

Interview with Thelma Stovall, October 31, 1977

Principal Interviewers:
Sharon Hall and Janice Stieneker

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CONDUCTED BY: Sharon Hall and Janice Stieneker
DATE: October 31, 1977
LOCATION:

SHARON HALL: I'll let Janice start out with the question.

JANICE STIENEKER: How did you become involved in politics?

THELMA STOVALL: Well, you wouldn't believe it. It is the most unromantic story in the world. I was active with the labor movement, secretary of the Tobacco Workers Association [Local] 185 for eleven years, but in the meantime I helped organize, back before the AFL-CIO merged, helped organize the women's auxiliary and had done this statewide because then they did not have too many women in the unions or a lot of the unions did not employ women. So, in 1949, the labor movement had gotten together and decided to support John Y. Brown for Congress or whichever one of those races he was running and they did it successfully so they began to feel they were pretty good politicians and they liked to try to get out on their own a little bit. So they got together --the AFL-CIO that year decided to run one person for each office open and one labor person for each office was open that year and when they get to the legislative race in my district they looked around and couldn't find anyone who had done anything politically at all. They asked me to run and I asked my husband what he thought about and he said "I think if you do, you've lost your mind."

But at that time the legislative races in Louisville were not as hard to run as out in the state, because you got districts and Democratic clubs and things like that to run in. So I ran without any idea of winning and believe it or not, out of fifty-three offices that year, we won two. My race in the legislature and one Board of Alderman race.

And of course, I stayed in legislature for three terms and then Governor Chandler came along and decided that he wanted me to run for secretary of state. And I said “No, thanks, just the same, I like the legislature and I don't think I could run a statewide race.” This was in December. And then in June he came back and asked me again to run for secretary of state. It was on Monday night and he gave me to Friday to make up my mind and on Tuesday he told the press. I came home that night, we had Governor Chandler in Louisville all that day taking him through the different plants and things and then we had a big joint rally for him to speak than night. And at the end of the meeting he said “Thelma, come up here,” and I thought that he was going to say thank you since I had been the only girl that had been with them all day. Instead of that, out of the clear blue sky, he said, “I just want all of you to be the first... I want to be the one to tell you this is the next secretary of state of Kentucky.” And again I went home that night, because I hadn't had a chance to talk to my husband and said “Raymond, I have got something to tell you” and he said, “You don't have to, I just it heard on the news.”

SH: (laughing) -- on the news...

JS: That's a great story.

TS: The other things I have done because I wanted to do them. I had three terms of secretary of state and two with state treasurer and I thought it was about time to

try something different. So at the risk of getting beaten, because I was a woman, I took a chance and made it.

JS: We're proud of you.

SH: Are you originally from Louisville?

TS: No, I am originally from Munfordville, Kentucky, but I have lived in Louisville since I was two years old, so I guess you would say I am a Louisvillian, if anything. My parents lived on the farm -- when I was two years old they did what a lot of parents doing back in those days. They thought you had to go to town. So they moved to Louisville and my dad went to work for the Louisville Gas and Electric Company and worked for them, until he retired, as an electrician.

SH: What obstacle did you face as a woman in politics?

TS: Not as many as people thought that you would. Occasionally, well, I guess I had more of it the first session of this last legislation when I had a bill in legislation that I wanted out and asked about it to some chairman of the Committee on Committees and Tom Garrett, who is a majority floor leader in the Senate, informed me that I wasn't going to get the bill, that nobody had ever told him that I was a member of the Senate. And I said, "Well, just help this, Tom, and I may not be a member of the Senate, but I'm darn sure lieutenant governor." I might add we got the bill, but I didn't do it right that time, but a few times I have had people say well, you can't do so and so because you are a woman, but that's not been very true. I think people really now began to think of me more as an officeholder than rather I am a woman or not.

JS: Absolutely.

SH: What advice would you give to a woman contemplating a career in politics?

TS: The same advice I would give to a man. To be active in your community. I think you almost have to, this is the way you get your start. You don't just jump and say "guess what, I am going to run for something" and then win it. But the more people who know you and understand you and think how you think or feel or try to find out about how you feel different things. Be active civically with whatever areas you can. Church, I am not saying use church just for politics, because I guess what I am really saying is you don't just go church just because you are a Christian. You go because it makes you a better Christian and you help other people become more interested and the same thing is true for politics. You don't belong to the Democratic Club just for the fun of belonging. You do it because you work harder with a bunch of people doing the same thing. That's what I am really trying to say.

SH: Now, Governor Stovall, we know you have been an avid supporter of the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] and almost singlehandedly pushed it through state legislature. Do you believe the ERA will be rescinded in this session?

TS: Not if I live and keep it from happening.

JS: Do you think it will...

TS: I am awfully disappointed that the John Birch Society has gotten into the thing. Of course, it's an emotional issue. It has absolutely nothing at all to do with homosexual marriages or lesbians or abortion. ERA is exactly what it says it is. It's ridiculous after 200 years that women are still second class citizens. No -- black men were allowed to vote fifty years before women could vote. As long there is still some

statutes that say there are certain things that a woman can not do, we are still second class citizens. This is the reason that was and let me correct one thing. I didn't not singlehandedly do that -- I had a lot of fine help. There are some mighty fine women in the state of Kentucky that feel and do the same things that I do. I was just in the position to be the leader rather than just a follower. But we had some mighty fine girls working together and we have had some men. We had some good members of legislature. David Karem was always on my side.

JS: Okay. What are your views on constitutional revision?

TS: Again. Let me put it another way. There are some things in our constitution that ought to be changed. I would be the first one to say that we don't need an election every year in Kentucky. One every other year, the way other states do it, would be the sensible way. I know I am in somebody's campaign every single year. There is just no way out of it in our state. \$500,000 debt limit is also a (unintelligible) situation today. But the thing about it is, ever so often a revision is start, let's throw it all out and start it over. And then they use all these terrible things that are wrong with our constitution and then when it gets beaten, which is done every time, you never see another thing about all those terrible things being straightened out. I made a promise that in the talk, the first person I debated on, was Richard Lewis from Benton, Kentucky, used to be a member of the legislature and the governor's administration assistant. I just said, "Richard, I offer you a challenge, in the event that this one is beaten, which I think it will, will you join me in trying to see that there are some changes made." There is no reason to say, well, it is too slow to amend. There isn't any reason in this world why we can not put in five amendments at a time or three or whatever number you want to come up with

and Richard agreed that he would join me up to seven. I honestly think that five would be about as many as you want. And I know it has been on the ballot a number of times and it's been beaten, but the truth about it is we just have not gotten out and worked on it. I never heard Kentucky turn down a good amendment. Well, if they feel it is good enough, then someone will get out and go to work for it.

I remember the year that sheriffs wanted to succeed themselves. They put in a cluster amendment, which allowed the governor, lieutenant governor, and most of the other officers to succeed themselves. And I agree. A governor ought to have two terms. It takes you that long to get your feet on the ground in any one of the offices. But the state officials thought that the sheriffs wanted to succeed themselves so badly, they would get out and do the work. And the sheriffs thought by putting them all in together that the state people would do the work and nobody went to work. And that's exactly...it's a normal thing not to... you almost had to truly lobby an amendment because of where it goes. It's either up on top of the voting machine or down in the bottom and consequently people that really intend to vote for them in many cases just forget it.

SH: Okay. Can you give us an idea, first of all I know you can't go into all, but what some of your duties are and what an average day for the lieutenant governor is?

TS: Here's more than average day. [Seems that the interviewee pulls out a list, laughter]. Truly, as far as the constitutional duties of our office, there are very few. Years ago, I guess Emerson "Doc" Beauchamp was the last lieutenant governor who had nothing to do. The lieutenant governor in those days didn't even come to Frankfort unless they just wanted to. Because the governor then didn't have (unintelligible) War on

Poverty Funds and that sort of thing. Consequently, a governor did not take office as often as he does these days.

So Governor Chandler when he was elected in '55, (December 30 ?) he thought it was ridiculous to have an elected official with nothing to do. So he revamped the office and gave the lieutenant governor head of economic development and then Legislative Research Commission and it stayed that way through two governors. While Bert Combs was governor and Governor Chandler, it gave a full-time job for the lieutenant governor. Well then, when Ned Breathitt was elected and Harry Lee Waterfield was elected lieutenant governor another time, Ned was mad at Harry Lee Waterfield for some reason and took economic development away from him, but he did leave him Legislative Research, which by that time had grown to the point where it was pretty much a full-time job anyway. And it stayed that way then, for until the lieutenant governor, Ashley (?) had something to do up until this last session and then (unintelligible) legislated his own bill, he said that legislature wanted to run their own business. So he put his bill in and passed it to take the lieutenant governor off of LRC, so it left the office again back to the way it was when we had to redo it.

The lieutenant governor is automatically a member of some of the committees. The vice-chairman of toll road authority, vice-chairman of the Governor's Commission on Agriculture, they're on a, well, there are half a dozen minor committees, I forgot which ones are which, where you just meet occasionally, not full-time. Of course, after I got to fussing about something to do, the governor put me on the commission on education, which is a national commission that has three people or four from every state in the nation on it. I think they average about two meetings a year to sit down and talk

about the trends in education and which was the best way to go about doing certain things and what other states have done there that are good.

Then I am on the Southern (?) Policy Committee, which is a commission of all the fifteen southern states. What really brought them into being is that they woke up one day and found out that because of Appalachia the South was getting major portions of some of the federal monies. And the North and East got together and said hey there, let's get a computer and figure how we can get this one worked out so we can get the most. So in self-defense they created the Southern (?) Policy Committee. They are not only working on being insured that they do not lose all of the federal funds, but they are trying to get together and work on the energy problems to see what can be done and of course, I'll say it again, it's just like church, if you're all trying the same thing and going the same direction, sometimes you come up with things. I am enjoying both of the committees. But it was not what I asked him, I thought I, I was hoping he would give me a regular duty here in the office. (unintelligible) You help people if you can and, of course, part of this is the reality of the fact that I have been state official for twenty years and people have gotten into the habit of saying nobody else is going to help, let's go see Thelma Stovall.

SH: Right, you got that reputation for help. There's no doubt about it. Do you feel the state legislature should meet every year?

TS: No, ma'am. I can remember when I was in the legislature that I overheard the commissioner of finance tell someone that we ought to meet two days every sixty years instead of sixty every... and I was highly insulted because I thought he was downgrading the legislature, but frankly, the reason I said I don't think we ought to meet

every year is that I have changed sides and I know exactly what that man meant. If all of the legislature's in session, virtually everything else in state government stops. Because they are the number one people while they're in session. It's plainly -- I think we can do without that much stopping. Kentucky has enough laws. We don't need to do a whole bunch of other laws every time you turn around. I would not mind to separate legislature and maybe let them meet thirty days one time and then thirty days another time, if they want to do it that way, you know. One of the reasons, suggestions for doing it that way is put in thirty days -- to put in your bill and then come back later after they have had time to go over them carefully. Then do the thirty days to pass the bills. This I would not oppose at all. But you virtually got to continue legislature anyways, since they meet monthly on my committees. I think the only bad part of this and I don't know whether it would change or not, if you had annual sessions. I've noticed that in coming to the committee meetings most of the legislators attend them religiously. But it causes them to be a little bit careless when the bills get in, because they assume because they have already worked on them that they know what's in them. But sometimes when they get drafted at the last minute, they don't realize, I mean, they don't necessarily say what they are intending to say. Consequently, they pass some bad bills and so then the continuous committee meetings have not, more careful to be sure that what they worked on is what is in the bill they are actually passing.

SH: Okay, one last question. Will we see Thelma Stovall as our next governor of Kentucky?

TS: I sincerely hope that is what you are going to see. (Laughter) If I live long enough and nothing happens. I am going to be a candidate and hopefully I'll be the governor. I would be foolish to get this close and quit.

SH: Well, I would love to see you as governor. Any prospective running mate?

TS: Actually, practically all of the candidates who have been announced for lieutenant governor are friends of mine. I could almost take any of them, but I would be kind of foolish to choose me one right away and then alienate all of the others' family and friends because that's what would happen. I would think I would do what the governor did. I'll just wait till it gets close to the time and then take a real good look on who looks like the closest and the best one and then I'll take either one of them.

Kentucky is a funny state and a lot of this may change. There was a time when the Kentucky, the governor was going to be from Eastern Kentucky, you usually found yourself a running mate in Western Kentucky or vice versa. Now, I don't know people really, normally you would say that you don't have much of a chance because you come from Louisville. I think the only governor we have had from Louisville was Lawrence Wetherby. Of course, he was one of these people who walked into the first year because Senator Clements went to Washington as United States Senator after Senator Underwood died. Of course that gave you a year to build your forces. Of course, when the unionists had the same advantage when Wendell went to Washington and that gave him a year to build. Rather or not, they will take some of the candidates, I mean for instance, Joe Prather, is a fine person and I think he would probably make a real good lieutenant governor, but he's from Elizabethtown and I am from Louisville. Whether or not the

people would take us as a team remains to be seen. I mean this is the only kind of thinking that you are doing now. Well, I say, most of them I could be happy with. Other than, I hate to say it, I would not be happy with Joe Hubbard, but other than that any of the ones who have announced so far I could work well with.

SH: So you don't feel like Thelma Stovall called Hollenbach, (?) with the governor of the state of Kentucky?

TS: I think Todd's got his own work cut out for him right now. I would say that two of us coming from Louisville, I don't think Kentucky is ready for... and of course, one of the things you got to remember about Jefferson County on top of it. Jefferson County by a boom is the only -- the first class city. And actually we pay about 60 percent of all the taxes, but it has always caused the rest of the state to be a little bit jealous of us. I would say Todd Hollenbach and Thelma Stovall would not be the best ticket in the world, simply because of the people, not because maybe we couldn't do a good job. But simply because of where we both come from.

JS: Well, it's been great talking to you.

END OF INTERVIEW