regard. But I didn't know how he would be as a campaigner. I knew this was a tough business, even at that time. The speeches, the grind was great. Well, I knew that the speeches and grind of World War II were great also which he did with flying colors, and so it was just that I was more oriented to Senator Taft and being in Belcher's office, why we were looking for Taft delegates, as a matter of fact, in Oklahoma. Oklahoma was a key state. It was the first state in the country to hold a state convention. So the whole country was looking at us to see which way the delegates might go. And you may remember that there was another man that had decided to run for President also, and that was General [Douglas] MacArthur. General MacArthur wound up with 5 delegates out of 22 from the state of Oklahoma. We had a strong MacArthur group working in Oklahoma. This, however, was before the presidential primary exercise became so prominent. As it wound up, as I



recall, after the convention in Oklahoma, MacArthur had five delegates and I think Taft and Eisenhower split the rest. The main party people for the state were Taft people. Bill Skelly, head of Skelly Oil Company, had been the Republican National Committeeman of Oklahoma. He had been a personal friend of Senator Taft for a long time. We had many prominent people plus our national committeeman, [Bailie] Vinson, from Tulsa, who really hired me out of college at Oklahoma State, who were for Taft. I was sort of pushed toward the Taft way, and I didn't push against it because I thought Taft was a good man.

BURG: Was this Vinson?



WHEELER: No, this was Bailie Vinson, V-i-n-s-o-n. He was owner of Vinson Supply Company. It was something I was caught up in, and I knew Senator Taft fairly well. I also recall seeing him sort of walk his way to the grave when he wound up with cancer. I was in the Eisenhower Administration when Taft died and recall what Eisenhower had to say about him. So it wasn't a matter of one good guy or one bad guy; it was just a matter of two good guys here running for office. And then you

had Harold Stassen who was pushing, and General MacArthur. But when the convention came and we got to Chicago--my first national convention I might say--and I wasn't a delegate, in fact, I never have been a delegate. I always go; I haven't missed a National Convention since then. I always go, and I urge people to be delegates who might not go. So I have never been a delegate. I try to have something to say about who is a delegate, but I don't ever seek that position because I am trying to stimulate people to participate. But anyway, when Eisenhower got it, why we swung around, and we had the largest Young Republican Club in the United States at Oklahoma City that worked in the Eisenhower Campaign, larger than New York City or Chicago. We had a dollar fee for membership in Oklahoma City. The most Young Republican Clubs Oklahoma had ever had before, because you must remember we had never had a Republican governor, came to the number of eight. We organized forty-two Young Republican Clubs in the Eisenhower campaign, and the largest one in the country was in Oklahoma City, which the record will still show. We had, I think, like 4,000, and that is quite a few dues-paying members. We had their names on an official list.



BURG: Let me go back into Oklahoma briefly before the convention in Chicago and before your state convention. I know from interviewing I have done in the state of Washington, my home state, and in the state of Texas how the Citizens for Eisenhower groups came up out of nowhere and in those states pretty largely captured precinct organizations prior to the state conventions so that when the state conventions came off there were strong Eisenhower support there. What happened in Oklahoma in this respect?

WHEELER: Well, that was sort of a tie. The Citizens for Eisenhower made the attempt and did capture about half the delegated finally. It was a interesting thing. I will never write a book, but if I ever did I would go back and talk about the way that situation developed. As you would imagine and as it turned out for the best, it was mainly the people new to politics that took up the banner for Eisenhower. I presume they were new because they hadn't been too pleased with the oldsters so they just never cared to join up to that point. The establishment, the Republican establishment, was more conservative and had been carrying the ball through the years and they knew Taft. He had been in the state and made



a dozen speeches. Oklahoma had high regard for Eisenhower because he had lived in Texas and Kansas and we felt like he was one of us, but the party structure was pretty much controlled, the Republican party structure, was controlled by the establishment and they were pro-Taft. So the new people made up the Citizens for Eisenhower, and they did very well.

BURG: You don't feel it was a significant number of switching Democrats in that--

WHEELER: Oh, yes, there was, no question about it. There were people who switched and have remained some of our best people. In fact, it probably was the thing that set the stage for us to have a two party system because we didn't elect a Republican governor until 1962, which was ten years later. And then my wife and I ran for Congress in 1960, in an impossible district, and we won. I don't know how much you know about our situation, but we won and had an office assigned to us up here. Eisenhower, bless his heart--we were counted out in a recount--he said, "They counted out my boy." And we were counted out by 76 votes in a special recount, in a fraudulent recount, if you will. But it showed that Democrats



would vote for a Republican. Our victory was due to President Eisenhower and my having been associated with the Eisenhower Administration. Eisenhower was very popular in Oklahoma, and he wrote two beautiful letters to help me in my campaign. This congressional district I ran in had a registration of 15 Democrats to 1 Republican. It was a different district than Belcher had. It was the western third of the state down to the Red River. It was an area where a Republican had never tried before. Lawton in Comanche County was the largest city. President Eisenhower was very interested in our race and Bryce Harlow, the number two assistant to the President who was responsible for my going to the White House in the first place, was from Oklahoma also, and he was responsible, to a great measure, for my career. He had me come to the White House from the Department of Agriculture. Bryce sort of pushed me into the congressional race because at the time I thought it was an impossible situation because no Republican had ever come close. In fact, usually, no one even ran. But it was the remnants of the Citizens for Eisenhower, and then our organization south of Highway 66 which was made up of all Democrats, because there weren't any registered



Republicans there anyway, that made up our campaign organization. Both parties had major participation in our campaign. So this congressional race pinpoints the turning point and the beginning of the two party system of Oklahoma.

BURG: Right, we had better get back to 1962 later on. I can see that we had better spend some time on that because, no, I was not aware of that and I think we would be most interested in hearing about it and former President Eisenhower's actions to help you. As we move back to '52 and you are working for the Taft campaign, would you say there that most of the Taft people that you were in contact with in Oklahoma, did they tend to be older people?

WHEELER: Yes, they were.

BURG: Was that in contrast with the Citizens for Eisenhower.

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: That group tended to be a younger group. In some states, Mr. Wheeler, they seem to run a fair gamut of youth to age in both camps, but in Oklahoma your observation was that the Citizens tended to be younger people.



WHEELER: Yes, they were. There were some older ones, but, in general, they were the younger bunch.

BURG: A second thing that I wanted to ask you, you expressed the fact, a few minutes ago, that you didn't really know how General Eisenhower might stand up to the political give and take and you had plenty of reason to know how tough that could be. Did you on the other hand think that Senator Taft would be, to put it in a very coarse way, a saleable commodity in 1952?

WHEELER: Well, I really thought about that a great deal because I was interested in the image situation and knew the tremendous task we had of trying to elect somebody. I was still, I would say, more issue oriented than personality oriented at that point, and I still am issue oriented. I think that if President Taft had gotten the nomination he would never have gotten elected in looking back on it, and that could have been the end of the Republican party back then, which a lot of people think we might be looking at today. I don't happen to think so. But, nevertheless, it was, I think, good that he didn't get the nomination. But



at the time I thought, and I was very highly motivated, his stand on issues ought to get the job done. But I did have some concern because he wasn't a particularly attractive man, and he wasn't a particularly entertaining speaker. His speeches were fairly heavy speeches with statistics, and facts and he assumed, I think, that people understood more than they really did and were listening to him more closely than they really were. So, to answer your question, I had some concern about it but I guess I was just living in a kind of hopeful state of mind that we'd be able to pull it off.

BURG: You dealt with him personally in 1952 on occasion?



WHEELER: Oh, yes, on occasion, yes. I wouldn't say closely on a day-to-day basis, but I would go to him, some of his meetings, where he was having small groups, here in Washington, and hear how he thought the campaign ought to be run.

BURG: What would you say, Mr. Wheeler, thinking back to those days, what were his strongest points as a Republican political leader, Mr. Taft?

WHEELER: Well, he was very strongly oriented toward a balanced budget. He thought we ought not to spend more than we made. Of course, he authored the Taft-Hartley Act; he was very strong for not letting unions get any stronger hold on national affairs. Now, when you ask such a question it is a little difficult to recall. He leaned toward federal housing which kind of stood out as an inconsistency for him with everything else that he was non-federal on, but he was sort of alone (among the Republicans) even back then for public housing. I was trying to remember some of his international positions on foreign policy, and I can't really--



BURG: I wonder if those would have coincided with your own?

WHEELER: I think they did to some extent, but I really am having a hard time remembering.

BURG: What did you think of his intellect, sir?

WHEELER: I thought he was really a very intelligent person. He was the complete opposite of a demagogue. That was some of his problem with some people, but not with me. He never

tried to dress something up different from the way he really thought it was, and so people used to get on him all the time for not taking a little softer line and trying to get him to have a little more hopeful view on a possible outcome of something. But he would lay it on pretty hard, as I recall, and a lot of his supporters thought that that was going to make it difficult to garner votes.

BURG: Not much showmanship?

WHEELER: No, no showmanship at all.



BURG: Nor any desire, evidently--

WHEELER: Not apparently, there really wasn't.

BURG: --to be a showman.

WHEELER: And I don't ever recall that he ever attempted any humor. I remember him laughing at himself, and he wasn't, I wouldn't say, a real solemn, stern person. I didn't have day-to-day contact with him either, but I was around him enough to know him fairly well. He seemed to have a feel for some position of destiny of his own, and I don't know whether

it was because he had been a son of a former President--I suppose that was a natural feeling--

BURG: Someone suggested that.



WHEELER: --a feeling like I would never have. But he seemed to be on a mission. It would be contrary to ordinary people like myself who come from no place but from great parents, and anything that does happen you are grateful for, and anything that you do do you are just glad you have a chance to do it. You never really think you are going to rise to any particular heights anyway. But he had a feeling that he had a major role to play.

BURG: Could he be warm with those of you who were assisting him in his campaign?

WHEELER: Yes. He could, when the groups were small. But when they got to be like 5 or 6 up to 10 or 12 or 20, why then he became pretty formal. When I said a while ago that he was stern and solemn, he really wasn't all that stern and solemn. But I guess Eisenhower was a man who enjoyed people who were cheerful and liked to see people laugh and be cheerful,

and I am the same kind of person. He liked to see the bright side, a little good cheer. But Taft, I don't ever recall, telling a joke. I suppose he did, but I just can't recall his trying to tell a humorous joke to get people to laugh, which is kind of what most politicians try to do, at the beginning and halfway through and at the end.

BURG: Now when you went to the convention, as you pointed out, not as a delegate and it went the other way, it went to General Eisenhower, had you been highly involved in the convention itself as a Taft man? And may I ask you what form your activity took in that convention up until the time the door slammed shut?

WHEELER: Well, I didn't have too much of a part. I got to sit on the floor, got to sit where the alternate delegates sat. And I had some little assignment, some kind of a sergeant-at-arms. You know, most of these conventions they have hundreds of these little assignments. So I could get on and off the floor. But I didn't have the assignment of going out and trying to change some votes to make the thing go Taft's way. I was trying to remember here; I think there



was just one roll call and then the second roll call set the stage for Eisenhower to win, because I hadn't even thought about it for a long time. But, I was sort of an observer and I was listening to our own delegates and I do remember that I was very disappointed that one of our delegates didn't go along on making the unanimous vote for Oklahoma. I think we had one person to hold out. I like to go for unity as much as possible and Eisenhower had conducted himself so well. And some of these Taft people were still sort of running against Tom [Thomas E.] Dewey, which made it a little unfortunate. They were running against Dewey more than Eisenhower. And you may remember Senator [Everett M.] Dirksen had a very strong role to play in that campaign, and I was not too far down in the audience when Dirksen pointed his finger at Tom Dewey and said, "We are not going to follow you. We are not going to let you lead us down a primrose path again," or something like that.

BURG: That's just about the quotation.

WHEELER: But he wasn't pointing at Eisenhower because Tom Dewey was active in the Eisenhower campaign. But he was



pointing at Dewey, as I recall. So we had kind of a change of course there in the national party where the old timers sort of lost their hold on the party, and probably it was a good thing they did because I think that the Eisenhower Administration was one we will look back on as kind of a "golden age" anyway. I mean it was a time when we had more things in the right slot than we have ever had since.

BURG: You felt that in the party itself that victory may have had a cleansing affect.

WHEELER: I think it broadened the base for the party, cleansing to the extent it probably pushed aside some people who were, perhaps, even destructive in the interest of a winning campaign, not destructive in their motives for what was good for America but unrealistic on what the real world was or maybe, as you said a while ago, who had a chance to win and who didn't.

BURG: Well, they had twenty years of struggling to do something, and they had not been able to do it.



WHEELER: Something hadn't worked. That's right. So I was in it from a southern state, and I don't make any apologies at all for being identified with the Taft group. Like I said a while ago, I recall Eisenhower's feelings when Taft died. I remember seeing some visible feeling. Taft was a great man, but he was in the wrong age to be elected, I guess, or he would have gotten the nomination.



BURG: It would seem as though events and the time never coincided. Now after that convention, for one thing, you now have got to dedicate yourself to the new man if you are going to work with the Republican party and for it, and you clearly made the decision to do exactly that. But you also had your campaign in Oklahoma, Congressman Belcher's campaign, to work on. So you then went back to Oklahoma from Chicago--

WHEELER: I did.

BURG: You are campaigning in effect for both men, Mr. Wheeler.

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: Can you tell me how that worked for you, what your experiences were?

Mr. Clyde Wheeler, 11-14-74

Page 49

WHEELER: Well, it was an interesting thing. See I--





INTERVIEW WITH
Clyde A. Wheeler, Jr.

by

Maclyn P. Burg
Oral Historian

on

February 5, 1975

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

An interview with Clyde Wheeler on February 5, 1975 in Mr. Wheeler's offices in Washington, D.C. The interviewer is Dr. Maclyn Burg of the Eisenhower Library staff and present for the interview, Mr. Wheeler and Dr. Burg.

Page 50



DR. BURG: Now, when we finished our first session, we had gone through the convention of 1952--we'd finished that--and you were at that point, it seems to me, going to embark on sort of a dual campaigning, partly on behalf of your congressman, Page Belcher, and partly on behalf of the Eisenhower campaign. Now, did that work take you back to Oklahoma?

MR. WHEELER: Yes, entirely. In fact, I spent all the time in Oklahoma and a little time, I think, in Kansas.

DR. BURG: Oh, really,

MR. WHEELER: I was up there to a meeting or two with the President in that campaign, I remember at Kansas City. But it was mainly Oklahoma.

DR. BURG: Let me ask you then, on these meetings that you had in Kansas City with the nominee, what kind of work would you do there, and would you see him or who would you be dealing with on those--

MR. WHEELER: I was calling on him with the Young Republicans,

because I was a Young Republican official then, and we were meeting with him about the campaign. It was mainly just pep talks and what he hoped to do, and I was bringing in young people, not large numbers, but key leaders, eight or ten.

BURG: Up from Oklahoma?



WHEELER: Oklahoma. And so it was not so much work, it was just a matter of talking about the campaign and campaign planning. Actually, as I recall now, all of the campaigning took place in Oklahoma.

BURG: Now at these meetings in Kansas City, the President himself would usually address the group that you brought in.

WHEELER: Yes. Right.

BURG: How long would such a meeting last?

WHEELER: Oh, an hour or two. At first the Young Republican club in Oklahoma was in very bad shape. However, by September of '52, we had the largest Young Republican club in Oklahoma City of the whole country. We had more members, even than New York City or Chicago, and it was mainly organized around

the Eisenhower campaign. Two-thirds of the young people were Democrats, I suppose, but they actually had paid one dollar to become a member, because that's what it took to become a member of the Young Republican club. The most Young Republican clubs the state had ever had before at one time was eight, and by the end of the campaign we had forty-four in the state. So it was sort of the beginning of the two-party system, I would say, in Oklahoma, and General Eisenhower was the center of it. But we didn't have any money for our campaign, and it's kind of interesting when you get to be fifty-three and you sometimes are a little concerned about young people's activities and the fact that they don't conform to what you want them to do. We had certain ideas then about the campaign that the senior party was a little skeptical of so they didn't want to give us any money for the projects we wanted. And so, we got the national franchise--let me show it to you--

BURG: Oh, good.

WHEELER: --still got one--got the national franchise on an elephant ash tray made in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, by Frankhoma



Pottery Company. I've got a picture someplace where I could show you in one of these meetings in Kansas City the Young Republicans presented the President with an elephant ash tray. And since Sapulpa's in Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Young Republican Club got the national franchise for the entire country. We bought them at a price we could in turn sell them to other state clubs at a price that they in turn could sell to local clubs so everybody could make a little money. And so we would sell them through the state organizations; they in turn would sell them to local organizations. But we made enough money off of this elephant ash tray to finance our end of the campaign since, As I said, the senior group--and I can understand now being a senior myself what must have been in the minds of those people, that we were actually radicals. We weren't at all. We were just wanting to be more active and wanted to perhaps spend some money on some of the projects that the senior group didn't care too much about. We sort of ran our own campaign and did very well at it. But we made our own money is what I'm saying. And President Eisenhower took one of these ash trays, and we took his picture accepting one of them and that's how we were able to retail them, through his help, to all these



other organizations. We made about, I think, twenty-five cents on each ash tray. When we got rid of them, then everybody else could make--whatever they could sell them for. We didn't have a set price--whatever they thought they could get.



BURG: Do you have a recollection of about how much money that brought in to your Young Republican group in Oklahoma?

WHEELER: Oh--I can't remember. It seems to me like it was around a thousand dollars, but that was quite a bit of money back in 1952.

BURG: Yes, it would have been.

WHEELER: It could have been more than that because we were able to buy an old jeep and made a huge elephant on top of this jeep that we used in parades. To move it from town to town, the highway patrol required us to move it from 3:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the morning so we wouldn't scare people driving down the highway with this huge elephant. It was papier-mache and sort of flimsy and we couldn't drive very fast. It looked like an elephant coming down the highway but it had a jeep underneath it. We couldn't load it on a truck

because it put it up in the air too high; so we had to drive it.

BURG: In effect it was a full scale elephant.



WHEELER: It was bigger than a full scale elephant, but it was on top of a jeep.

BURG: And that part of the money that you--

WHEELER: Yes, that's right, we spent on that.

BURG: Let me make a note on my tape recorder to the museum curator, Will Jones, another Oklahoman, the ash tray that Mr. Wheeler has shown me is sort of a light cream with brown touches on it, light brown touches. It is approximately four to five inches in diameter; it has several places on top for cigarettes and also on top, in the ceramic, it says 1952 and then there is a elephant standing on it. These were done by Frankhoma Pottery, Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

WHEELER: Frankhoma Pottery Company.

BURG: --Frankhoma Pottery Company in--

WHEELER: Sapulpa, Sapulpa, Oklahoma; S-a-p-u-l-p-a.



BURG: Will will know where that is. I make that note just in case we have one and are wondering what it was and where it came from.

WHEELER: I still have one or two left that I could give you-- but candidate Eisenhower helped us get that project off the ground.

BURG: Now let me ask you to give me some examples of some of the projects that you younger people had in mind that the Old Guard might not have warmed to.

WHEELER: It's a little hard for me to remember now. I think the main thing was they wanted us to do their work. We wanted to have educational type meetings. They wanted us to knock on doors and we were willing to do that of course, but we wanted to have our own meetings and we wanted to have seminars and speakers and try to become more issue oriented. It was a Democratic state and we were trying to get the people to become issue oriented and not candidate oriented, but partisan

oriented to some extent because we were hoping to have these Democrats stay in the Republican party.

BURG: You wanted to make converts.



WHEELER: That's right. We wanted them to stay in the Republican party because of issues and not necessarily because of, I would say President Eisenhower. However, he was providing the leadership for the issue orientation. And then I think that we thought it worth trying to get votes in some areas of the state that the senior party had written off as being hopeless. We had many counties where out of, like, 10,000 registered voters there wouldn't be but a hand full of Republicans. I can remember a county where we couldn't find anybody to be a Republican county chairman. We had some counties where the Republican vote, in times past, would be like less than a dozen out of ten or twelve thousand. We thought we ought to work in all those counties regardless of the past. And I think, as I recall, that was one issue. The senior group thought we should concentrate on the northern part of the state, which was generally Republican, and write off the southern half. It wasn't a serious disagreement. We

were good friends. The senior party chairman was a good friend of mine, but it was just a little difference on tactics and strategy, I guess.

BURG: Who was the senior party chairman at that time?



WHEELER: His name was Floyd Carrier, from Carrier, Oklahoma.

BURG: I may have asked you that before.

WHEELER: No, I don't think so. He was a state senator.

[Interruption]

BURG: Was that C-a-r-r- --

WHEELER: i-e-r.

BURG: Now, may I ask whether you had an opportunity in the Kansas City meetings, I think you said there were two such meetings, had you had an opportunity to discuss your tactics for Oklahoma with the candidate?

WHEELER: Not too much, because, you know, it was a big meeting and everybody was trying to see the General, or the

candidate, Mr. Eisenhower. When we gave him this elephant ash tray, we did tell him that we were going to use the funds for our campaign, but as to various projects, we didn't have time to go over them in much detail. But he was pressing us to knock on all doors. In general, he was telling us not to write off anyone, but to try to see everyone. That was sort of our philosophy, too, to not write off any area, or any group.

BURG: Was it twice that you saw him?



WHEELER: We saw him twice in the campaign--I did--the first time in Kansas City and I think the second time was also Kansas City. I just can't be sure whether it was there both times or not. But the elephant ash tray effort was in Kansas City at the Muehlebach Hotel.

BURG: It's asking you to look back a long way to make maybe a subtle observation. Did you see any difference in him or his attitudes or his physical appearance in those two separate meetings? In short, I'm asking, did he show to you any signs of the fatigue of the campaign?

WHEELER: No he really didn't. Of course I may not have been all that close to him, but I never did really see much deterioration in him until maybe like the last year of his office. He was pretty strong. Even after his operation, I heard him say one time--he was on the way out of the White House and some of us were standing there in a hallway and it was like 6:30 in the evening. He said, "If I'd have learned a long time ago what I know now," he said, "I could live forever because," he said, "I finally learned what I can take and what I can't take." And he said, "At 6:30 or so I've got to rest a little bit." And he was getting ready to go hit a few golf balls on the White House lawn. And he said, "If I'd have known that a long time ago, I'd live forever. I now know what my body can take and what it can't take." He was, you know, being humorous, but he was saying what so many of us don't really know, and I've thought about it quite a bit myself, and that is we abuse our bodies sometimes when we don't mean to, but we do it. But if we'd just be a little more sensible about it we could live longer. He was saying he finally had gotten to where he knew what he could do and what he couldn't.



BURG: You don't recall any difference in the message either, I suppose, on those occasions.

WHEELER: No, no I don't. I don't.



BURG: I think perhaps if there had been some radical alteration in what he was asking you to do, you would have remembered that.

WHEELER: I don't.

BURG: Now could I ask you, too, Mr. Wheeler, did your Young Republican group make some kind of concerted effort to obtain a black vote in Oklahoma?

WHEELER: Yes, we did. And it was a new experience for me because I had come from a part of the state where there weren't blacks and I hadn't seen but two or three blacks in my whole lifetime until I went to college and the service. I remember going to meetings in the black communities and inviting young blacks to participate with us, and it wasn't too successful because the senior party had only a few black members, but, I would say, it was sort of a beginning in that

state at that time. We did make an effort. But I can't say it was really too successful.



BURG: It took the form of meeting with young black leaders who might possibly be interested in a political side.

WHEELER: That's right. They were so oriented to the other party, to the Democratic party, that they just didn't see how they could relate with the Republican party at all. It was difficult to get them to even listen to us, but we did make an effort. But we had several that came with us and I would say are still with us. We had a professor from Langston University in Oklahoma who later worked in the Eisenhower administration.

BURG: Who was that man, do you remember his name?

WHEELER: Wish I could think of his name. The man is now dead. I later helped get his papers through the Civil Service Commission. He became the first black Farmers Home Administration loan officer in the United States. I think he had been a professor at Langston University, a great person. There are many black farmers in Oklahoma and many throughout the U. S. The

black farmers had thought the white farm loan officers in many places didn't give them the consideration that they gave to whites. I was in the Department of Agriculture at the time, and so I remember helping get this man's papers through the Civil Service Commission so he could qualify as the first black Farmers Home Administration loan officer in the United States. Took place in Oklahoma in the Eisenhower administration.

BURG: That's enough information so that he could be run down--

WHEELER: Oh, yes. Why I can't think of his name--because he later tried to help me in our campaign, when I ran for Congress. I'll think of it later. He died, unfortunately, not too long ago.



BURG: Well the reason I asked was, in other southern states, as I know from my experiences, any attempt to go for a black vote was just almost automatically written off, even by Citizens for Eisenhower groups, who I think sort of fell under the spell of the older party leaders who say, you know, it's no use. But in your instance, you tried and you found it was indeed difficult, but the attempt was made. Now you

also had to divide your time, to some extent, between those activities and your activities on behalf of Congressman Belcher; so did you also tour the state in his behalf?



WHEELER: Yes, right, I did. In his district, the campaigns were locked together anyway; so people who would vote for Eisenhower, they wouldn't all vote for Belcher, but very nearly so. Eisenhower was getting a lot of Democratic votes that no Republican had ever gotten before, but it was generally felt that if Eisenhower got a good vote then the other Republicans would do fairly well anyway, and that was the case.

BURG: The voting statistics showed how many Democrats, in effect, had switched over at least for the Eisenhower side. Now, Mr. Belcher won that election.

WHEELER: Yes, he did.

BURG: At the conclusion of the election, did both of you return to Washington, D.C.?

WHEELER: Yes. Right.

BURG: And you resumed your duties with him as his executive assistant, so to speak.

WHEELER: That's right, that's right. And I was national committeeman of the Oklahoma Young Republicans and a national vice-president at the same time, of the Young Republican National Federation.

BURG: Had you been voted to that position during the campaign period?

WHEELER: I had been voted to that position in the beginning of the campaign. I'd been voted to the national committeeman position in 1951, I believe. And then in '52 I became a national vice-president and was in line to be the national president, because it's a regional situation to some extent. The southwest was supposed to have the presidency the next time--it's rotated around from the various sections of the country. But in '54 I became a special assistant to Secretary Ezra Taft Benson of the Department of Agriculture, and I felt I couldn't do both jobs. That's how close I came to becoming the national president of the Young Republican National Federation.



BURG: During the period after early November of '52 and up until inaugural time, was there any contact between Congressman Belcher's office and the new administration which would be coming in and what form did that contact take?



WHEELER: Well, of course, there was a lot of contact getting ready for the inauguration. The Republicans were so overjoyed at having won; that was a new experience. We had another Republican member--there was another Republican member from Oklahoma at the same time from the Tulsa area--we had two districts. So we had to deal with all of the hundreds who wanted to come to the inauguration. There were just so many invitations; so we were faced with how to handle all of these state people. That was one thing. Then we had lots of people who, sincerely so, were public service oriented who wanted jobs in the Eisenhower administration. We had all kinds of people asking for jobs and wanting us to help get their applications in the right slot. There was an excellent feeling of cooperation between the President and the Republican members in general. I think the Republican members--I can't remember anybody at that particular time that wasn't pulling for

President Eisenhower completely. Now, they all liked him, even the strong Taft supporters, and Belcher had been a strong Taft supporter. As I think I told you, I was Taft's Oklahoma Young Republican organizer, but I didn't know the General then. Everybody loved Eisenhower even before he became a candidate and they all wanted to help him after he got elected. We had a real heavy schedule of calls--people wanting jobs, people wanting to come to the inauguration, etc. Then, as the President was filling out his Cabinet, we were asked occasionally about recommending Oklahomans to serve in the administration. The first administrator of the Small Business Administration under Eisenhower came from Oklahoma, a man that we recommended, Wendell Barnes, from Tulsa. So there was special contact.

BURG: What individual on the White House staff or the staff that was forming usually made that kind of contact with you with respect, for example, to Barnes and others at that level? Who was it that sought your advice and your recommendations?

WHEELER: Well, of course, there was some people calling the Congressman. There was Sherm[an] Adams--who used to call



Congressman Belcher. I don't know that I got calls from lower level staff people in the beginning. Of course, Bryce Harlow we knew, and he wasn't so much involved in recruitment at that time; he was mainly involved in policy matters and speech writing and that sort of thing. As I recall I think it was Sherm Adams that talked to the Congressman more than anyone else. There weren't a lot of calls at the high level, because we didn't get very many opportunities from Oklahoma. We had only one or two people, as I recall, that got very good jobs in the beginning.

BURG: Now, after the inauguration, after the administration settles into the White House, by then, sometime in that period if not before, but around that time, Sherm Adams would have had as an assistant, Charles Willis, Jr.

WHEELER: Yes, I was trying to think of Charles Willis' name.

BURG: He handled patronage.

WHEELER: Yes, he did. Charles Willis, he was involved at all levels. It was his sole responsibility. I think for a sub-cabinet level, Sherm Adams would get into it some, but Charlie



Willis handled most of it. And occasionally he called me, after it got lined out. I didn't know him at first.



BURG: He was then the man, when the Oklahomans got in touch with you with respect to jobs--

WHEELER: We sent recommendations to Charlie Willis.

BURG: Now let me ask you this. As you think back on it, were the results satisfactory to you and to Congressman Belcher. That is, did you feel that Oklahoma was getting its fair share of some of the patronage jobs.

WHEELER: Well, I think we weren't entirely satisfied because I suppose that was the way with every state. We didn't get very many. It wasn't long until an awful lot of dissatisfaction developed over patronage handling. Because the Republicans had been out of power for so long, they were looking for a clean sweep in all the agencies down to a certain level and that didn't happen. I didn't know what you were going to lead up to--a change of Eisenhower attitude or what--but I'll throw in at this moment because I don't want to forget it--one thing that I noticed is that President Eisenhower became

more partisan by the end of his second term than he was at the beginning. He really didn't have a feel for the two-party system and for partisan type Republicans who labor year in and year out to keep the party effort going. And so, in the beginning, the patronage thing wasn't all that important to him. He was more interested in his Cabinet operation. But as far as this clean sweep which partisan young republicans like myself, who had seen Democrats in key positions in Oklahoma for so long that I wanted to see get kicked out and some of them never did get kicked out, why, there was a lot of frustration.

BURG: Twenty years of drought.



WHEELER: That's right. In fact that was really the reason they hired me in the Department of Agriculture. There had been very few changes and that was one of the first reasons they wanted a liaison for Congress, but Secretary [Ezra Taft] Benson was sort of like President Eisenhower; he hadn't been a partisan figure. I had been partisan, and I always told people that if it bothered them that I was a partisan, I wanted to assure them that my mother was a Democrat and my

blood was half-Democrat, and so I was half and half as far as blood was concerned and the partisan issue came through because I felt strongly about a two-party system but that I could have been a Jeffersonian Democrat. I couldn't be a liberal Democrat. I believe in the Jeffersonian principles but I was mainly concerned about having two parties, strongly competitive, offering the best people they could find to run the country and thinking through the issues. So I was partisan to that extent and felt very strongly about it. I thought the Eisenhower administration was very slow about getting underway with new people, and I think we're suffering today from some of that. I think that we had a greater opportunity then to get in new blood than we've ever had since because I think the country would have supported it since he had such tremendous support. He had the whole country behind him; he could have done about anything he wanted to. I think he could have appointed many more Republicans than he did. I'm not meaning to be critical because I understand why he didn't. He was concerned about winding up the Korean War and he was concerned about the economy. We



had droughts in the farm areas on our hands. We had the agriculture situation that wasn't good. So he was thinking about those things and this third or fourth level person in the Department of Agriculture or over at HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare] or the labor department, whether or not that man was a Democrat or Republican didn't make much difference to him. But so much for that.



BURG: Well, one of the consistent remarks, I think, that show up among White House staffers, I believe many of them speak of this, is their frustration, and indeed it must have been yours too, the difficulty of translating the President's wishes into some program of action--some affirmative kind of action--in the departments and it seems as though that was a continual difficulty. I believe then that your thought would be--

WHEELER: No question about it.

BURG: --it might have moved better, you might have gotten action faster, had Republicans gone into those departments.

WHEELER: No question about it. In the Department of Agriculture, when I got down there, after one year of its being under Secretary Benson, we had fairly high level people--in business we would call them second level management--people who would be out making speeches against Secretary Benson's program and against President Eisenhower, who were actually sabotaging what he was trying to do. Now that, to me, was just completely unacceptable--that's just unconscionable in a two-party system. I think the people expect the winning administration to put in its own people. And I still fail to understand why--because the Democrats were already in and so it's not so much a problem for them--but it was a problem for Eisenhower and then, we thought, Nixon, being a partisan type himself would certainly understand the situation, but he didn't. He used to gripe about Eisenhower because we didn't make more changes, but I really felt Eisenhower went farther than Nixon did. Because Nixon came in and he just barely won, which was a little different from Eisenhower's situation, but I'm a partisan to the extent, and having been in business, and been in government, that I feel that an administration cannot function unless it gets its own people



far enough down in the departments to sell its programs. These great solutions and programs would be developed in the White House and nothing would happen. They'd be launched, but they wouldn't ever get a fair trial. And I think the American people really expect more changes, but we've got interest groups that have grown up to protect the "ins" which I call the federal party. We've really got three parties in this country anyway: We've got the Democrats, Republicans and we've got the federal party and the federal party is about twice as strong as the Republican party and very nearly as strong as the Democratic party. Really it's stronger than the Democratic party today, but since '72 it's probably--or since Watergate--it's many times stronger than the Republican party. But we got this federal party protected by certain people in the press and outside groups, and so they begin to fight off any new administration immediately about being partisan and Jacksonian, and it's not that at all. It's just getting in your own people so you can govern--so the people can have a choice. People now are turned off about government. Fifty-two percent voted last time and I think it's because they've gotten to where they can't tell any



difference; they don't see much difference in one administration to the next. They hear different campaign promises, but then a new President gets in and the situation after he is in is not much different from what it was before. They don't make enough changes in people to make it really change. I didn't mean to get into this because it has nothing to do with what we're talking about.

[Interruption]



BURG: to three I'm quite sure that you held these views; you certainly were not alone in holding them. Could Congressman Belcher voice--I think he probably had similar opinions--

WHEELER: There was no question.

BURG: --could he voice them to anyone in the White House? And secondly, was there anyone that you could voice your concern to on the White House staff?

WHEELER: Well, of course, I voiced them to Charlie Willis. I got to know him fairly well and Congressman Belcher would voice them to Sherm Adams and Bryce Harlow.

BURG: You would not always know, I suppose, what kind of response Belcher was getting from the Governor but--

WHEELER: Yes, I would always know--

BURG: Would you?

WHEELER: He'd tell me. We, usually, wouldn't get too much response. But Governor Adams had been a congressman; so he and Belcher knew each other. But it was a painful process there for a while. Always was.

BURG: Belcher had high regard for the Governor?

WHEELER: Yes, he did.

BURG: I wonder if, in his conversations with you, whether Congressman Belcher had begun to lose any of his friendship with Adams because of not being able to penetrate this--

WHEELER: I think that, of course Belcher having been a Taft person, as time went on, was getting more critical of the Eisenhower administration for not making more changes of personnel. He thought that would help his policies to be



implemented. He always had great regard and high respect for the President, but he did get pretty unhappy because there weren't more changes.

BURG: You could lay your opinions on Charles Willis.

WHEELER: Right.

BURG: With what kind of response, Mr. Wheeler? How did Willis handle your complaint?

WHEELER: Charlie would do the best he could, but a lot of times he'd say, "Well, I can just go so far." We were an agricultural state and after I got to the Department of Agriculture I worked closely with Charlie Willis myself, trying to get in Republicans and trying to look over applicants that Charlie Willis would send to us in the Department of Agriculture. But Charlie, a lot of the times, would say he'd look into the situation and represent our view, and most of the time nothing happened. Looking back on it, it was so minor compared to things that have happened since then that I'm having a hard time, even at this point, thinking it was very unpleasant. The worst kind of a situation



was a real paradise compared to some of the things that have happened since then. So it's hard for me to even recall that there was much kicking, arguing, and criticism.

BURG: One final question along these lines. Were you in fairly close contact with your opposite number in other congressional offices, and did you find that they too were going through this same sort of thing and were disappointed?

WHEELER: Yes. I helped start an organization called "Bull Elephants." It was made up of the Republican assistants to all the Republican House members and the organization still exists. We met regularly. I was the first president of it, and we were trying to help each other. I felt strongly then and do now about trying to sharpen the cutting edge of a party or leadership or of an office so we were meeting regularly to try to be better informed. At these sessions we'd gripe to each other and I'd hear them complain; so their situation was very similar to mine. Later, when I went to the Department of Agriculture and started working with other Cabinet congressional assistants like myself, congressional liaisons, why we had similar problems. In fact I



advised a Senator, who was griping about something, "Why don't you go tell the President yourself?" In fact this was Senator [Andrew] Schoeppel--this was fairly early--like in '54. I said, "Why don't you go tell the President?" And he said, "Well, I think I will." He got an appointment and took several other senators with him, eight or nine, quite a few. And Joe Skubitz, who was his assistant and now a congressman, later told me that the President was very surprised to hear what these men had to say, how mad they were about the patronage situation. Senator Schoeppel and his group had their say but it was unfortunate they hadn't called on the President sooner. Members of Congress and Senators had fairly easy access to President Eisenhower's office. If this had been the pattern under President Nixon, things might have been better for him because he did close the door on so many people.

BURG: So there was a case where the evidence, the evidence that you yourself have, would say that the White House staff was not filtering through things to the President that perhaps should have been one of his major concerns.



WHEELER: That's right. They weren't being successful at it, I'll say that. They were--

BURG: Or at least to us, now looking at it, it looks like they weren't doing this.

WHEELER: That's true.



BURG: Now let me ask you if there is anything else in the remainder of 1953 while you are still with Mr. Belcher that should be brought up. I can see that you had many duties and connections, work that you were doing, for example, the "Bull Elephants" that I'd not known about. Have we overlooked anything now out of that period.

WHEELER: Oh, I don't think so.

BURG: We've talked about your fairly close contact at that period with Charles Willis, Jr. Do you recollect anyone else on the White House Staff that you had any dealings with in 1953 of a --

WHEELER: Well, it was mainly Charlie. And later on Bob [Robert E.] Hampton was over there. But I think in '53 it

was mainly Charlie Willis. I was trying to think here real hard; I can't think of any anything major.

BURG: All right. Now when did the opportunity come to you, when and how did the opportunity to go to the Department of Agriculture come up?

WHEELER: That came up in this way. A former congressman by the name of Ross Rizley from Guymon, Oklahoma, had been a strong supporter of Senator Taft's and General Eisenhower's, was appointed the first general counsel of the Post Office Department. Secretary [Ezra Taft] Benson, was a great person as far as I am concerned but appeared to many people to be completely non-partisan because he was a very religious man. For some peculiar reason there are many people who think that you can't be religious and be political, which is unusual, but that really is in the minds of lots of people. These people thought that this church-oriented person never would grasp partisan politics, which was untrue. Nevertheless, agriculture was getting more criticism than most of the other departments, mainly because there were so many problems, fantastic surpluses, droughts, low prices, etc. Everybody



was looking for scapegoats--everybody meaning the politicians and the press. The White House decided to put somebody in the Department of Agriculture with some political background. Consequently, Ross Rizley was asked to leave the Post Office Department and go to the Department of Agriculture as an assistant secretary over the commodity programs--such as Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, ASCS. He had been on the agriculture committee when he was a House member. In fact Page Belcher had been his executive secretary. Belcher, Rizley, and I were from the same congressional district. Well, Rizley went to the Department of Agriculture and I knew him very well. My father also knew him. I'd gone to school with one of his sons at OSU [Oklahoma State University]. When Rizley got to the USDA, he needed an assistant. He called me and asked me if I'd be interested. And I said, "Well, you probably should ask Mr. Belcher." So he asked Mr. Belcher and Mr. Belcher said he was very much against my going but wanted me to go down and talk to the Secretary. The Secretary asked me to come down to the Department for a meeting which was arranged. Secretary Benson asked me all kinds of questions about my philosophy and whether



or not I was happily married. We used to have prayer in the staff meetings in the Department of Agriculture.

BURG: This was a fairly searching kind of interview he gave you.

WHEELER: That's right, it really was. I still remember it and--

BURG: Now did it shock you, Mr. Wheeler. I mean, did this come as a kind of surprise?

WHEELER: Well, yes, it shocked me a little; I was actually pleased with it because I felt like that he considered it an important position so he really wanted to find out about me and--

BURG: Now what other questions--he's asking about your marital happiness and--

WHEELER: Right. And he was--I can't remember--he asked about what religious beliefs I held, but--

BURG: What did you tell him?



WHEELER: I can't remember that he did ask me that, but I think that we did talk about it and I told him that I was a church-oriented person and had been since I was a child.

But of course he knew I wasn't a Mormon and he had a lot of Mormons employed as his top people. But--

BURG: Did he ask about your drinking habits?

WHEELER: Well, I think he did; so I told him I had no problem there, as I recall he did ask me and--

BURG: He knew your background, I assume.

WHEELER: I think he did--

BURG: So were there many questions probing your general knowledge of agriculture--

WHEELER: Well, yes, there was. And he asked me about my feelings on price support programs and we talked about it quite a bit and he said, I do remember this, he said, "This is an unusual position that we have here." He said, "I can hire politicians; there are quite a few up there (Capitol) that have had a lot of political experience." And he said,



There's some with lots of agriculture experience." But he said, "You're the only one that I can think of that has had milk-cow experience and political experience. That's what I need is someone who's had," --and those were his words, milk-cow, we were talking about milking cows I guess because I'd milked a million of 'em--and he said, "You're the only one I know that's had milk-cow experience and political experience. That's what I need." And so he hired me. And so I went as Ross Rizley's assistant. I wasn't Secretary Benson's assistant until a year later. Mr. Rizley was in charge of a major area of the department, but he was also to make sure that we had administration-oriented people in key positions. I was in there to help him with it. Of course, as you know, I was partisan having been in the party structure. It was a very stimulating and interesting experience because there were all kinds of problems. We had the cattlemen's march, and potato farmer's march, and diarymen's march; I've seen 'em all. This was back in the '50s so marches aren't new to this country at all.

BURG: Now how many assistant secretaries--



WHEELER: He had three assistant secretaries who--

BURG: One was Rizley--

WHEELER: He had Rizley and he had a fellow by the name of [Ervin L.] Peterson, and he had Earl Butz. Butz's and my office were very close; we're good and close friends, you see, for quite a while. My office was just about three doors down from Earl Butz's, and Butz was there four or five years. Those were the three: Rizley, Butz, and Peterson.

BURG: Do you remember Peterson's first name by any chance?

WHEELER: It's--he's over there now; not an assistant secretary but a great person; he's from Oregon state. We call him Pete Peterson, just like every other Pete Peterson--I could get it.

BURG: We can probably chase it down; he's still there.

WHEELER: That's right. Of course, he's a Republican. He went out--he's back there now under Butz in a lower position. But the Congressional Directory, I could pull out one for '54 and find it real quickly.



BURG: We've got them there; we'll just check it out that way.
Now, not one of those three men is Mormon.

WHEELER: Not one of those, no. That's right.

BURG: But I believe that on Mr. Benson's personal staff--

WHEELER: Personal staff is--

BURG: --there were several.

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: Frederick Babbel being one of them.



WHEELER: That's right, that's right. And then he had Milo Smith and then he had Ralph Roberts, who was an administrative assistant secretary. Now that was cabinet level at that time. Ralph Roberts and, oh, we had some more.

BURG: As long as we're on that topic, let me ask at this point, did you ever see the Secretary's Mormonism get in the way of the operations of the Department of Agriculture?

WHEELER: No, I never did. Not a time. I did see his tremendous religious faith serve him well in many tough situations. He had tremendous courage, and a man of lesser courage probably couldn't have stuck it out. You and I are the same age; you may remember the droughts and the agricultural price situation of the 50's and you may not. You may not have been oriented to the agriculture situation but we had some tough times in the 1950's. Agriculture's problems have always been political; worse than oil, or it's as bad as oil, put it that way.

BURG: Well, I recall that he came under heavy fire and there was much pleading that he be--

WHEELER: Be kicked out.

BURG: --taken out.

WHEELER: The Republican House members caucused in '57 or '58 and agreed to send a delegation to ask Sec. Benson to resign! Walter Judd, who was a House member from Minnesota and Dr. [Arthur L.] Miller who was a House member from Nebraska were elected to come down and ask the Secretary to resign. The Secretary buzzed me and asked me if I knew why these two



members wanted an appointment--it was set for 8:30 in the morning--and I said, "Yes, I do," (this was over the intercom). I had already been called by some of them and told what they were going to do. They'd asked me to set up the appointment. I told the Secretary over the intercome that "they want to come down and ask you to resign."

BURG: What a cheerful task you had.

WHEELER: I had to tell him. And so he said, "Clyde, I would like for you to be with me." And so I didn't sleep all night, I don't think. And so at 8:30, why, here they came and there I was--

BURG: You were by then his assistant.



WHEELER: That's right. He was in at his desk, and he was always able to keep a clean desk, generally--my bosses have all had clean desks and I never have been able to; that's the reason why they're successful and I'm not. But he had his desk top clear, and he sat there with his hands folded on top of his desk, very composed, very pleasant. When the pleasantries had been exchanged, Dr. Judd started out by saying, "Mr. Secretary, you perhaps know why we're here."

And the Secretary said, "Yes."

And Dr. Judd said, "Well, we had this caucus yesterday and we," (it may have been mainly midwestern) he said, "we feel that with the farm situation being what it is," --and I think looking forward to the '58 election, because the '58 election was a disaster for the Republicans--he said, "we feel that if you stay Secretary through that election, it will mean the defeat of many Republican members. It will mean my defeat and many other members will be defeated because of you, and we don't think that you really would want that. That, if you knew how strongly we felt," and he mentioned the numbers who were there, quite a few, not all the Republicans but over half certainly, and he said, "we like you, and as you know I've always supported you. I've always defended you, and I've always stood up for you." This was Dr. Judd talking. And he said, "But nevertheless, these are the facts of life, and we're up against a tough situation, and you need to know what we're up against and we feel that the party'd be best served, agriculture would be better served, if you would resign." So he stopped and then Dr. Miller, who was a medical doctor; Dr. Judd was a Ph.D. I think--no Dr. Judd was a medical doctor, too--that's unusual.



BURG: Two medical doctors.



WHEELER: But both medical doctors, that's right. Dr. Miller started in about the same line. He said, "I'm from," (he had the western district of Nebraska) "we got a drought on; we got low prices," and he used the same line. He said, "I just barely won by a few votes, 500 or so the time before," and he said, "I just sincerely feel that you should resign." He didn't talk as long as Dr. Judd. The Secretary hadn't said a thing during those two conversations.

And when they got through, the Secretary said, "Do you have anything else you'd like to say?"

And both of them said, "No." And of course I didn't say anything; I just sat there.

And so the Secretary said, "Well," a smile on his face, hands folded, he said, "gentlemen, first, I want to say that I understand this wasn't easy for you." And he was pleasant and cheerful anyway when they knew they'd come to ask him to resign, which is really something to say for him because I probably would have been very emotional. But he said, "I know this wasn't easy for you, and I appreciate the fact

you've come to tell me to my face what you have to say.
Gentlemen," he said, "here's the situation. I didn't ask
for this job in the first place. I hadn't even thought about
it. I've never been in the political arena. I didn't even
vote for President Eisenhower; I didn't even vote." But he
said, "I love my country. The President called me from New
York City in December of 1952." (Benson had been in charge
of agriculture for the Mormon church)

[Interruption]



WHEELER: He said, "He got me on the phone and" (I think he
was up in Idaho.) "and asked me to come to New York City to
talk about being Secretary of Agriculture. I was astonished,"
but he said, "I went. I went the very next week." He said,
"I had known Milton Eisenhower, had worked with Milton in
various educational and agriculture projects." But he said,
"I had not known the President, hadn't even seen him." But
he said, "I went to New York City. The President said he'd
been searching for a man to be Secretary of Agriculture, and
he said, 'I know my brother Milton knows you and he thinks
you're the man, have the right temperament and everything.'"

And he said, "I finally decided I would do it. I will never turn down a job where I can serve my country." But he said, "I told the President that I would take the job with two understandings. One is that I would always do the very best I could for what is best for America, first. Everything that we do, all of my recommendations and policies will have the country in mind first, and American agriculture second. I want it clearly understood that you will support me and that our policies and programs will have the country in mind first and agriculture second. Any time that you don't think I'm doing that and you want my resignation, you can have it." And he said, "Gentlemen, the President hasn't asked for my resignation. I've been trying to do what's best for America and what's best for American agriculture. I know these things are difficult but I still think that what we're recommending is best for America and best for American agriculture and until the President tells me otherwise I intend to stay."

And so with that they got up. They said, "Well, thank you very much Mr. Secretary." And that was the end of it. And he was there two years longer. It was quite a thing.

BURG: Remarkable story.



WHEELER: Yes, so it was.

BURG: That's remarkable.

WHEELER: He was tough, but he was gentle.

BURG: Did either Judd or Miller or any of the caucus, shortly thereafter, get back to you and comment on--

WHEELER: Yes, Judd did. Judd, of course, was a religious man, gentle man, and he was very impressed. Doc Miller later was defeated, and, well, Judd did too--Judd got knocked out in '64, the Goldwater race. But I think Miller was defeated in 1958.

BURG: In '58?

WHEELER: In '58, right.



BURG: But Judd's own prediction about himself had not been true.

WHEELER: No.

BURG: He, he went on.

WHEELER: But Miller was critical. He didn't react as well as Judd did, to the meeting.

BURG: When he called you back, when--

WHEELER: Yes, when I saw him later, I don't remember if he called me back, but I saw him later.

BURG: Was his criticism just simply directed at the fact that--

WHEELER: The Secretary didn't get the picture; he just didn't get the picture of what they were up against. And if he really did, why, he really wouldn't want them to be defeated and--

BURG: Judd was more philosophic about it.

WHEELER: Yes, he was.



BURG: Was the Secretary right, in your estimation, just giving your own opinion?

WHEELER: He was right because, as we're faced today, these tough decisions on the role of government is that they're always tough and we have people who want to take the easy way even though it's not in the best interest of the country, and the Secretary was actually trying to get the government out of agriculture. The government had built up these agricultural surpluses that were interfering with the free market

system. He knew it was right and we all know it's right. But naturally it's easier to have the government--I just saw the agriculture budget yesterday on the news, nine point some billion dollars--and back then it was like a billion and a half with all the surpluses. Well, you see, Benson didn't get his program in. If he had gotten the government out of agriculture, there would have been a lot more farmers still out there because these big programs were working to the disadvantage of the little farmer, the very ones that everyone's supposed to holler about and care about. These big government farm programs work to the advantage of the farmers with the most acres, because they get a bigger government check. The little guy gets his check, but it's so little that when he's competing with the big guy, he can't do it. So, Benson was right. Now I'll say this for Earl Butz, he has come nearer getting the government out of agriculture than any other Secretary of Agriculture even though we have a nine point two billion budget, because that's going for lots of other things. It's going for all kinds of research and inspection and building ponds, yet, and waterways and houses for farmers and things like that that we didn't used to do. And it's



Food for Peace, a big chunk, and the school milk and food stamp program we didn't have--that was just starting. See this food stamp program is very costly, and I support the fact that we've got to feed hungry people and we can't let people go hungry in this country when we've got so much food. But the way the program is operated I do quarrel with and so--but Benson was right. No question about it. And people know it today.

BURG: I think we're running low on this tape so I will give myself a note for a future interview. I want to come back at this point and pick up Mr. Wheeler's specific duties with Mr. Rizley, the range of things that Mr. Wheeler did at that stage of his career before he went on to become an assistant to the Secretary. Thank you very much, Mr. Wheeler.





INTERVIEW WITH

Clyde A. Wheeler, Jr.

by

Maclyn P. Burg
Oral Historian

on

July 2, 1975

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

This interview is being taped with Mr. Clyde Wheeler in Mr. Wheeler's office in Washington, D.C. on July 2nd, 1975. Present for the interview: Mr. Wheeler and Dr. Burg of the Eisenhower Library staff.



Page 98

DR. BURG: When we broke off I had just asked Mr. Wheeler to describe his work under Mr. [Ross] Rizley, who was an assistant secretary of agriculture, had Commodity Credit Corporation and various other things under his control and also had congressional relations, and Mr. Wheeler had gone with him specifically for the work in congressional relations. Now, exactly what did the duties involve then?

MR. WHEELER: It involved working directly with the members of Congress and the staff people of the members' offices and the committee offices that dealt with agriculture and working with the White House on agriculture legislation. That activity continued for a year, and then I became special assistant to the secretary. So really I had a job title change, but the duties didn't change all that much. I just--

DR. BURG: It was still the usual--

MR. WHEELER: --then answered directly to the secretary, Secretary [Ezra Taft] Benson, after one year.

BURG: What year did you become special assistant to Mr. Benson?

WHEELER: I think that was 1955.



[Interruption]

BURG: We were talking about the nature of your work, first under Mr. Rizley. And I was going to ask you: When you moved up as special assistant to Mr. Benson, did Mr. Rizley remain, handling other things?

WHEELER: Yes. He soon left and went as general counsel of the Civil Aeronautics Board. He was gone soon after I became special assistant. But my job at Agriculture was always involved in congressional relations and any political considerations. I was involved in trying to help recruit qualified Republicans for key positions and worked very closely with the political leaders of the Eisenhower administration. A very involved thing, of course. During that time we had a very severe drought, and we had surpluses and low prices and all kinds of political problems. Republicans, many of them wanted Secretary Benson to be fired by President Eisenhower,

and so I had a lot of political dissension.

BURG: Within the party--

WHEELER: Within the party.



BURG: --as well as with your political opponents.

WHEELER: Yes. That's right.

BURG: Now. Let me ask--although I suppose I think I know what the answer would be and I don't mean to be derogatory--but can you tell me anything about the background of making your position, actually a special assistant to the Secretary, which would be quite different from the way it had started out.

WHEELER: Right. It became obvious that Secretary Benson had to have more liaison with the Congress and with political leaders. Now, he had not had a political background. Had been a Republican, but hadn't participated in any elections, hadn't even seen President Eisenhower. Had never met him before he was called to join the Eisenhower administration. He did know Dr. Milton Eisenhower, President Eisenhower's

brother, and Milton Eisenhower recommended Ezra Benson for the job as secretary of agriculture. But he had no feel for the political situation and the party competition that we had in this country, and had been out of the country, some himself. But he'd been a church-oriented person and did know a lot about agriculture. When we began to have economic problems, or when the economic problem became more severe, then that caused more political problems. And that was when it was realized that someone like myself, that had had rural background and also had political background would have to really become involved in the policy structure of the department. I worked at it pretty hard to try to get the administration recommendations considered and approved as much as possible, because we just had a Republican controlled Congress for two years in the Eisenhower administration, 1953 and 1954. I went to the Department of Agriculture in 1954. In '55, when I became special assistant, the Republicans didn't have control of the Congress, so it was a different ball game.

BURG: And they had found out that Mr. Rizley simply couldn't be effective--



WHEELER: That's right.



BURG: --in this rather important role and still hold two or three other jobs.

WHEELER: Mr. Rizley never did really work at the congressional relations job himself. He had been a Republican member of Congress, knew lots of Republicans, but he had administrative responsibilities which prevented his giving a lot of time to congressional relations. That was my job. I worked under his direction, but he helped all he could. He had responsibility for the price support programs. So it was kind of a situation where the need required such a person, such a background as I had, and I was just there and happened to develop the thing and developed it into what it became. I finally had one assistant. But now beginning with the Kennedy administration, the Johnson administration, and even now there's some six or seven people who work at congressional relations for the Department of Agriculture. When I was there, we just had one and then two and that was all.

BURG: Who was your assistant by the way?

WHEELER: My assistant was LeRoy LeMaster and--

BURG: You might spell that last name.



WHEELER: It's L-e and then capital M-a-s-t-e-r. He was from Perryton, Texas, and he had been an agriculture attache in Uruguay for one year. He had an agricultural background and had had some political experience.

BURG: Where had you met him?

WHEELER: Well, I had met him in Washington. I don't live too far, in Oklahoma, from Perryton. He had run for Congress down there, and someone had sent him to see me--and I can't remember who it was--but I just became acquainted with him. His political and agriculture background qualified him for the job.

BURG: I was going to ask you if you were heavily involved in Mr. Benson's attempt to get farm prices, parity levels, lowered. But I couldn't recall whether those were especially a feature of the first year, or two years, of his administration

or whether that continued. It seems to me that it did continue past 1954-55.

WHEELER: Yes. It was a continuing process. As I recall, there were no major legislative recommendations made until about 1954. He was in office a year studying the situation.

BURG: And pressured, as I remember, to come up with a decision.



WHEELER: The Eisenhower administration asked all the departments to develop a program that would be distinctly an administration program. And Secretary Benson came into a situation where surpluses were developing and the previous administrations had had a high parity support, which meant the government was supporting the basic commodities, some seven of them. His recommendation, which was certainly a correct one, was to get the government out of that business and to lower the parity support and eventually get the government clear out of supporting the basic commodities at all. That became an endless scrap. That battle was fought off and on throughout the administration as I recall. I was trying to remember--

it's been a long time since I even thought about what finally happened to his recommendations. But he did get some changes made, but he never did get the complete decontrol and never did get the government away from supporting these commodities. That never did happen until Secretary [Earl] Butz. Butz has actually gotten government out of agriculture more than any other secretary. And Butz was one of Benson's proteges. So I would think Secretary Benson would feel pretty good at this point that finally the federal government has adopted policies that should keep the government out of agriculture in this business of supporting prices and actually setting the market prices for agricultural commodities.



BURG: My recollection was that parity levels were at about ninety percent--

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: --I think he was struggling hard to get them down to seventy-five--

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: --and later had to compromise to, I think eighty-five percent.

WHEELER: I think that's right. He was trying to get it down to seventy-five and hoping eventually to get it down to fifty, but I don't think he ever asked for fifty. I think, like you say, because I'm sure you've reviewed this, that he just asked for seventy-five. I think that's the first time I've thought about that for fifteen years, but I believe that that's what he asked for.



BURG: But it was a plan, an approach with which you were in hearty sympathy.

WHEELER: Yes, that's right. I was. My father had an eighth grade education and was a wheat farmer and a small farmer, and he was the last man in our county to sign up for wheat quotas which came about as a result of the first price support programs during World War II--before World War II, the old Triple A programs worked into a price support program when quotas were set. My father resisted and I was always proud of him for the fact that he knew it was the wrong

direction, wrong way to go. Even with just an eighth grade education he knew that the free market system was the best. The reason I remember that he was the last man, I had a cousin, a girl cousin, who worked in the agriculture office for our county, and she called many times and she'd say, "Uncle, you're going to have to sign up or you won't be able to market your wheat." He had to be given a marketing card to market his wheat as a result of planting the allotted number of acres. In fact, back then everybody had their acres checked. The USDA had people come out and check the acres to make sure that farmers stayed within their quotas. And then it eventually got so they didn't check every year because people fell in line like people do when they live under regulations long enough. Everyone knew what his acreage was so that's what he farmed every year. My father did not want to sign up; he was the last man to sign up. And it was my great pleasure to tell Secretary Butz the other day about that. I wish my father were still here so he would be able to see that finally we are rid of those awful price supports and government controls, and that, if he were living today, he'd be able to farm all he wanted to and do it the way he wanted to. You



see, under the control system, actually if you had quotas for wheat, you had to keep on farming wheat really. You had no choice to change to maize or corn or something like that because you got locked into the system where you couldn't move from one commodity to the other because you had an investment in that quota. And like the cotton quota and tobacco quotas today--there's still quotas I think on tobacco--I'm not sure--but back in the '50s they were very valuable. They were worth more than the land. When you sold farm real estate in tobacco country the quota that went with the farm was more valuable than the land itself.

BURG: I see.



WHEELER: If you can imagine. But fortunately that day's over.

BURG: Almost like a liquor license--

WHEELER: That's right.

BURG: --for a bar.

WHEELER: And I hope we've got the good sense never to go back to that.

BURG: Well, did you find this job, first under Mr. Rizley, and then in about a year's time, this step up for you--

WHEELER: Four years under Secretary Benson.

BURG: Did you find that work appealing to you, satisfying to you?



WHEELER: Yes, I did. We had all kinds of problems, but I really felt like I was making a contribution, because I understood what was going on, and, having a political orientation, I was able to cover a lot of bases. I believed in the policies of Benson and Eisenhower, and I was young and completely motivated to try to do a job. We were raising children, and I had a lot of family responsibilities. But I worked long hours. In fact our office, the Department of Agriculture, used to keep track of calls that were coming in just for the sake of knowing how many operators that were needed or something. Our little office took 400 calls one day and that's a lot of telephone calls to come in on one

office. More calls than any other, even the Secretary's office. And we always had that. We had two or three hundred calls every day. So we were very involved. It was a useful experience for me also, because I was a partisan Republican-- however, my mother was a registered Democrat--but it required me to discipline myself to work with a Democratic controlled Congress and to become well acquainted with Democrat members, which was a necessity because they ran the Congress. And that discipline at that particular time was very helpful to me in later years because I later ran for Congress in a district that was twenty to one Democratic, so I had to be able to communicate with Democrats.



BURG: As you look back on it now, can you recall what members of Congress in your own party and also in the Democratic party, were the chief people with whom you had to deal?

WHEELER: Well, of course, looking back on it the number one leader that I dealt with was Charlie Halleck, who was the minority leader; Congressman Joe Martin was the Speaker for those two years when the Republicans controlled the Congress.

Then I worked with Joe Martin very closely, I knew him well. The years in which I was the most involved came under Charlie Halleck. I would say Charlie Halleck was one I worked with the most and had a lot of influence on my activity. I also worked very closely with Congressman Les Arends, the Republican whip. Then, of course, I had quite a bit of contact with Speaker Sam Rayburn and with Lyndon Johnson, who was the majority leader in the Senate. An agriculture leader I worked with very closely was Cliff Hope, Congressman Cliff Hope of Kansas, a close friend. His son's a close friend of mine to this day; he lives in Garden City, Kansas. He was the ranking Republican on the House Agriculture Committee. Then there was Congressman Bill Hill of Colorado who took his place when Cliff Hope retired. I had a lot of contact with him. And on the Senate side, Senator [Robert A.] Taft was the minority leader on the Senate side for about a year under President Eisenhower, and then Senator [William] Knowland was his successor. I worked with Senator Knowland very closely for a couple of years and then with Senator [Everett] Dirksen who followed Senator Knowland. And on the Senate Agriculture



Committee was Senator [George] Aiken, who was ranking Republican. The ranking Democrat, who was the chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, was Senator [Hubert] Humphrey. Secretary Benson and Senator Humphrey put on some pretty good debates on occasion and with Senator Humphrey becoming very vocal and vindictive, but with Secretary Benson always calm and logical. He irritated Senator Humphrey because he wouldn't fight on his level. He fought in a calm, cool voice, which was the best way to fight Humphrey. Senator Humphrey expected the Secretary to come back in an emotional way and Secretary Benson wouldn't. It was interesting to see these two outstanding personalities confront each other on basic issues.

BURG: Within that group of men that you've cited to me, Republicans and Democrats, I'm sure there were plenty of occasions when even within your own party, Mr. Benson's agricultural policies were not acceptable. Can you think of instances where, within your own party, you had any problems in dealing with some of the Republican leaders, both House and Senate?



WHEELER: Well, I can. The situation really came to a head after the election of 1958. Eisenhower was re-elected for President in 1956; 1958 we had a serious drought on; we had two more years to go in the Eisenhower administration. But in the congressional election in 1958 the Republicans lost very heavily. It was obvious that that was going to happen if certain things didn't change. A lot of the Republicans, in getting ready for the 1958 elections, pressed President Eisenhower to ask Secretary Benson to resign--didn't I mention this before? Haven't I gone over this before?

BURG: I'm not sure.



WHEELER: About when the Republicans had a caucus and came down and--

BURG: --talked with--

WHEELER: --asked Secretary Benson to resign?

BURG: Yes, come to think of it.

WHEELER: I thought maybe--

BURG: Yes, I believe you have.

WHEELER: I thought we'd covered that once. But I was going to mention it. That was the main thing--when the House Republicans caucused and some ninety members met. Congressman Doc Miller of Nebraska and Congressman Walter Judd of Minnesota were chosen to represent the group. They came to the Department and asked Secretary Benson to resign. That was one of the most emotional experiences of my career when the Republicans organized to try to get Secretary Benson out. So, I do recall that.



BURG: How about your Democratic opponents, who presumably would have been unhappy a good bit of the time.

WHEELER: They pretty much ran against Secretary Benson in 1958. In their campaigns in the rural areas Benson was the issue. Of course, we were constantly trying to develop material to offset what they were saying and to get voices to use the material.

BURG: Now did that pose any special problems for you in having to deal with leaders on the Democratic side--House and Senate?

WHEELER: Yes, it did some. It certainly did, because they had a good political issue in Secretary Benson. They were against him, but still I had to work with them because they were in charge of the committees. So it caused some concerns, strained relations all the time.

BURG: But you were able to cope with that, by and large.

WHEELER: I learned how to be a diplomat during those last two or three years in order to survive.

BURG: Did it have any effect on your own morale, because clearly this would tend to make you less effective in your job? Did you take it personally or did you learn to ride with that kind of problem?

WHEELER: Well I think it was both. I learned to ride with it, but it bothered me a great deal anyway. I was completely involved in it and completely committed to the effort. I thought I had ulcers and I thought I had heart trouble and I kept going to the doctor for that last two years. Every-time I checked out in good shape--no ulcers, no heart trouble, no anything. But I kept thinking I was sick. The pressure



was pretty heavy. I wanted to slug somebody but I couldn't exactly do that.

BURG: Not very well.

