

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable L. Eugene “Snuffy” Smith (R)

66th District

Indiana and Jefferson Counties

1963-1986

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY: Heidi Mays, House Archivist
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Heidi Mays (HM): Good afternoon. I'm here with [L. Eugene] Snuffy Smith who represented the 66th District in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from Jefferson County. He was first elected in a Special Election, February 19, 1963, and he retired November 1986. How are you today?

The Honorable L. Eugene Smith (LES): You got it all right. (*laugh*)

HM: Great. Thank you. Can you first tell me how you came about having the name "Snuffy?"

LES: Yeah, that's a pretty long story. (*laugh*) I was in a Boy Scout troop and there used to be a comic strip called *Barney Google* and one Sunday they changed the script and they introduced this new character called, "Snuffy Smith." He was a bootlegger from Kentucky and he was a rambunctious character. And our Scout troop met on Monday night. And I went to the Scout meeting and I remember the guy that did it. I walked in and he said, "Here comes Snuffy Smith!" And that name caught on and it really stuck; it never left me. And one of the things that was interesting about that, the first time I met Bill Scranton [Pennsylvania Governor, 1963-1967] I had been thinking about – in fact, people at home had told me, "You better drop that "Snuffy" Smith, you know. That's not too good for a State Representative." So, the first time I met Bill Scranton he said, "Hi, Snuffy." So, I decided it was all right. (*laugh*)

HM: What kind of influence did your family have on you in your early life?

LES: A good influence. My mother was a homemaker and my father worked through the Depression. We had a very good home life and a lot of good background. A lot of good things happened to me.

HM: Did you come from a political family?

LES: No, no. I ran for Mayor of Punxsutawney and was elected and when our State Representative died, a couple people said to me, “You know, you ought to fill that spot.” And I started on my way. At that time, County Chairman were pretty important. So, I guess I had the blessings of the County Chairman, although he wasn’t too happy with me. But, we had a County Convention that went into about two o’clock in the morning. There were 12 votes. and I finally ended up with the nomination.

HM: Well, why did you run for Mayor of Punxsutawney?

LES: There were some things going on that we didn’t care too much about. And I was in business then and I was interested in the community and the future of the town.

HM: And the business you were in was the tire business?

LES: Yes.

HM: And how long had you been with the tire business?

LES: Well, I was in the tire business before the war [World War II] in a very minor way, but it was something that I picked up after I came out of the service.

HM: So, you had served in the 306th Bomb Group during World War II [1939-1945]?

LES: Right.

HM: How did those war time experiences prepare you for public service?

LES: I don't know that that war time experience had any influence on my decision to get into politics. I seem to get a little emotional when I think about that, so I think maybe we'll just pass on that.

HM: Okay. What other types of jobs or experiences did you have prior to coming to the House?

LES: I was in business and I worked hard at it. In fact, I've worked hard at everything I've ever done.

HM: Okay. Were you in farming at all? Farmer aid?

LES: Well, I had some beef cattle one time and that was kind of a relaxation when you'd go home from Harrisburg, if you could go out and mow hay or bail hay. That was always a time of relaxation. One day it was a real hot day, and I was making hay up on the hill and I looked down and the cattle were all laying down just chewing their cud and I thought, "They've got it better than I do." So, I sold my cows. (*laugh*)

HM: Why did you decide to become a Republican?

LES: I was born a Republican.

HM: So, your family has always been Republican.

LES: Yes.

HM: Okay. And the District? Is that a Republican District would you say?

LES: Yes, I think it is. When I was first elected, each county had a Representative and when the one-man-one-vote came into existence, the reapportionments all took place. And that was quite a hassle. A couple of them were turned over.

HM: Was that a problem for you?

LES: A little bit.

HM: Okay. How did your campaigns differ? How were they different; from the Mayoral campaign to running for the House for the first time?

LES: Well, it was quite a change when you start looking at the whole county. There were other communities. One, the county seat, was smaller than Punxsutawney and those people had an idea that the Representative ought to come from the county seat. So, it was a little more difficult and it was a lot of work.

HM: Did campaigning change over time?

LES: Oh yeah. It sure has.

HM: Did it become easier or harder?

LES: At that time there weren't any television ads. A little bit of radio that wasn't too expensive, but money was scarce. It was different.

HM: Do you think it was easier for you – going on, it looks like you had little or no opposition in some of your later campaigns – so, it looks like it might have gotten easier?

LES: It got a little easier yes.

HM: Could you describe the 66th District? What types of people live there?

LES: When I was elected, coal was still fairly prevalent in that area and timber, gas exploration was not excessive, but it was going on. Railroads was a big employer. In fact, we had, in Punxsutawney, we had railroad shops there that had about 400 employees. That's gone today. So, that the employment scene has changed considerably.

HM: How would you say Indiana and Jefferson County compare to the rest of Pennsylvania?

LES: Like Philadelphia?

HM: Well, okay. It's definitely more rural than Philadelphia. (*laugh*) But, as far as the people, I guess? Okay, can you describe your relationship between yourself and your constituents?

LES: Yeah, I always had a great relationship with my constituents and I tried to stay in touch with them. I mentioned the county seat; I set up an office there at my own expense. District offices weren't in existence at that time as far as the Legislature was concerned, but I did that on my own just to keep in touch with those people. And I think I maintained a pretty good relationship with my constituents.

HM: Do you remember when you had your first District Office?

LES: I would imagine it was the early [19]70s.

HM: Okay, because that's pretty early for a District Office. What kind of constituent are you now?

LES: Well, I'm calm. (*laugh*) I don't get involved politically.

HM: Okay. Do you remember your first Swearing-In Ceremony?

LES: Yes I do. That was quite an experience. I was the 109th Republican and there were only 105 seats on the Republican side, so they had taken four seats on the Democrat side in the first two rows. I was Sworn-In and seated beside – I don't know if I ought to mention his name or not – Enos Horst [State Representative, Franklin County, 1955-1968]. Enos was from Cumberland County, no he was from Chambersburg, I'm sorry, Franklin County. Apparently, it was kind of a tradition with he and Harry Elvey [State Representative, Fulton County, 1961-1966], they rode together, and they stopped at the State Store every morning and got some “refreshments” for the remainder of the day. And he was in pretty good shape when I was ushered to my seat and he reached out his hand and he said, “You stick with me son, you'll be wearing diamond rings and overalls.” And I tell you, I thought to myself, what in the world did I get into here, you know? He just shocked me when he said, “You stick with me son.” But, he was a great guy. He was a good help to me.

HM: Did you have any impressions of the House Chamber itself?

LES: Very impressive, yeah. Kind-of awesome, you know?

HM: Were they any particular Members that you would consider to be mentors to you other than Enos Horst?

LES: Well, I relied on the people from back in the District, in Clearfield County and Indiana County. I relied on them for advice and for pitfalls.

HM: And who were they?

LES: One was Bill Buchanan [William; State Representative, Indiana County, 1953-1968] was from Indiana County and Austin Harrier [State Representative, Clearfield County, 1963-1974] and Dr. Ralph Marsh [State Representative, Clearfield County, 1957-1964] were from Clearfield County and we rode together quite a bit. At that time, there wasn't any mileage or expense – there was a three thousand dollar expense account per year, so we carpooled just to save money.

HM: Any interesting stories carpooling back and forth?

LES: No. *(laugh)*

HM: Okay. Is there anyone that you mentored as you had a longer career?

LES: I don't know. I just stopped at the Pennsylvania Bankers Association [to] talk with Louise Rhen. She came to us while she was still in college. And then she went to law school and she worked part time in the House. And at one point in time, I knew the Bankers were going to hire an attorney and I put a little pressure on some of them and on her and she didn't want to leave. But, I told her the same thing I told Paul Wentzel, who worked for us and he went to the Department of Banking – I think he's the Executive Secretary now, and Louise is the Attorney for the Pennsylvania Bankers – so I helped those kids along a little bit. I always felt good about that.

HM: Well, your son [Representative Samuel Smith, Armstrong, Indiana and Jefferson Counties, 1987-present] took your seat. Did you offer him any advice?

LES: Yeah. Most of it he didn't take. *(laugh)*

HM: Okay. Can you describe your relationship with Leadership while you were serving? Did you have a good relationship?

LES: Yeah, I had a good relationship. I made a few mistakes along the way. I'll tell you about one of them when you come to the PHEAA [Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency].

HM: Okay. Can you tell us about some of your important issues or aspects of your Committee work throughout your tenure in the House?

LES: My first Committee was – at that time I think they had 25 or 28 Committees – it was a Sub-Committee and it was called Railroads and Railways. And we had, as I told you, over 400 people in the shops and a lot of people were trainmen. So, they thought I might be interested in that Committee. And, one of the things that came up shortly after I became Chairman was legislation to put toilets in engines. At that time, they were steam engines and just coming into electric. And I did that. I sponsored their legislation – it was through the union and the railroad – and I sponsored their bill. Well, you know the Republicans weren't too fond of labor legislation and I stumbled a little bit there. But, what was interesting was a woman from [Reynoldsville] had written a song that she asked me to introduce as a State song and I was too stupid to know that I should have put on it "by request." So, when the newspapers, the Democratic newspaper in Brookville, started hammering on me in the next election, one of the things they said was, the only thing I had done in Harrisburg was sponsor legislation to put toilets in engines and a State song. *(laugh)* So, they made me look like a real hard-working Legislator.

HM: What were some of the other Committees that you served on?

LES: When I left, I was Chairman of the Banking Committee. It was really the Commerce Committee, but –

HM: Well, you were certainly a proponent for state-wide banking.

LES: Yes, and that didn't come by my own doing. I met with the bankers probably two years before that legislation came. The independent bankers were very much opposed to it and independent banks were quite prevalent in our area. And I told them when they got everybody together we could move on that, on state-wide banking. And it took quite a while and they didn't get everybody together, but they did get enough of a consensus that, it was controversial, but it worked out pretty well.

HM: Why was that important?

LES: Well, I'm of the opinion that if you're going to have a strong economy, you have to have a strong banking system. There has to be money available and it just seemed to me that we needed to strengthen our banking system and expand the perimeters for the larger banks. And it worked out fairly well.

HM: You are also a proponent for economic development. Can you explain the issues around PITA [Pennsylvania Infrastructure Technology Alliance] and the connection to having a good economy and healthy banks?

LES: Well, we expanded PITA several different times and dropped the requirements for employment a little bit. I felt that we did a pretty good job with PITA. I think it's still functioning and it's still important.

HM: Okay, what about interstate banking and expanding the powers of savings banks?

LES: We did that too [Act 4-1981 and Act 313-1982].

HM: You instituted a lot of reforms and amendments to the Banking Code. Why was it necessary to streamline that code?

LES: Well, at that time it was fairly awkward and I don't remember many of the specifics, but it needed updated to come into conformity with the legislation that we had passed.

HM: You also worked for lower mortgages for low-to-moderate income families [Act 51-1980]. What led you to attempt a solution to this problem?

LES: That's the one I got in trouble. (*laugh*) It was during the Shapp Administration [Milton; Pennsylvania Governor, 1971-1979] and we had a high-rise, our first high-rise, in Punxsutawney was on the books of PHEAA. It was ready to be released and the Leaders in the Republican Caucus decided they were going to do away with the PHEAA. They were going to eliminate it because it was a drag and it was doing this and that. And I called a fellow that I knew, in fact he lobbied some for the PHEAA, and I said, "This is going to get pretty sticky and I want you people to know that I'm going to be with you." And I told the people in our Caucus that I was going to support this and I was able to get

a couple of Members to go with me. So, when the vote came up, they didn't have enough votes to eliminate the PHEAA and my Leadership was very unhappy to say the least. But, it worked out and it's working fine now. The most resistance came from the lending institutions because these people were doing their own and they didn't like that.

HM: Well, in 2005 PHFA [Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency] honored you with a citation for your leadership in passing the Agency's home ownership program. So, almost 20 years after leaving office are you still active in this field at all?

LES: No.

HM: Okay. Why is this legislation –

LES: I'm active in golf and mowing grass and raking leaves.

HM: Excellent. Do you think this legislation is still pertinent today?

LES: Oh yeah, yeah. They're still doing some high-rises. It's really low and moderate income housing and it works out very well. There are a lot of people today that just can not afford to own a home.

HM: You also kept an eye on small businesses and tried to aid them as much as possible. Was this because you were a small businessman yourself?

LES: Yep. I knew what their problems were.

HM: Okay. So, you were a good Representative for them.

LES: I think so.

HM: It was explained to us that you voted the District and you didn't play Party politics, sometimes being referred to in conjunction with Representative Stapleton [Thomas; State Representative, Delaware County, 1975-1978] as having "your own political party." Is there any truth to these statements?

LES: *(laugh)* No.

HM: Okay. Could you comment a little bit on the changes to the House structure while you were here?

LES: Yeah, it's changed considerably. I was looking over this facility; this was unheard of when I came to the House. When I came here, nobody had an office. You had a locker off the back of the House where you could hang your coat and on the first floor. I walked through there today. I noticed there were some Representatives have offices back through there on the way to the cafeteria. There was a secretarial pool there; I think the Republicans had six stenographers and if you wanted to dictate a letter, you went – they

had a row of chairs – and you sat down in the empty one and moved up, and when you got in there you could dictate as many letters as you had. And I can't remember about the postage, but I think we paid our own postage. But, anyway, when you go from there to where you are today, I'd say that it's more than a 100 percent; it must be a 1000 percent. *(laugh)*

HM: Did you share an office with anyone while you were here?

LES: Oh, yeah, later but there were no offices then.

HM: Right. So, later on who did you share an office with?

LES: Warren Spencer [State Representative, Tioga County, 1963-1984] from Tioga County and Paul Ruane [State Representative, Northumberland County, 1965-1974] from Northumberland County, there were several places where I shared an office. And we always had a great time.

HM: Did you share a secretary at that time as well?

LES: Yeah, you started out with your secretary usually having four other Members and it gradually improved to the place where at least Committee Chairmen got their own office.

HM: So, the addition of staff was something that you saw change as well.

LES: Yes.

HM: And the professionalization of the Legislature.

LES: Yeah, yeah. It's come a long way.

HM: What about the technology?

LES: It's – I just shake my head. I don't have a cell phone. (*laugh*) And when you think about cell phones and all the things you can do with them, Internet and 250 phone numbers that you just – It just kind of blows me away.

HM: Can you explain the significance of Groundhog Day for you and for Punxsutawney?

LES: Yeah, we always had a big time in the House on Groundhog Day. I remember one time there was a group here from down around Lancaster – I can't remember the name of that groundhog¹, but maybe it was Quarryville, I think it was Quarryville – and these people were all dressed up and they were in the Governor's Office and there were about 20 of them. And I saw them in there and I asked somebody what they were doing and they said, "Well, that's the Groundhog Club from Quarryville." I walked in and I said,

¹ Octoraro Orphie.

“Are you people from Punxsutawney?” And they just howled, they booed me out of the place. *(laugh)* But, yeah, it’s become very good for the area, you know, get a lot of publicity. I just noticed in the paper today, they have these little Punxsutawney Phil’s—well there not little; they’re over six feet tall and they’re plastic – and different companies sponsor them and they’re opening tomorrow, the 19th one. I think they have a limit of 20 and tomorrow Sara Defelisa’s Pizza is going to unveil their Punxsutawney Phil. So, it’s been great and always a big time. And there isn’t much else to do on the 2nd of February, so we get a lot of people and it’s a lot of fun.

HM: Well, I read some of your comments on the House Floor about the Groundhog and I heard you gave cookies away as part of the tradition, Groundhog shaped cookies.

LES: Yeah, and I think Sam did that too.

HM: And one of the journals said that your cookies were bigger than his cookies. I just wanted to let you know that. Can you explain your thoughts on the media and how they were a help or a hindrance?

LES: I’m not a big media fan and it’s even worse today. What it boils down to now is about 90 percent of the national news you get is – I don’t want to say it’s not factual, but – it’s slanted. And I think that doesn’t speak well for our nation. It doesn’t speak well for politics. It certainly doesn’t speak well for the news media. It’s changed quite a bit and I think it’s getting worse.

HM: What was your relationship like with them while you were in office?

LES: I always had a good relationship with the media. They didn't always like me, but I didn't have any trouble with them.

HM: What was your relationship like with lobbyists?

LES: Most of them – I had some good friends who were lobbyists. I'd say I had a fair relationship with them.

HM: Were you able to rely on their information?

LES: If I couldn't, I severed the association. If they gave me a lot of malarkey, I usually told them I was busy. But, yeah there information was pretty sound.

HM: Did you ever think of running for any higher office?

LES: No. Although, one time when our Senator died, I did make an attempt at that, but it was a very short attempt, because when I realized what I was getting into, I said, "That'll be enough of that."

HM: What were your fondest memories of serving in the House?

LES: I think just doing what I could to improve the business climate and the working climate; trying to make people's lives better.

HM: Are you still active in politics?

LES: No. I have practically withdrawn. You know, I don't see much future in an 84 year old man trying to tell these people anything because they think, "That old guy, he's goofy. Get him out of here." (*laugh*)

HM: Most Representatives upon leaving give a farewell address; you did not.

LES: No.

HM: Is there anything you would like to say now?

LES: Oh, no. I'm glad to be gone.

HM: Did you have any regrets while you were here?

LES: No.

HM: You got everything you wanted done accomplished?

LES: Yeah.

HM: Great. Well, what do you believe will be your greatest accomplishment or what is your legacy to the citizens of Pennsylvania?

LES: I never thought about that. I never had any ambition to create a legacy. I just went along from day-to-day and whatever happened, happened.

HM: Okay. Well, that concludes our interview.

LES: Okay.

HM: Thank you very much for coming today.

LES: Yes, indeed. Thank you. That brought back some old memories.