



INTERVIEW WITH
O. Hatfield Chilson
by
Thomas P. Soapes
Oral Historian
on
March 18, 1976
for
Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

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This interview is being taped with Judge Hatfield Chilson in his chambers in Denver, Colorado, on March 18, 1976. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes of the Eisenhower Library. Present for the interview are Judge Chilson and Dr. Soapes.

DR. SOAPES: First of all, Judge Chilson, would you tell me when and where you were born and about your early education?

JUDGE CHILSON: I was born in Pueblo, Colorado, November 22, 1903 and from 1906 to 1918 I lived in Merced, California, after which I returned to Pueblo, Colorado. I attended elementary schools in Merced and in Pueblo, graduated from Pueblo Centennial High School in 1922. I attended the University of Colorado from 1922 until 1927, graduated with an LLB degree. That's the extent of my formal education.

DR. SOAPES: As soon as you completed that education, what did you do?

JUDGE CHILSON: I took the bar examination in Colorado and went to the San Luis Valley and practiced law. Was there a short time and went to northeastern Colorado. After approximately a year in Greeley, Colorado, I formed a partnership with a Mr. Romans of Loveland, Colorado--

DR. SOAPES: He spells that R-o-m-a-n-s?



CHILSON: Correct. He died in 1938. I continued the practice of law in Loveland, Colorado, until 1956 when I went back to Washington in the Interior Department at the request of Fred Seaton.



SOAPES: Now did you at any time during this period participate in politics?

CHILSON: Yes. I became active in politics immediately after I got out of school in the way of participating in precinct caucuses, county assemblies, and so on and so forth. I ran for district attorney of the 8th Judicial District in Colorado, which was a district composed of four counties in northeastern Colorado. I was elected in 1940, was re-elected in 1944 and served until 1948. That was the only elective office. I had held some public offices such as city attorney of Loveland, town attorney of Estes Park, but nothing of an elective nature. Although during this period of time I did participate actively in Republican politics and was generally known to be a Republican and active worker in the party.

SOAPES: Did you hold jobs like county committeeman?

CHILSON: No, I did not.

SOAPES: I believe also during this time you did some work in the conservation field with the Big Thompson project?

CHILSON: Yes. I was trying to get the date. I took an interest in the Colorado Big Thompson project from the time of its proposal in the 1930s. I served as a director of the district for a period of time, and I've forgotten the dates. I served about, oh, 1951 to 1955. Also during that period of time I was one of the leaders in organizing and operating the first soil conservation district in northern Colorado known as the Big Thompson Soil Conservation District. I did a good deal of legal work in the water field and, as a result, was interested particularly in water conservation.

SOAPES: What was it that drew you into this type of work?

CHILSON: Well the water work and my participation as a lawyer in that field was dictated by my clients. If I hadn't had any clients who had water business, I wouldn't have had the water practice. So that's the answer to that. But it's soon apparent



to anyone living in that kind of an intensified, agricultural area that conservation is most important in all features. The water, elimination of noxious weeds, and crop rotation, the preservation of the soil to keep it from blowing and eroding, contour farming on dry land--of course that's almost necessary on the irrigated land--and that sort of thing makes everybody who's interested in the agriculture of the area become interested in conservation.



SOAPES: Were your clients utility-type interests--producers-- or were they users?

CHILSON: They were both. The irrigation in that part of the state of Colorado was, although not entirely, almost entirely developed by mutual ditch and reservoir companies, a group of farmers that gather and form a non-profit corporation to build a ditch. And so they go to the stream, they build a dam, they build a ditch, take the water, apply it to their lands, and by so doing under Colorado's water law, they acquired what's known as a water right. And the rights are recognized by priority appropriation--first in time, first in line. And so my clients

were largely either individual farmers who had a particular individual water problem or mutual ditch and reservoir companies who had problems in the operation of their systems.

SOAPES: Did you have much contact with the federal government in the '40s in this work?

CHILSON: Only through the Bureau of Reclamation. And because this was a very large and at that time, quite a novel project, it received a lot of publicity and a lot of attention and a lot of interest. It involved the building of a tunnel under the Continental Divide and bringing water from one Continental Divide to the other. And so, because of that and because the use of the water that was brought to the eastern slope from the western slope by the Colorado Big Thompson project was governed by water contracts with the federal government, specifically the Bureau of Reclamation. Of course, we did have a lot of contact with that branch of the federal government and later with the power branch of the Department of the Interior because of a certain policies that Secretary [Harold] Ickes had adopted with respect to the use of the power generated by the project.



SOAPES: What was the general feeling in this part of the country towards the reclamation and conservation policies of the Truman administration? Were they popular, unpopular?

CHILSON: Well, by the time Mr. Truman became President, I don't think the Truman administration had any particular impact upon our water resources. I don't recall that there were any particular policies that created any great problems in the state of Colorado. Of course, mining, when the Korean War was over, took a tumble, but our mining interests here, the large mines that we had in Colorado were largely gold, silver, lead, and zinc. And they had been in the doldrums for many, many years. And so I can't recall that the Truman administration had any particular impact in the natural resource area in Colorado.

SOAPES: One of the historians who's written on this subject-- on both the Truman and Eisenhower period--has mentioned that the 1952 election for the West was really a protest vote against further federal land acquisition and bureaucratic dictatorship from Washington. Was that a theme that politicians talked about frequently out here in, say, 1950, 1952?



CHILSON: Well, of course, time dims your memory, but my recollection of that period of time, at the time that President Eisenhower was elected and he began to develop his policy or policies toward the development of natural resources, he was confronted with the fact that over a long period of time there had developed the theory and feeling under previous secretary of the interior administrations that you had to conserve the natural resources so that you'd have them there a hundred years from now to take care of the people and so on a hundred years from now. President Eisenhower felt for a number of reasons--and I can't speak for him entirely and, again, memory dims your recall--but it soon became apparent that the Pacific Northwest had a terrific power problem. They had brown outs. They had no fossil fuels. The closest supply of oil and gas was Canada, and the Canadians were not too favorable about the exportation. And the Pacific Northwest desperately needed power. And so they had to look to water power which was their only source of power generation that they had in the area. And, of course, that developed then the "giveaway" attacks upon Mr. [Douglas] McKay, who was the Secretary of the Interior, over



whether or not these dam sites that were available up there should be developed. President Eisenhower, during this period of time, if I read the record accurately, came to the conclusion that you couldn't tie up all the natural resources of this country because it might be needed a hundred years from now. That there should be development, but that there should be a multiple purpose use of development. You should never develop a natural resource for one purpose if in the course of developing it you could use it for two or three purposes. For example, a reservoir might be used to store water for hydro-electric power for municipal use, water use, for irrigation but also it could be used for recreation. So the President, as I say if I understand correctly, said now there is such a demand for all of these things that we can't look to any one segment of government to do the job. We can't look to the federal government to do it because the federal government can't do it by itself. You can't look to the states to do it alone nor to municipalities or any other agencies. That this has got to be a partnership of local, state and national government, and the development has got to be done with conservation in mind so that you don't exploit a resource for one purpose and leave it completely



useless for other purposes which could have been accomplished parallel with the principal development. And, of course, that was contrary to the feeling that existed at that time among a large number of the populace that had grown up under the withdrawal from development of public lands, power sites and so forth and so on that had occurred under previous administrations. And as a result, very severe criticism was leveled against the President and Mr. McKay, who was Secretary of the Interior, because of the attempt to change direction of the bureaucracy and the people, so that they could do what they needed to do. And that's about the best that I can express it in the resource field.

SOAPES: From your recollection, who were the people who were most vocal in their criticism of McKay?

CHILSON: Well, I would not attempt to name individuals; I'll name groups.

SOAPES: Fine.

CHILSON: They were grouped together at that time and were commonly called the conservationists. Today they probably



would be called environmentalists. Nevertheless, it is somewhat of the same type of thinking that lead to the formation of the conservation groups--the Sierra Club was active and very active in opposing all reclamation. I shouldn't say all reclamation because I don't know about all reclamation, but opposing many projects that I know of for reclamation. The fish and wildlife organizations didn't like the idea of the dams in the Pacific Northwest because they were afraid that it was going to make the salmon extinct in certain rivers and so on. You had the same groups at that time who believed that even though there were resources available in public lands or on public lands that were very useful that, nevertheless, as between goals--the goal of developing them for the public use and the goal of preserving them for future generations. For example, you should not mine because it destroys the beauty of the scenery that should be maintained as wilderness. Eventually, as you know, the wilderness concept was adopted in a modified form by Congress and we do have wilderness areas, and rightfully so. We have certain areas in certain rivers put away so we do have a preservation of some things in their



natural state or as near a natural state as it's possible to do. So it's the same contest that's going on today and probably the same contest that will be going on a hundred years from now.

SOAPES: Can I make a generalization from what you've said that the debate between the Eisenhower administration and its critics was between one group that said let's preserve everything as is, or most everything as is, versus the administration's argument--let's preserve and use.

CHILSON: Yes. It all boils down really to that. Except that perhaps just as important was the view that eventually prevailed, and which is the more moderate view, which was this multi-purpose use. Now President Eisenhower was very much of the opinion that neither of the extreme views were the correct views. For example, this just comes to mind and how much the record will reflect it I'm not sure because I'm speaking from memory, but for years they had pending in the Congress what they called the Coordination Acts. The fish and wildlife devotees throughout the country and the people interested in recreation and the bureaus within the government who were



interested in fish and wildlife and recreation as well as development, we had them all in the Department of the Interior. In other words it was a big squalling family. The fish and wildlife were not interested in developing a reclamation project, they were interested in preserving the fish and wildlife of the area. So what the Bureau of Reclamation, even though they were in the same Department of the Interior, they were certainly not friends. So you had all this division of opinion thrust upon you all the time from every side. Well, the President made it very clear that he did not believe in the extremists on either side of this but that there should be an opportunity given before a project was built to see what other uses beside the prime use and what other purposes could be accomplished, and that that should be done before the project got so far that it was frozen. And a good example of that, of course, is the building of a Bureau of Reclamation reservoir. The primary purpose is to store water for use or the development of hydroelectric power. But the fish and wildlife people and the recreation people were always asking for the opportunity to be heard during the planning period. The Bureau of Reclamation were not interested in going to a lot of expense through the



study of this and that and the other thing because they had one job, you see--build the reservoir and get the water. So they had these Coordination Acts pending in Congress over quite a long period of time but could never move them. President Eisenhower told Secretary Seaton that there ought to be some way that these people could be heard during the planning period and so Secretary Seaton then talked to me about it and he said, "Now, I'm going to shove off on you the job of trying to get these Coordination Acts passed," or the pending legislation. And without going into long detail, we eventually consolidated enough support within the administration--the Bureau of the Budget, and Defense, Agriculture, and everybody else that's interested--we developed enough support that we were finally able to go before the committee, I think Congressman [John D.] Dingell was the chairman of the committee, and tell him that with the President's blessing we were here to support the Coordination Acts. And he said, "Well, I think the world has come to an end," because he was delighted, this was one of his--and they did pass. And since that time the recreation people, the fish and wildlife people, and the other interested agencies



have an opportunity to be heard about their desires and what they think they could accomplish with this project in addition to the prime purpose of the project of reclaiming water by the Bureau of Reclamation reservoir. That's, I think, a very good example of the right way and, at least, what the President thought was the right way that it should be done.

SOAPES: Were there people within the administration who opposed these Coordination Acts?

CHILSON: Not because they were Coordination Acts. Budget usually would oppose anything that would create a problem for them by way of finances and their setting up their budget within what they believed would be a realistic figure. Now that isn't correct, of course, when I say always, but it is an important factor. And unless they think a program is of very great importance, they may well either oppose it or may not openly oppose it but be very lukewarm toward it. And when we get to helium, I can tell you about what happened there, which is a good example of the interactions that you have within the administration itself. When I say within the administration,



I don't mean within the White House corps and I don't mean within the Cabinet members or the policy members of the administration that are appointed by the President. I'm talking about the old-line bureaus and the agencies who are run by career people and who formulate to a large extent the objects and purposes of that particular agency or bureau. So consequently they point out what effect this is going to have, we'll say, on the Commerce Department and the Secretary of Commerce might well express himself to his President, "Well this might on the face of it look like a great thing, but here's what my people tell me is going to result in our area of operation. Now they're not concerned with our area of operation, but I am, and I think you ought to know as President that before you endorse this program, what it might do." So that's the way it worked during the time that I was there. And I assume--



[Interruption]

SOAPES: Did you know Douglas McKay personally?

CHILSON: Well, I met him, but that's about all. I didn't know him before I went to Washington, met him on either one or two occasions back there, but I had no acquaintance with him.

SOAPES: Now did you participate in the '52 campaign in any capacity?

CHILSON: Well only as I had always participated as a Republican. As I remember, I was a delegate to our county convention, and delegate to the state convention. As a matter of fact, if I remember correctly, in 1952 I gave the keynote speech at the Republican state convention. But beyond that, no. Even though President Eisenhower had a headquarters at the Brown Palace Hotel--you probably know that.



SOAPES: Yes.

CHILSON: I was not among the group that was prominent enough to have been asked to come down and meet him and so on and so forth. I was a country lawyer from up north and I liked to participate in politics, thought it was everybody's duty to do so.

SOAPES: Did you know Dan Thornton?

CHILSON: Yes, quite well. As a matter of fact, Judge [Jean S.] Breitenstein of the circuit court of appeals, 10th Circuit Court of Appeals, was attorney for the Colorado Water Conservation Board that handles interstate water matters for the state of Colorado. And at the time Judge Breitenstein went on the bench Thornton had to get a replacement and there was very bitter dissension between the east slope and the west slope. You may have heard of it--about the diversion of water from--

SOAPES: I'm not familiar with it.

CHILSON: Well it all boils down, they had most of the water and we had most of the people, and so the increasing demand for water on this side and the diversions, trans-mountain diversions from the Colorado River on the west slope for use over here created great dissension. So Governor Thornton was rather in a spot in that he couldn't appoint a lawyer for the Water Conservation Board from Denver, and so he came to see me to see if I'd take it. And I'm sure it was at the recommendation of Judge Breitenstein because we had both been water lawyers



over a period of time and been well acquainted. So I took that job on. And then Governor Thornton, who everybody thought was going to run for the United States Senate in '56, announced that he was not going to run. So I announced my candidacy for the United States Senate. Then he changed his mind and wanted to run. And he'd been two times governor in the state and quite an active Republican, so I told him that he was certainly entitled to run unopposed by me and that if he would make his announcement I'd nominate him and I did. And it was after that that I was approached by Secretary Seaton to go with him in the Interior Department. What effect that little incident had on the selection I don't know and never did. Don't know to this day why Mr. Seaton came up to northern Colorado to get a secretary, but it turned out that way.



SOAPES: Thornton, his personality, how would you describe that?

CHILSON: Well, I don't like the word at all, but lots of charisma. I would use the term flamboyant, but that's too extreme. It was more modified than that. But he was a colorful figure; he made his reputation in raising cattle and he did a

good job of it. He sold two bulls for fifty thousand dollars apiece and had them down in the lobby of the Brown Palace Hotel on show, during the stock show. But quite an able fellow and quite sound and very reliable. And I thought he made an excellent governor.

SOAPES: Turning now to your move to Washington in '56, had you ever met Fred Seaton before? Did you know him?

CHILSON: The first time I met Fred Seaton was when they dedicated a portion of the Colorado Big Thompson project and they had the celebration at Loveland. I knew quite a few of the Bureau people, including Mr. [Wilbur A.] Dexheimer who was a graduate of the, what we then called Colorado Agricultural College at Fort Collins. A Coloradoan, and I've known him and I knew quite a few of the Bureau people. And Senator [Gordon] Allott was going to be there and he was in school when I was, good friend; we both originated in Pueblo. So I knew it was going to be a long, strung-out occasion and so I suggested to Senator Allott that why didn't he come over to my home and take a nap in the afternoon and then we would have some people



in before they went to the steak fry up in the mountains.

"Well," he said, "I can't. I've got the secretary of Interior with me."

And I said, "Well, bring him along."

And so Senator Allott, Secretary Seaton and some of the Bureau of Reclamation people came over to my house before we went on the picnic and steak fry, first time I had met him.

SOAPES: This was 1956?

CHILSON: This was '56. So shortly after that I got either a letter or a telephone call from him asking me if I would come back and talk to him, that he had a job that he'd like for me to do, and I assumed that it was some kind of a speaking campaign for a person until I got back there. So I'd had no contact with him at all.



SOAPES: Now this was the appointment as the assistant secretary for land management?

CHILSON: Yes.

SOAPES: What essentially was your job? What was the scope of your responsibilities in that position?

CHILSON: They divided the Interior Department into groups, and they don't always stay the same. I'm sure every secretary may change them around. At that time, if I can recall, under land management secretaryship fell the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, the Office of Territories (which covered the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, Alaska, and Hawaii). I'm sure there was another one, don't recall it.

SOAPES: We can check that one out.

CHILSON: Quite a wide variation of interests and so forth, and very interesting to someone who had had no previous experience with this type of administration.



SOAPES: What were the principal problems that you had to deal with as you came into the administration?

CHILSON: Well one of the big problems was a room full of paper because the office had been vacant for some time, and this was merely a temporary appointment. If President Eisenhower had not been re-elected, my job would have wound up in January,

which was all right. I knew that and it was all right because I had no intention of staying. This I looked on as a kind of a military service sort of thing and agreed to go for a year, ended up staying two. Glad I did. But I always intended to come back to Colorado and practice law.

Well, not having had any background of experience and Colorado having practically no Indian reservations, one small one way down in the southwest corner of the state, I think probably the problems that made the greatest impact on me were Indian problems, because they've always had problems and still have problems and hopefully they're being solved, but it's a very slow process. And the problems that I dealt with back there were those that were immediately pending and had some urgency. At that time there were some termination programs going on where the trusteeship of the federal government was being terminated and the Indians were no longer under federal trusteeship and they took over their property, operated it themselves theoretically and so on.

We were having a lot of trouble at that time, and I assume they still are up in South Dakota, the Rosebud and the Pine Ridge and so on and so forth. The problem there being how the



Indians could really get the financial rewards out of the land that they owned. And I was no expert, and never did become expert in the problems up there, but generally I gathered that (a large part of it was grazing land) they lease the grazing land to the white cattle growers and the cattle ranchers up there rather than ranching it themselves. Never came to any conclusion on the problem but these were problems that hit me sort of out of the blue, knew nothing about them. But they needed attention, they needed some decision at the policy level. The factual matter, of course, you get from those old-line bureaus. They can get three people in your office in a hurry that probably have seventy-five years of experience dealing with the problems that you are and they can give you the benefit of it, and that's the way the railroad runs and not too bad a system.

There were two Indian problems that finally had what I thought was a good end result. One was the Klamath Indians out in Oregon owned, I think, the largest virgin growth of ponderosa pine in the country, terrific forest. As a tribe, they had had a timber operation going that paid them dividends, so to speak. But they decided that they wanted to terminate



their federal supervision; they voted to do it. But when they voted to do it, they indicated those who would leave their interest in the forest in communal ownership with the other members of the tribe, so they wouldn't have to sell it. And so Congress passed the termination act on the basis that enough of the Indians would want to retain the forest, that they could pay off the other Indians who wanted out, who wanted their money and wanted out of the financial end of the tribe. But after the act was passed and then the vote was taken by the Indians under the act for termination and indicated whether or not they wanted their money, the great majority of them wanted their money. And here they were with the termination act passed, no possible way to get the money to pay off all these people that anybody could see. That was one of the things that fell into my lap. So with the Oregon representatives, Senator [Richard L.] Neuberger, who was quite cooperative in this venture, we with the people in the Indian bureau and with the forest experts and so on and so forth, we finally in Interior worked out a plan that those who wished to retain communal ownership of a portion of the forest as their share without taking it in money, that a certain part of the area



be set aside for them. Then they could operate it as they saw fit. For those who wanted their money out, we proposed that we offer the forest for sale to the timber companies, the large timber companies, under a deal where they would operate it on sustained yield management, where it would never be clear-logged and cut off and the forest destroyed, and, that if we were unable to get a satisfactory bid from the lumber companies, that the federal government would buy it and make it a national forest, throw it in with the national forest system. That doesn't seem like such a big deal now, but at that time, to propose spending millions and millions of dollars of the taxpayers' money to buy up some Indian forests and just make it a part of the national forest, you know, it certainly wasn't too popular within the two houses of Congress to begin with. But it eventually passed and the last I heard, it's worked very satisfactorily. Crown Zellerbach [Corporation], I think, bought the greater portion of it.

SOAPES: On Indian problems in general, --and I speak from ignorance here, I don't know that much about Indian policy-- but was there an articulated approach to the Indian policy of



reducing federal control of Indians or was this something that was sort of taken on a case-by-case basis?

CHILSON: Well I'm not sure about the question you have in your mind. The Indian problem, as we always spoke of it, was related only to about half the Indians in the United States, those were the reservation Indians. And you know the history of how they got on the reservations is because the development of the Indian countries was such it just came about. Right or wrong, good or bad is now academic because the fact remains that you have the Navahos out on the Navaho reservation; you have the Hopis on the Hopi reservation; you've got the Sioux up in South Dakota; and you've got a condition and not a theory. Now I'm not expert enough to know why we have an Indian problem and what I learned while I was back there didn't give me any explanation. And I think it's largely because, or at least to some extent we don't understand how they think.

For example, the Palm Springs Indians, out in Palm Springs, California, they owned the land around the area of the town of Palm Springs, still do. And they had a large tract of land, I think it was a hundred and sixty acres, that adjoined the



main downtown area of Palm Springs, and nothing on it but a bunch of shacks. The property was producing practically nothing. I'm not sure who was responsible, but someone, probably in the Indian bureau--who the credit goes to I'm not sure--got a number of people with a lot of know-how, people who had great business experience, Floyd Odum for example who was head of Atlas Corporation--they got this committee to get together to see what could be done about developing this downtown area of Palm Springs which is owned by the Indians. The value of the lands they had there was estimated to be of a value of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to every man, woman and child of that tribe and here they were more or less poverty stricken. No income, nothing. This committee worked out a plan where they got, I think it was Magnin's and Bullock's in Los Angeles, big department stores, and a bunch of others, and they agreed on a development. The money would all be put up by the people going to make the development and it would produce the Indians a very, very sizable income. And they put in a lot of work and time and so on as you can understand. And they came up with this plan;



presented it to the Indians; the leaders said this was great, go ahead. So the Interior Department went to Congress, they had to get an act of Congress so they could make a long enough lease that they could build these buildings and so on and so forth. Well the congressional committee that had this in charge said all right. The chairman said, "We're going out to California to have some hearings; we'll stop in Palm Springs, stay overnight, and have the hearing the next day and we'll then go on into Los Angeles, take care of our other business." And so they did. They went in there, everything was all right. The night before the meeting the Indian chiefs came in and assured the committee this is what they wanted, it was great and so on and so forth. The next morning they called the committee together, called the chiefs in to give their testimony, the chiefs said they wanted no part of it. Went down the drain.

Now why that would happen? But this has happened, this happened enough times with various congressional committees that they had difficulty in accomplishing what they ought to accomplish. Senator [Arthur] Watkins from Utah, a Mormon, was the only one who I know of who insisted on being on the Indian Affairs Committee of the Senate, and that was because of his



Mormon background, their relationship with the Indians, he thought he was paying off a debt which the Mormons owed the Indians. Well, they eventually got a plan approved and adopted and they did develop the area, or at least a part of that area out at Palm Springs, and I'm sure the Indians are reaping great benefits of it, but it's kind of a frustrating sort of life.

SOAPES: It's a situation where the government couldn't really be sure they had an agreement--

CHILSON: That's right. Just like the Klamaths, you know, who assured Congress that a large majority of the Indians didn't want money, they'd take their share in as a part of the forest and then turn right around and do the contrary. But, anyhow, the country has the obligation to tough it out and to do what they can to try and solve what everybody calls the Indian problem which is not a problem--it's a bunch of separate problems that various Indians and Indian tribes have. And, well anyway, it was an interesting experience.

[Interruption]



SOAPES: When was it that you moved up from assistant secretary to under secretary?

CHILSON: In March, 1957. President Eisenhower appointed me under secretary, and I was confirmed very shortly after the nomination.

SOAPES: And as I understand from talking with you there was a Helium Policy Working Group that was put together. How did that group come about?

CHILSON: Well I can't tell you. I'll give you this short background. As I recollect, there were some privately owned helium extraction plants that had been constructed, and this, I think, was during the first World War when they wanted the helium for the use of blimps. Well, after the war there was no particular demand for helium and eventually the private plants went out of production and the Interior Department, under the branch of the Bureau of Mines, had a helium--I suppose that's the helium activity group that they speak of. Anyway, the Department of the Interior became the only producer of helium in this country and although the uses were small,



nevertheless they did have a demand and they did produce a lot of helium, as illustrated by the fact that the Cliff Side gas field down there at Amarillo was exhausted, and so it indicated that there was quite a bit of helium used, but not to any great excess. Now, if you want me to relate how we got into this helium development deal?

SOAPES: Yes.

CHILSON: The Bureau of Mines had been trying to create interest some place within the government to not let this, what they believed was a very valuable natural resource--helium, go to waste because helium is found as, maybe two percent or three percent element of the total quantity of gas as it flows to the fuel market.

SOAPES: Right. Natural gas.

CHILSON: Natural gas. But nobody took any particular interest in the Bureau of Mines' concerns about trying to do something about conserving helium. However, the helium uses began to expand. They found during the second World War what they could



do with the use of helium as a shield in welding flammable materials. They got into the missile and rocket area and they found that for various reasons helium solved problems for them. The atomic reactors, they found that helium did something for them, that it was readily available, the helium was; it would do a job cheaper and better than anything else, the idea being the molecule is so small that it can be used as a leak detectant in the atomic reactors. The molecule is so small that it will discover a leak so small that it would leak only a quart of air in what, twenty years, two thousand years? I mean unbelievable. All right. Now the Bureau of Mines knew this, but nobody else (you know, there was no pressure, there was no emergency) thought about it. I was sitting at my desk one day and I got a telephone call, don't remember from whom, and they were going to have to close down a plant, as I remember down in Kentucky, that was manufacturing electric refrigerators, and they were going to throw several hundred people out of work because the Department of the Interior wouldn't furnish them with helium and that helium was a necessary ingredient of their manufacturing process. Well Secretary Seaton was away and it



didn't take much imagination to know what the President would think about throwing several hundred people out of work and taking time. So I got ahold of the Bureau of Mines and I talked to Dr. Seibel who was in charge of the helium activity and had been for a long--

SOAPES: How is his name spelled, sir?

CHILSON: S-e-i-b-e-l. Well we scurried around and found a supply of helium and solved that temporary emergency, but at the same time I asked Dr. Seibel to give me a complete briefing on this whole helium picture, because if it was that important that if we couldn't supply somebody, it would throw people out of work, and we were the only suppliers of helium in the country we were in a kind of touchy situation. I can proceed to tell you on the tape the progress of this, or I can give you a copy of the address I made down at the helium centennial which covers the matter in a more logical way than I could probably do it by giving it orally. So if you'd like to read this and then see if you have any questions about it that you think would supplement this, that might be the most expeditious way of handling it.



[Interruption]

SOAPES: There were several recommendations and alternatives for handling the helium problem that came along: plant construction, a pipeline system, private industry selling it to the government. What were the major considerations in determining which alternative would be utilized?

CHILSON: Well really you only had three alternatives you see. One was to go out and buy up the gas. Just couldn't buy the helium--

SOAPES: You had to buy all of it.

CHILSON: --you had to buy all the gas. Well if you bought all the gas within a 250 mile radius of Amarillo, Texas, you see, it just wasn't feasible. The second alternative you had is the one that we used, of getting the right to build extraction plants on the pipeline. And as the fuel went to market, you would take out the helium. The third, I've forgotten just how I phrased it, but it's in here. Oh yes, the third was just to pass legislation prohibiting the marketing of helium-bearing gas before the helium was extracted. But that would be, well, to



put it very mildly, just wouldn't be feasible. Because to tell a pipeline company that's taking a large part of the fuel for the use of the Chicago industrial area and tell them that they had to take all the helium out of it before they sent it on, there was no general market for helium, or very little-- the biggest market was government and, well, just not feasible. So the only feasible way was for the government to build or cause to be built by someone, extraction plants on the major pipelines and take the helium out as it was produced and then stick it away in the Cliff Side gas field which had been exhausted, and then draw it out as you needed it. But, of course, even that program, well I think we estimated somewhere, five hundred million to eight hundred million dollars it would cost, because before you could sell the helium, you were taking helium out at a much greater rate than there was a market for. And so the conservation effort would have to pay for the helium and then get its money back X number of years from now.



SOAPES: Once the government began to show this strong interest in helium conservation, did private industry then begin to start showing more interest?

CHILSON: Not very much. As a matter of fact, when we discussed this within the administration--I'm talking now about discussing it with representatives of Commerce and Defense, the AEC and the Bureau of the Budget and Gordon Gray, the Office of Defense Mobilization, they were unanimous that no private industry would ever build a plant. And that was pretty well evidenced by the fact that when this shortage showed up, you know that I talked about, we immediately got busy to close that gap. And we made a deal with the Colorado Interstate Gas Company to build an extraction plant on its pipeline that ran near Keyes, Oklahoma. The government built it, and with that additional volume we got out of immediate danger. We had enough production with the old production plus this new plant, so we were on pretty solid ground by that time. But no one at that time showed any interest in building the plant. Colorado Interstate Gas Company wanted no part of building the helium plant. We just all assumed, or perhaps I better say that in talking about it we all came to the conclusion we'd get no private plants built. And, of course, we were wrong, and there were a lot of private plants built. The President, after the presentation at the



Cabinet meeting of this problem, he said, "We just waited fifteen years too long. Now get on with the job and if private industry won't do it, we'll do it ourselves." There wasn't any question about it. I know I was surprised that private industry built as many plants as they did.

SOAPES: It was a question of it wasn't an economically profitable situation, there wasn't enough need for it?

CHILSON: Well the only market was the government, you see. Well, let me put it this way. I think everybody pretty well assumed that the only market of any consequence would be the federal government, to put in this conservation pool. I'm not too sure it turned out that way, although I have not kept close enough track of what's happened since. But I think that there were a number of markets developed where the product was sold direct by the private plants and then they had the back-up course if they couldn't sell it on the market that they had the government to fall back on. Now I never knew exactly why it appeared that private industry wouldn't have any interest, but they hadn't shown any to date and here the government was



the only producer, and then these private companies had the gas with the helium in it and, of course, if it didn't do anything else, it created an awful lot of litigation.

SOAPES: Oh?

CHILSON: They eventually began to litigate as to who was to receive what for the helium. Did the landowner own the helium and was he entitled to a percentage of what they got for the sale of the helium? Or was it the one who took the lease? Or was it the fellow who drilled the well? Or was it the company that transported the gas? Who got the money for it? And they're still litigating about it. I got a chuckle out of this. As I told you, Judge Breitenstein was a good friend of mine and he had to write the opinion in some of these cases, helium cases.

SOAPES: For the record on the tape, he's showing me a list of cases, it's about fifty some-odd as of January, 1971.



CHILSON: With a note on it--

SOAPES: "To the chap who caused it all, with the compliments of the author." [Laughter]

Well is there anything else about this helium conserva-

tion program that we haven't touched on that you can recall that would be of interest?

CHILSON: No, other than what I have detailed in my speech at Amarillo. That should pretty well cover it, I think. Now if you do wish, the actual bills that were introduced into Congress, I think you'd have no difficulty getting those. Now I notice I have in my file some of the bills that were introduced, but I'm not sure of which one eventually passed. So consequently--

SOAPES: We would have the material on the bill that eventually got to the President's desk in our bill file--

CHILSON: Yes, yes. Yes, you'd have that, yes.

SOAPES: --with the various departmental recommendations. We would not, of course, have the others. Our files of government documents are skimpy.

CHILSON: Well you asked me back along the way about the operations within an administration. I might just add this. The group that I worked with within the administration in devising the program in addition of course to the Bureau of



Mines and whatnot, but outside of Interior as I told you were Commerce, Defense Department, Atomic Energy Commission, Budget, and the Office of Defense Mobilization. Well, in presenting our proposal to this committee for their consideration, it soon became clear that you had to take into consideration that these various departments had their own problems. Now the Defense Department said, "No, it would be a mistake, this helium program," yet they were the biggest user in helium. They used it in their defense industry and, as I say, a lot of their programs.

"Well what are you going to do if your supply of helium is exhausted, you don't have any more helium available to you?"

"Well, we can use other things, such as argon," I think--

SOAPES: Right, argon's an inert gas.

CHILSON: Yes, well they had substitutes.

"Well do you have it in sufficient supply?"

"Well we think we can get it."

"How much is it going to cost you?"

"Well, within reason." And so on.

They had had no difficulties; they had gotten all the



helium they wanted and they got it at a very cheap price, they didn't want a change, and you could understand that. If you were running their business, why you wouldn't want a change just because it appears that someday you might run out of it. You can always find something else. Commerce had, I forget now what their objections to it were, but I think theirs was likely the total cost it was going to be to the program.

SOAPES: Was this coming from Neil McElroy; was he defense at that time?

CHILSON: No, this group did not include the secretaries, an assistant secretary, that level. And they were talking, of course, to their bureau people, their career service people and the people that operated their programs. Atomic Energy Commission felt a good deal like Defense and so on. And, of course, the Bureau of the Budget was horrified at the total cost of this program, you know, as it would be over a long period of years, everybody assuming that private industry would not want to come into the picture. And even if they did come into the picture, what they didn't sell on the open market,



the government would have to buy from the individual plants anyhow; so you might, same as producing. So all of these different people and agencies have their own problems, they would, more or less, come first and foremost. And it's kind of interesting to see how the government works because when the time came that there was an ultimate decision to be made as to whether we were going to continue to let this wastage take place or whether we were going to enter on a conservation program, President Eisenhower, under his theory of operations, he had heard, you know, the comments of each of these groups at Cabinet meetings. Secretary of Commerce and Secretary of Defense and whatnot and, but he never asked for a vote on anything. He'd ask for comments and so on, but he took the responsibility for the ultimate decision. That's the way it worked in this case. Although Budget didn't support it and Commerce didn't support it and Defense didn't support it-- nevertheless the President having to take the overall view of what's good for the--

SOAPES: The whole, yes.



CHILSON: --everything, he made the decision. And I thought at the time, and I have read comments by so many people since to the same effect, that government sometimes can be so slow in coming to a decision and in other instances arriving at it so quickly that you just make your head swim. And what that means I don't know, but it's the way government works. Sometimes, you know, just takes forever to accomplish anything, and, in the case of helium, once we got the word from President Eisenhower, why, away it went.

SOAPES: One general question I'd like to pose about the whole area in which the Department of Interior was concerned--I've seen comments by historians, journalists; I've seen a little documentary evidence suggesting the same thing, that Eisenhower's main concerns when he was in office were foreign policy, defense policy, that sort of thing, and that other issues, the purely domestic issues, had a second level of importance to him. Did you have that feeling when you were in the Department of the Interior?



CHILSON: No. Entirely to the contrary. Anybody in a position like President of the United States, or like the president of

a big corporation, the president of a school system, whatever it is, that has the ultimate decision-making power and he's got the responsibility to make it has priorities of matters that are important. If you're about to be engaged in an outbreak of a war, why of course you're not particularly interested in how much helium you're going to conserve at the minute you're making those decisions. But nevertheless he still knows.

Now the reason I say what I did, President Eisenhower, at least during the period of time that I was there, insisted that each of his Cabinet members furnish to him once a week on one page, letter-size page, things of importance that had happened in the past week in his department that the President should know about. Now that's one way he kept himself informed, and if it was overlooked, my information is that the secretary who overlooked it was made to understand in no uncertain terms that this was not something to be done at their convenience, but was to be done and continued to be done til he wanted it stopped.



SOAPES: So you felt that when problems came to the attention of the President from the Department of the Interior that they

got an equal shake with the Department of Defense, the State Department, the same thing in terms of appropriations and that sort of thing, in terms of the priorities of the administration.

CHILSON: Yes. I think there's no doubt about it. I think there's no doubt about it.

[Interruption]

SOAPES: You worked very closely with Fred Seaton.

CHILSON: Yes.

SOAPES: What can you tell me about the man in terms of personality, his working habits, what type of person he was to work with?

CHILSON: Well it's rather hard to capsulize but I'll give it a try. Of course, he was a newspaperman to begin with, so he had a great curiosity about what was going on in the world. Due to his background, he had a great understanding of politics, what motivates people, what is interesting to the public, what is interesting to the news media, and so forth. He had a background in which I had not had an opportunity to have brushed



elbows with, so to speak. He had a great intellect, very quick mind, a great power of decision, and a great power of accomplishment. Of course, I considered him, by the time I got through with my two years back there, as one of my very close friends and probably one of the most, well undoubtedly a man who gave me during the two years of my association with him an outlook on a lot of things, the outlook of people who are not involved in the legal profession with which I had been for so long a period of time so closely associated. And consequently it was a very enriching experience. What more to say about him--he was honest and forthright and determined, and when the chips were down he could stand fast in the face of great opposition, great criticism and so on. And his ability to accomplish, I think, is well indicated by the fact that when Senator McKay left as Secretary of the Interior the newspapers were full of "give away, give away" criticism day after day of the Department of the Interior and so on, generated largely in part by these groups that I referred to as conservation groups and so on and so forth. And I think it's fair to say that after he finished his term as Secretary of the Interior



that most of the organizations, conservation organizations, recognized him as fair, that he was in fact a conservationist even though he didn't agree with them in all respects, but they respected him and they respected his ideas and attitudes.

SOAPES: You would say he was a better politician, in the best sense of that term, than McKay had been.

CHILSON: Well, yes. I don't know too much about Senator McKay's background. But here you had a man who'd devoted, if not all of his life to politics because he was a successful publisher, he was a successful operator of radio stations and so on and very successful in business. Nevertheless, he was one of that small group that started the Young Republicans way back when. And he had been in politics up to his neck, I don't know how early, at least since that time. I know it goes back that far because Senator Allott and Senator Seaton were in that group that formed the Young Republican organization.



SOAPES: So Fred Seaton was a very competent man who understood his job and how to get it done.

CHILSON: He knew how to get things done.

SOAPES: Who did you have most contact with at the White House when you were there, or did you communicate directly with the White House much?

CHILSON: No, I didn't, because the contacts with the White House, whenever Secretary Seaton was not away, all the contacts were with Secretary Seaton. My greatest contact with the White House was in Secretary Seaton's absences I attended the Cabinet meetings in his place. The President was somewhat different than many presidents. He insisted on attendance at Cabinet meetings and they were held regularly and he expected them to be on time, which was 7:30 as I remember, 7:30 or 8:00, I don't know. But Secretary Seaton, you know, early in '57 had a disc operation; he was in the hospital for quite some weeks, and during that period of time, of course, I had the contacts that he would have had with the White House and I attended Cabinet meetings. We also had Hawaiian and Alaskan statehood bills, and we were carrying the ball on that so to speak because they were in the Department of the Interior as territories. As



a result of that and some other things, Secretary Seaton was gone from Washington, I wouldn't say a good deal of the time, but he was absent frequently during Cabinet meetings. And, as a result, I attended Cabinet meetings in his absence. I had more contact with the White House that way perhaps than any other.

SOAPES: From your attendance at Cabinet meetings--and I realize you didn't attend all of them, that you attended them in the stead of Secretary Seaton--what did you feel was the purpose of the Cabinet meeting? Why did Eisenhower have the Cabinet meeting so often? What did he do there that he couldn't have done without the Cabinet meeting?

CHILSON: Well my impression was he probably principally wanted to accomplish three things. First he wanted to accomplish, I think, an opportunity to express his feelings about certain matters to a group of people who he felt he could trust and whose opinion he valued. Secondly I think he did it to give his Cabinet officers--you see from his military I think he believed a lot in staff and I think that he felt that the Cabinet was



his staff, so to speak, and that if staff had something on their minds that they thought bore discussion that he wanted to give them a time and a place where they were grouped together to be heard. And the way he accomplished this was that any Cabinet officer that wanted to discuss anything at Cabinet meeting would request that it be put on the agenda by the--

SOAPES: By the Cabinet Secretariat?

CHILSON: Yes. What was his name?

SOAPES: Max Rabb.

CHILSON: Yes, Max Rabb. Gosh, your memory sure gets away with you. Yes. And if there was room for it and if the President consented, then they'd put it on there and they would have a discussion. Thirdly, I think he wanted it as an opportunity to find out what was going on in his government. It's a big government and things are going on all the time that the President can't possibly know about and even the White House staff can't know about. In other words, if some G-5 Interior



employee up in Alaska got in trouble up at Point Barrow, it might be a long time for the President to ever find out about it, but some newspaper reporter at his next press conference might say to him, "Mr. President, how about Joe Doakes up at Point Barrow? I understand he got in trouble." And the President's got to say, "Well, never heard of it." Now, of course, you can't keep track of everything, but it's just surprising what you can keep in mind.

SOAPES: We've talked at great length and about a number of things. Is there anything else that comes to your mind that you would particularly like to get into this interview that we haven't mentioned from your experiences in Washington? Or, perhaps a good way to close it might be a brief comment on your part of Eisenhower's interest in Department of Interior matters. I know that we've talked about the problem of priorities, of Interior versus other departments. Was Eisenhower someone who was well briefed in advance on his own about Department of Interior matters or was this something that he had to be educated on?



CHILSON: Well, probably both and he probably had to be educated on most of it because there wouldn't be any other way that he could get it. But the President had a great background that I think historians will eventually recognize, although current ones don't seem to. For example, on the Alaskan statehood bill, he just put his foot down and said, "We are not going to have Alaska as a state unless the federal government retains control of the northern portion." Now nobody else came up with that. This came up to him from his own experience in the military, I'm satisfied, when they conceived the idea that the Russians might invade this country or Canada through Alaska and that therefore the federal government should be in a position that it could treat that area up there as a war zone anytime that it desired, and that therefore it shouldn't relinquish security control and so on. And that's the way the bill was finally written and that's the way the bill was passed. Now that came from him, no one else. To a lesser extent, he would discuss the Hawaiian statehood bill and the details of the bill, although not so much. I don't know what else I can say about that. I can add one personal incident that occurred.



I'd had no experience in the mining business, and Congress was considering a domestic mining bill, something to keep a nucleus of domestic mining so that in case of emergency we wouldn't be out of luck because we couldn't get the metals from foreign countries. Now somewhere along the way in his career he had picked up the price relationship as between lead, zinc, and copper. And so he sent word one day that he wanted to see Fred and Fred was not there so I went over to see him with respect to this. I don't know how long it had been that he had obtained that formula--there's a relationship, I don't mean the exact same dollars but if you got so much for lead you should get X percent for zinc and so on.

Fred told me on many occasions that this happened quite frequently in his dealings with the President. The President would come up with information, you wouldn't have any idea how he got it, but it was quite apparent that he had gotten it in his broad education during his years of military service.

Of course, I suppose when in trying to appraise a person with whom you have an association, such as serving in the President's administration, that you couldn't be very objective



about it, that's probably true of myself--I can't be very objective about it. But I am satisfied that I know enough about how he conducted his administration and that his basic and fundamental ideals and standards were such that history will eventually recognize that he was a very good man and a very good President.

SOAPES: Thank you very much, sir.

