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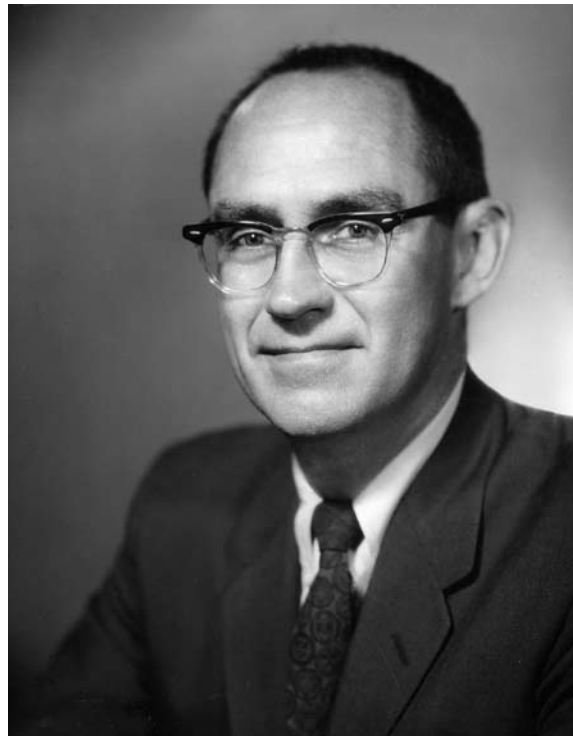
No Office, No Phone, and Other Legislative Memories

There was a time when Illinois lawmakers didn't have their own desk, telephone, secretary, staff, or a per diem. It was a time when the state capital's hotels were divided among party lines; Republican legislators stayed at "the Republican headquarters" in Springfield, otherwise known as the posh Leland Hotel, and Democrats stayed at "Democratic headquarters," or the historic St. Nicholas. Some would ride the train home and discuss business in the "club car." It's a time long gone, but thanks to hours of interviews, the memories aren't gone.

In 1971, Sangamon State University (now the University of Illinois at Springfield) established an Oral History Office to record the memories of hundreds of Illinoisans. Its aim was to preserve eyewitness accounts of various aspects of life in central Illinois and the Prairie State. Participating Illinoisans recorded memories that ranged from turn-of-the-century life to the inner workings of state government.

One of the Office's most ambitious projects was recording the memories of dozens of former legislators, according to its founder and former Director, Cullom Davis, now History Professor Emeritus at UIS. (The Illinois Legislative Council and the University's Legislative Studies Center helped with the project, too.) Davis says the idea stemmed from a 1970s conversation with Bill Day, then publisher of Illinois Issues and former Director of the Illinois Legislative Council.

"There was a general feeling...that the General Assembly had been transformed, (from) a part-time biennial business into a full-time annual business, with staffing and the accoutrements of support for decision-making and collegial work," Davis explains. "It was a vastly different body than it had been 20 years earlier. Therefore it would be important to capture the recollections of people who had been part of that earlier process, and also part of the transformation."



Representative George Burditt - Photo Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

After Davis successfully lobbied the legislature to add \$35,000 to the Council's budget to fund the project, his Office established a non-partisan advisory board of journalists and professionals to guide the work. They chose which former legislators to interview. "It was bi-partisan," Davis says. "We were determined to get some women, though there weren't many to choose from then, and some African-Americans."

Today, those interviews, like most of the University's oral histories, are available in print at UIS and other libraries, as well as online (www.uis.edu/archives/contents.htm). "This is a blue ribbon job that earned a lot of national attention for its quality," Davis says.

Thirty-two lawmakers who were in the General Assembly between 1943 and 1981 participated in the "Illinois General Assembly Oral History Program." The names include familiar ones like Cecil Partee, Corneal Davis, William Redmond, Esther Saperstein,

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and George Dunne. Some were rank-and-file members while others held leadership positions. They discussed -- sometimes candidly, a variety of subjects: reapportionment, legislative and judicial reform, ethics, controversies, and patronage, as well as the minutiae of their daily work.

Here are some interesting memories from three of the lawmakers: George Burditt (a Republican from Western Springs who was a representative from 1964 to 1973), George Dunne (a Chicago Democrat who served four terms in the House between 1955 and 1962 and was Majority Leader his last term), and Cecil Partee (an African-American and Chicago Democrat who served as a representative, senator, and Senate President between 1956 and 1977).

Lawmaking 101

Unlike today, when Burditt, Dunne, and Partee were elected, there was no state-sponsored seminar about lawmaking and state government for newly-elected legislators. (Today the Illinois Legislative Research Unit publishes a book and holds a comprehensive seminar for first-timers.) Back then, new lawmakers relied on a seminar given by Noble Lee, Dean of the John Marshall Law School in Chicago, who was also a legislator for more than 20 years, starting in 1940.

"It was a classroom atmosphere and we sat in the chambers and in committee rooms where these lectures took place," said Dunne in his oral history.

"Each of us was given a bill and then (Lee) explained that bill and went through the steps of its introductions, its creation, and the relationship between that bill and the segment of society that the bill addressed... and the value of that legislation to society as a whole," Dunne added.

George Burditt said: "He told us the full word on structure of government, committee structure, the executive department structure, everything else." Lee brought in heads of departments, the Speaker of the

House, and the Senate President to talk to the group. He explained each branch of government, the budget process, and agencies that helped the legislature.

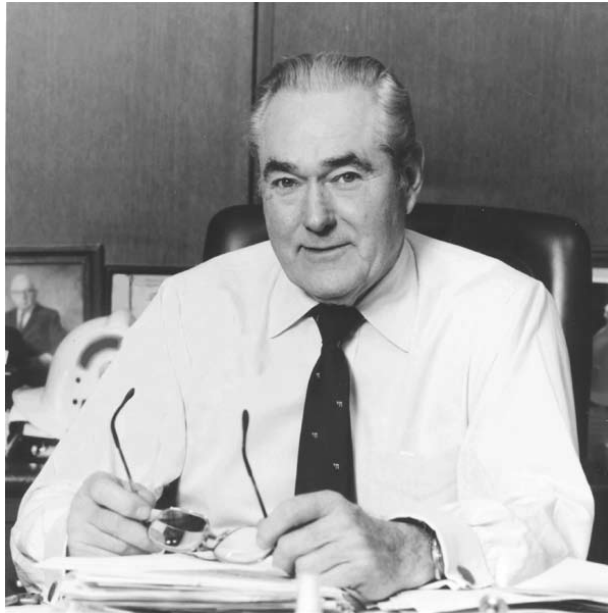
"He didn't receive any compensation for it," Dunne said. "(Lee) felt that that would be his contribution to the welfare of the State... the expenses were taken care of by some lobbyists."

When Dunne joined the General Assembly in 1955, Lee held his course over a few days before the legislative session. While the new legislators learned, some old-timers played, Dunne said. "They paid (legislators) up front in those days." At that time, lawmakers were paid at the beginning of their two-year term. ("I think the salary was \$1500...," Dunne said. "When I left there I guess it was probably \$3,000...") "When you'd go down (to Springfield) to be sworn

in, there was then a break... the fellows used to say, 'Well now that I got paid, I'm going to Florida.'"

Partee said he and other freshmen legislators got advice from veteran lawmaker Corneal Davis, who told them to "thoroughly understand" each bill before voting on it and not to "pop off on every question, which undermines your effectiveness."

"Sometimes you can talk so often down there that when you get up, people don't listen. If you talk less often and you know what you're talking about, you get more of an audience and you get more appreciation of what you say..."



Representative George Dunne

What Office?

The working conditions of the old General Assemblies were far different from today's. Lawmakers had no office, no phone, no staff, and no privacy. Their desk was their domain.

During George Dunne's tenure, legislators chose their desks in the chambers on the first day of session. "As your name was called in seniority, you would go down and take whatever seat you wanted. Of course, I was a first-termer, so naturally I was sitting in the back of the room," he said.

“We had nothing,” George Burditt said, describing the technical support lawmakers got when he arrived in Springfield in 1965. “We didn’t have a telephone, we didn’t have a secretary. I had a desk on the floor of the House, period.”

There weren’t many perks for legislative leaders either, Dunne said. “When I became (the House Majority) leader it wasn’t expanded from that point very much. We had one desk up in a little hole in the wall at the top of the stairs...”

When Burditt became a representative in 1965, “the legislature then had 177 members and it was a little bit crowded on the floor. You just did the best job you could and what you couldn’t put in your desk...you’d take back to your hotel room... You didn’t have room for anything (on your desk) except the Bill Book...and a weekly Digest. I kept in my drawer a separate file on each bill in which I was particularly interested.”

“There was a bank of telephones (at the back of the House chambers),” Dunne said. “On occasion you’d get a call and somebody would come down and tell you (that) you were wanted on the phone. And you’d go out there and answer the phone. And if you wanted to make any calls, why, you’d use those phones also.”

“There was no allowance at all for a legislative aide or anything of that nature,” Burditt said, though there was a secretarial pool lawmakers could use. However, he was lucky because two women from his district, a mother and daughter, offered to serve as his personal secretaries. The mother volunteered and Burditt paid the daughter with his own money.

Postage for official mail, hotel bills, and other costs came out of lawmakers’ pockets, too, since there was no per diem and legislators’ \$50 expense allowance didn’t go far, according to Burditt. “We paid for all our own meals, except... almost every night you’re in Springfield a legislator can go to a free dinner if he wants to.” Lobbyists, friends, or association representatives would often foot the bill he said.

Bedsheet Ballots and other Election Issues

George Burditt was elected in a unique way, on the famous “orange ballot,” as he called it, though it was also deemed the “bedsheet” ballot because of its long length. The legislature failed to reapportion the legislative districts in 1964, so the Illinois Constitution stipulated that legislators be elected at-large, with all candidates on one ballot. Each political party nominated 118 candidates for the House of Representatives (there were 177 House members at the time). “There were 236 names on the ballot,”

Burditt said. “It was one, great, long orange ballot; it must have been three or four feet long, 118 Democrats on one side, 118 Republicans on the other.” The top 177 vote-getters were elected to the House, one of those was Adlai Stevenson III, who headed the Democratic ticket on the bedsheet ballot by request of Mayor Richard J. Daley, Sr.

Burditt supported mechanizing elections because the paper ballots used when he first entered politics delayed results and led to voter fraud, he said. One type of fraud was “chain balloting.”

“Some person goes in early in the morning in a Chicago precinct and votes and doesn’t put the ballot in the box, (but) walks out with the ballot in his pocket. After he gets outside, he marks the

ballot the way he wants it marked and gives it with a dollar or two to the next voter who’s agreed to do this. That voter goes in, gets a new ballot, deposits the already marked ballot in the ballot box and brings out another blank one and that’s when he gets paid,” Burditt said. Typically the Chicago precinct captain was waiting outside to mark the ballot and hand it to the next willing voter, Burditt added. “There was a lot of that in Chicago in those days.”

In 1971, the U.S. Constitution was amended to lower the voting age from 21 to 18. That same

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Senator Cecil Partee

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year, Cecil Partee, a Chicago Democrat, lead the effort to get Illinois to ratify the amendment. “The 18-year-old voting (amendment) was a very hotly contested issue and it was something that really had everybody upset,” Partee said. “I guess a lot of gentlemen felt that if the 18-year-olds got the vote, that, in many instances... particularly the areas of the colleges, that they would come in in large numbers and take over the established leadership of those county governments...”

Partee was successful, but the eighteen-year-olds didn’t take over. Their turnout was great during the first election they could vote, but dropped off afterward. Partee said he learned that you can’t always predict the outcome of legislation: “Sometimes... what was predicted... didn’t happen at all, and sometimes things you didn’t think were going to happen, did.”

Real Bills and Fetchers

For George Burditt, learning the difference between a good bill and a “fetcher” bill was an eye opener. “The whole time I was there, there were fetcher bills. I never heard the term fetcher bill before I went down (to the General Assembly),” he said. As a new legislator, there were times he thought a bill was good legislation, until a more seasoned representative told him it was a “fetcher.”

“The term was applied to a piece of legislation that would cause problems for a company or an industry, calling for more regulation or taxes,” says Kent Redfield, Professor of Political Studies at the University of Illinois at Springfield. “The purpose was not to actually pass the law, the purpose was to fetch a campaign contribution. The idea was the (legislator) would agree not to push a bill in exchange for a campaign contribution...” Redfield says when he started working in 1975, fetcher bill “was a term that people used quite openly.”

Burditt described a theoretical example of a fetcher bill, “a bill to require all barbers to have the word ‘Haircutting’ in three-foot letters on the front of his store... there never was such a bill introduced. But all barbers in the state are going to say,

‘My God, that’s a terrible bill. We’ve got to kill the bill. What do we do?’ They go to their lobbyist and he tells them, ‘That’s a fetcher bill, guys. The chief sponsor of that bill needs a new car.’”

“Now... I’ve got to tell you,” Burditt continued in his oral history, “I can’t name a single incident in which I know that occurred. I know of no incident of a payoff in the legislature except I do know that Babe McAvoy and a bunch of other guys went to jail for doing things like that, a lot of them did.”

In the late 1970s, however, stricter oversight measures were enacted, like campaign contribution reporting, to stem the practice of introducing fetcher bills.

Read More

These recollections are a tiny sampling of the information and memories included in the University of Illinois at Springfield’s Illinois General Assembly Oral History Program. Cullom Davis, former head of the Office that initiated the Program, said various legislators’ oral histories have been quoted in books and articles. There’s a wealth of information here not only about the working conditions of former General Assemblies, but about the issues they faced, the personalities they had, and the stories behind both.

To read more, see if your library has a print copy of the histories, or read them online at: www.uis.edu/archives/projects.htm#ASSEMBLY.

**Legislative Schedule**

For the latest information about the General Assembly’s schedule, visit its Web site: www.ilga.gov. You can see whether either chamber is in session that day or you can click on the Senate Schedule or House Schedule to get each chamber’s upcoming schedule.

