

Governor McNair Oral History Project
South Carolina Department of Archives and History

Interview

with

Robert E. McNair

Interviewer:

Cole Blease Graham

Date:

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CBG: This is Tape 3, Side 1, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair, part of the McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. My name is Blease Graham, and today's date is May 18, 1982. Governor, we've been talking about campaigning for the House and becoming a young legislator. What was it like coming to Columbia? What were your expectations and what did you find?

REM: Well, having worked as a page while I was at the University [of South Carolina] and then again while I was in law school, I thought I had a little knowledge of how the legislature really worked. However, it was different being a part of it, being a member of it, than it was being involved as an observer or as a page. I think we all came with great expectations, and we all had, you know, ideas of what we thought ought to be accomplished. Most of us who had come in during that period of time were veterans of World War II. So we had what we thought were fresh new ideas until we arrived on the scene. [chuckles]

CBG: Did you find yourself serving a period of apprenticeship, I guess you might say, with certain teachers or leaders, or was it pretty much that there was no structure and you had to devise your own way?

REM: Well, no, I think you do that [find teachers]. The wise person will always find his way around, become familiar with how things work, not to try to move out front too fast. That was true with most of us who came at that time. We all sort of got into the swing of the legislative process. That was the year that [James F.] Jimmy Byrnes had been elected Governor, so we came with his so-called massive educational revolution where he was proposing the sales tax to build school buildings, to implement a statewide transportation program that we'd not had before, to provide funds for upgrading quality in the classroom, to provide funds to better maintain the schools and all. So, coming at that time, we got caught up in his major program that placed special emphasis in the beginning on education.

CBG: Would this have been 1948 or 1950?

REM: This was 1950.

CBG: 1950. Do you remember some of the young legislators who came in with you?

REM: Yes. [William L.] Bill Rhodes, who recently retired from the State Supreme Court, as a justice, came from Hampton County. [William T.] Bill Jones, who's now solicitor up in Greenwood, came from Greenwood County. John Gentry, who's now a judge from up in Pickens County, and I believe U.S. District

Court Judge Charles Simons, who is senior federal judge for Aiken, either came in then or maybe a year or two thereafter. Earle Morris, who's comptroller general, came about that same year or maybe the next term. Rex Carter, who served as speaker, came one term later. [Ernest F.] Fritz Hollings, who became governor, was one term earlier. So that was that group, as I say, which had come out of school and gone into the service and come back and gone to law school or gotten into their respective businesses.

CBG: Was there much unity among this young group, or were their committee assignments so scattered that it was hard for them to communicate and work together?

REM: Well, there wasn't what you have now, the freshman coalition or . . .

CBG: Caucus.

REM: We didn't have that. You recall at that time we all represented our respective counties. Allendale County, for instance, Hampton County, Jasper County, had a representative. Charleston, Richland, and the other large ones, had numbers, but they ran county-wide, so it was more of the upstate/lower state division, the big county/little county division, than we now have.

CBG: What was it like just to focus on representing a county? Being a member of a county delegation, did you find yourself split, say, between the needs of Governor Byrnes's platform and the needs of your own county?

REM: Well, then you certainly you had your own county's special interest and what was best for them. At the same time, you know, the legislative delegation literally ran the counties. That was before we got constitutional reform and county government reform and county councils that we have now. So budgets had to be approved by the legislature. We actually passed the so-called county supply bills in the General Assembly. So you had the final say on the budget. Thus you were more directly involved in the day-to-day management of the county, the schools, all the various county governmental functions. You had to provide the funds or approve the funds for their operations, and you did have divisions over what was best for the smaller counties, what was best for the larger counties, what was best for the upstate, what was best for the lower state. That was shortly after the [challenge to the] separate but equal doctrine had come to the forefront insofar as blacks and whites were concerned. So Mr. Byrnes came forward with his program to provide equal facilities for black children in the public school system. That was the reason for the transportation program. That was the reason for the new schools. They had historically not had good

schools and had no transportation, and the counties and local school districts either could not or would not provide that. So this was an effort on the part of the state to do it and for the first time to take primary responsibility for public education.

CBG: Did you see much split or division between House and Senate on these matters?

REM: Well, the House and the Senate always had their differences, and I suppose that's going to continue to be true. The Senate then had one senator from each county. That again was before reapportionment came along. So the senator from Richland County took a very strong position on what was best for Richland while the senator from Allendale, who represented probably ten percent as many people, had the same influence and power and the same vote and took the position of what was best for Allendale. There was probably more of a division in the Senate itself between the big and little counties than there was over on the House side for that matter, or at least it was more clearly defined in the Senate. The House and the Senate back then had leaders who didn't always get along, so we were all caught up in their differences.

CBG: Were you able to steer a delicate path between these various conflicts as a young legislator?

REM: I think so. Bill Rhodes and I came along and tried to take a position of what we thought was best for South Carolina while we still looked out for our own small county interests. When it came to school transportation, we were all strongly for it because the rural counties, the small counties, were the ones that had less of it and couldn't afford it. When it came to the funds for school construction, the big battle was over whether it would be based on enrollment or on attendance. We took strong positions for enrollment. The black children would enroll, but they wouldn't have good attendance, and we felt like the purpose of all of this was to try to provide for them, and, therefore, we had to provide for the numbers. We had to provide the physical facilities to take care of them in order to encourage them into the school system and encourage them to get an education. So those were the kinds of issues that were involved in that, and they were big issues. They were important to us because there was a significant difference on numbers. We were all very strong for funds for supervision because, again, we didn't have the tax base to provide the supervisory personnel that we needed. Therefore, we wanted funds for supervision and for maintenance also. Whether the maintenance funds would come on the basis of enrollment or on the basis of school attendance was the kind of issue that sort of separated the lower state from the upper state and also often separated the small counties from the larger counties.

CBG: How did you go about advocating your position? Did you try to get on a committee where you could make these views known, or was it more through debate or just through informal communication?

REM: It was mostly through getting on appropriate committees. Everybody tried to get on either Judiciary or Ways and Means. Secondly, it was through personal communications, developing a personal relationship and trying to work hard and be knowledgeable so that you could discuss the position informally with others. Debate was always available. I think most of us limited our standing up and speaking as much as we could. It didn't take long to find out that the fellow who was always at the microphone accomplished very little. He really didn't have that kind of influence; people got tired of hearing and soon quit listening to him. So you found that, if you were always getting up and trying to speak that you didn't have much influence, and people wouldn't listen to you.

Bill Rhodes and I agreed that he was interested in the Ways and Means and I in the Judiciary, and we were fortunate enough to get assigned to those two committees. At that time the committees worked together. The committee chairmen worked together. Normally, if the Ways and Means Committee came out with a strong report on something, it was pretty well received, and the Judiciary Committee would normally give its support, and vice versa. So I think the leadership in the legislature was much stronger than it is today. That's no reflection on the leadership; that's an indication of the change that's taken place. Everybody today coming to the legislature is a leader himself. Then we had people who had been there, who were knowledgeable, who understood, and you were more inclined to follow somebody that you had a lot of respect for -- that you understood -- than you are today perhaps.

CBG: How did you go about getting the committee assignment? Did you put in a request?

REM: Yes, you went through the Speaker of the House who was Mr. [Solomon] Blatt. He exercised that power and had that authority to assign. Now, I had been very good friends with his son, Sol Blatt, Jr., in school and had gone to Allendale to practice law and continued that friendship there and certainly felt that I was close to Speaker Blatt. So, in making that request, I was very hopeful that he would honor it, which he did. Although he had the power he did some things that were good. He always called in a group of leaders and sat around with them and talked about the committee assignments and what committee different people ought to be assigned to and all, so he did have some input from outside, but as he acknowledged later, the blame was his because he had that responsibility and that authority.

CBG: This may be a little difficult, but tell us a little more about Speaker Blatt. What kind of a leader was he or is he, I should say, and what major things have you observed about him perhaps in this context over the years?

REM: Well, you know, you have to say he's been one of the real leaders in South Carolina. He has a talent for it, he has the personality for it, and he has the unique ability for it. He's one of the brightest people I've ever known. He's a brilliant lawyer, trial lawyer, and he's got a real good personality. He has a way about him that makes it, you know, easy to get along with people and he has a background of wanting to do something, wanting to work hard. We often talk about, you know, "give him an opportunity and he'll tell you his history," and I think that is an indication of why he is so determined to succeed, so determined to accomplish things because he looks back to where he came from and is willing to work hard. So I think you have to say he's a fellow who was willing to work hard, commit himself, and had the ability to be a leader, and he really was. He's probably the strongest single leader that the House of Representatives has ever had.

CBG: In his own way, I suppose, he's lived the American success story or the American myth of rags to riches.

REM: No question about it, and we used to talk about him elsewhere. People just looked at South Carolina as being a Deep South state, very prejudiced in everything that it did, and one of the things we'd always point out to them was that we had a Jewish Speaker of the House of Representatives who has been Speaker longer than anybody else in this country and it wasn't something of recent origin, and they would sort of be taken aback by it.

CBG: What about some other leaders, for example, Senator [Edgar] Brown? Did you have contact with him?

REM: Well, yes, I think you have to say again that was an unusual situation to have Mr. Blatt as Speaker of the House and Senator Brown as the senior senator who was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and the acknowledged leader of the Senate and also Mr. Democrat in South Carolina which give him additional influence, a very strong and powerful person, a unique individual, one who probably had the best personality of anybody you'd ever run into. He had a very keen mind and was a person who knew how to use his influence and how to wield his power.

CBG: I've heard it said of Senator Brown that he was a person of vision who didn't worry so much about minute details but had a view of the future that he was concerned about and communicated to people.

REM: Yes, and that's one of the tragedies, I suppose, of that time. We got caught up in the Sol Blatt/Edgar Brown/Barnwell Ring experience, and the press and the public sort of looked on them from the other parts of the state as being the power brokers of South Carolina when really both of them and Senator Brown certainly, as you say, had a vision for South Carolina and what they wanted to see and what they wanted to see accomplished. All of them were very strong fiscal responsibility people. They also were very strong supporters of education, and they were very strong supporters of the industrial development program, providing job opportunities. Most of the foundation for the state's program came under their leadership.

CBG: Were there other leaders besides Blatt and Brown who may have stood out in your mind in this period?

REM: Well, this was the period of Olin Johnston and Strom Thurmond, you recall, who had had their historic battles. Now, you know, Olin Johnston was governor during the big Highway Department fight, and the Johnston faction carried on as he went to the United States Senate. Senator Thurmond came as the big states righter; running for governor and then running for the [U.S.] Senate as a write-in candidate against Senator Brown and winning. Mr. Byrnes was, of course, on the scene and, until the Thurmond-Brown race, had been a very close, warm, personal friend of both Mr. Blatt and Mr. Brown. That caused a split. Senator Brown and Mr. Byrnes didn't speak again after the write-in campaign when Byrnes supported Thurmond. Mr. Brown was hurt deeply, and it was many, many years before they even, I think, even spoke to each other. And of course, at that time we had Senator [L. Marion] Gressette, who is now the leader of the Senate and a very, very powerful force in the Senate, as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

CBG: He would have had fifteen years of experience or so by then.

REM: By then, yes, and was a strong influence. Brantley Harvey, Sr., young Brantley Harvey's father, was just finishing his time, and he had been one of the strong leaders in the Senate. Calhoun Thomas from down in Beaufort had been a very strong leader, Judiciary Committee chairman over on the House side. He left as we were coming in. Bruce Littlejohn, who is now on the Supreme Court, had been Speaker of the House during the Thurmond years. That was just prior to us. Mr. Blatt was out for a short period of time when Senator Thurmond had run against the Barnwell Ring and had won for governor. So he went on into supporting Bruce Littlejohn against Mr. Blatt for Speaker of the House. Mr. Blatt opted not to run for that

short period of time, and then, when Bruce Littlejohn was elected judge, Tom Pope came in as Speaker and ran against Mr. Byrnes as governor in a very unfortunate situation.

CBG: I suppose this is the kind of question that is often asked, but as we've been going along here, was there such a thing as the Barnwell Ring, or was this just a general label for . . .

REM: [chuckles]

CBG: . . . what today I guess we'd say were different policy needs for upcountry and low country.

REM: Well, I think that's primarily what it was. It was the force for the small counties and the low country built around Senator Brown and Mr. Blatt who both happened to be from Barnwell. There was a Barnwell Ring.

CBG: Yes.

REM: There was the Barnwell Ring. Though we've often heard about them not getting along personally too well and having their differences locally, when it came to Barnwell County, they were together, and when it came to the lower state or the small county interests, they were together.

CBG: Yes.

REM: So, yes, there was a Barnwell Ring, but we all laughed about it quite often and said it was a lot bigger and broader because there were a lot of us that were probably members of it. It was sort of a coalition under their leadership.

CBG: How would you assess the policy of the state under the separate but equal doctrine? Was this seen by some legislators as a positive thing, or was this really seen as a way, let's say, to keep blacks from developing in South Carolina, given the surge of World War II?

REM: I think it probably was both. You'd have to acknowledge it was both.

CBG: Yes.

REM: You know, at that time, people didn't visualize total integration, so the move that we were making to support a massive tax program to provide equal facilities--equal opportunity was the way it was put at that time--was looked upon as a very positive move and was a very major undertaking and a very courageous political thing to do. Most of the money went to the improvement of black education in the state, the building of schools and the providing of transportation that the whites had always enjoyed. I rode to school on a school bus all my life, and the black children who lived in the area walked to school, and thus very few of them went to school. You know, compulsory school attendance we had, but we didn't enforce it. It really didn't apply, and everybody acknowledged that they worked in the fields. So it was really a positive thing on the part of some. On the part of others, it was just another step in avoiding the time that we would get to integration.

CBG: Was Governor Byrnes conscious of the financing necessity for all of this in developing his plan of industrialization? Would you say that the industrial development of the state really started with Byrnes?

REM: Yes, it really did. We had had just an introduction to it prior to that, mainly through the efforts of Charlie Daniel, who was just beginning to get Daniel Construction Company going and had just begun to get recognized in the industrial world. But it came with Mr. Byrnes, and Mr. Byrnes at that time really recognized that we had to educate people if we were going to bring industry to the state, and you know they were going to be employable. So that was part of the thing behind his efforts. That 1951 program of his was recognized, as I said earlier as creating sort of an educational revolution in the state, which was followed by that period of time we refer to as the industrial revolution that began to take place.

CBG: Do you think Governor Byrnes anticipated the *Brown [vs. Board of Education]* decision in 1954 which in effect made the separate but equal doctrine obsolete? In other words, did you get the feeling that this was an attempt to demonstrate that it could work, or was this gearing up to move on to the next level of policy?

REM: I really don't know. The state employed John W. Davis, who was the big constitutional lawyer, nationally recognized as a constitutional lawyer, who'd been a presidential nominee at one time and their position was, as they reported to us, that the state's position was sound constitutionally and that they would prevail. So I think at that time we all proceeded on the assumption that the state's position would prevail and that, if we made facilities equal, we could continue under the separate but equal, but we couldn't continue if we had inadequate facilities and if we didn't provide good educational opportunity.

CBG: Perhaps even if there was a thought that it was not a workable policy in the long run at least it could be rationalized as gearing up to move on.

REM: Yes. We turned out to be substantially ahead of the game when it did come time that we had to integrate the schools because we had built all of those good facilities. We had developed a statewide transportation system already. We didn't have to stop and go back and do the kinds of things that it might have been even more difficult to do then. I think if we had tried to come with the sales tax, tried to come with a transportation system in the early stages of the aftermath of those decisions, it would have been difficult.

CBG: Say around 1958 or 1962.

REM: Yes. It would have been awfully difficult.

CBG: Yes.

REM: But, you know, many of the new black schools became the schools used when we went to an integrated system.

CBG: Were you involved in any of the legislative battles, as for example, with the sales tax?

REM: Well, we were there during that time, and we supported it very strongly, and I recall when we were going through all of that battle that it was an interesting political thing to see the support for it and to find that we were again fighting more the issue of how we were going to apportion the money. By creating the Educational Finance Commission we took a lot of the politics out of it because that was a very powerful group. That was a group of very, very strong people who were determined to use this money wisely and they were the ones who had to approve the utilization of it for the construction of schools. They were the ones that ran the school transportation system, headed by old Dr. Ryan Crow, who was formally superintendent of schools in Sumter, one of the truly outstanding men who just dedicated himself to doing a good job. He made it work and made the unpopular political decisions to consolidate schools. At that time we went from hundreds of school districts to about one hundred, and that commission was the one that forced it. They wouldn't authorize funds for every little school and every little precinct in the state. They forced consolidation, and they developed the transportation programs.

One of the big battles in the legislature with reference to transportation was not the program but the bus drivers. That's where we started using student bus drivers because of the cost, the economics of it, and studies showed how safe it was. Again, I, along with others, strongly opposed that. We were concerned in the rural counties where they had to leave before daylight and get home late in using student drivers. We wanted the adult driver, but I think time has proven that the student driver has performed well, has a very good safety record, and everybody has accepted it after a period of time.

CBG: What were your impressions, let's say, after your first term in the legislature? Did you feel like what had happened was the way you had planned and hoped that it would go?

REM: Well, we felt we'd been a part of really kicking off South Carolina's future by doing all of this for education. I think we all felt good about it. We all felt we'd been a part of almost history-making because so much had been accomplished. It was a matter of trying to see it all implemented and moving from there, as a result of that, and you know we moved quickly into the industrial programs. Mr. Byrnes had that as a high priority and, working with Mr. Daniel and others, was able to get people like the DuPont Company to come and look and to decide to build in South Carolina. We've often said that was the real kickoff for us because normally what was good enough for DuPont was good enough for others. So we didn't have the difficult selling job that we had previously had.

END OF SIDE ONE; SIDE TWO

CBG: This is Tape 3, Side 2, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair. This is the McNair Oral History Project of the Department of Archives and History. Today's date is May 18, 1982. Governor, after your first term, in going back home, did you find opposition? Was somebody willing to run against you for your seat?

REM: No. Really, that was another good thing about being from a small county where you had almost day-to-day contact with the people. You saw them on weekends, and in the law practice you represented most of them and did whatever legal work they had. I had no opposition the next time around, and in fact I was opposed only once more during the twelve years that I served in the House of Representatives. That was a comforting feeling, not to be opposed after going through all of that 1951 and 1952 session and coming back with that feeling of comfort and confidence from the people.

CBG: What was your experience with legislative committees? We might ask generally how legislative committees were working at the time that you were serving and what your particular experience with them was.

REM: Well, it was good. The committees, even more than they are now, was where the work really took place. Serving on the Judiciary Committee was one of the heavy workloads. Lionel Legge, who was later a Supreme Court justice, was then chairman, just a very outstanding person, knowledgeable, a good lawyer, did a good job of running the committee. When I say running it, the committee chairmen literally ran the committees then. The chairman pretty well decided what bills were going to come up in what order in the committees. We didn't have the open committee meetings like you do now, so you didn't have all the politics going on in there. Your meetings were probably more constructive. I like to think they were, though I think the openness is good.

CBG: Yes.

REM: But . . .

CBG: At least they were more organized. [chuckles]

REM: At least they were more organized, and they were more orderly because there wasn't any point in somebody speaking for the press or the public because you were speaking in the closed room and speaking only with the members. So your committee meetings went a lot faster and a lot smoother than they do now. My experience was good because working hard and being very interested in what was going on, you become a part of it, and you get caught up in it. That was a good experience, particularly then because we had a very strong committee. Some very, very prominent people that we talk about today were then members of the Judiciary Committee. Ways and Means, which was then headed by Charlie Verner, the late Charlie Verner from up in Greenville, was a very strong committee also. We could only serve on two, but if you were on the Ways and Means, you could only serve on one, and if you were an officer of a committee, you couldn't serve on any other. So I had been a member of the Judiciary and the Labor, Commerce, and Industry Committee, and in the second term, my second term, I had an opportunity to run for the chairmanship of the Labor, Commerce, and Industry Committee. I served on both committees and then ran for and was elected chairman of the Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee with a lot of support from Mr. Blatt and the business community.

CBG: Did it happen to you, as usually happens to young legislators, that for your first assignment these leaders gave you a pretty . . .

REM: [chuckles]

CBG: . . . tough one to see how you would perform and . . .

REM: Well . . .

CBG: . . . sort of size you up for it?

REM: I think so, and I thought about it later; and I'd laugh with them in saying, "you really tested me out in a hurry."

CBG: Yes.

REM: I got to be a committee chairman in my second term. That was unreal . . .

CBG: That's unique.

REM: . . . in itself and unique.

CBG: Yes.

REM: At that time, I think, I was probably one of the youngest, if not the youngest, committee chairman we'd had in a long time. But then along came the well-known right-to-work legislation that had to be handled through that committee, so I was put into the briar patches in a hurry and given a very difficult assignment. We had to go through the passage of the right-to-work law, and that was a good experience because we went through all the filibusters that you would expect and all the normal turmoil that you would expect from that.

CBG: Was there much public reaction to that?

REM: There was a good bit. There was a lot of strong public support for it naturally because it was philosophically in line with what South Carolina supported. At the same time, there was a strong labor opposition to it, and we did have, you know, some organized labor at that time, probably about the same percentage of the total work force that we have now. The big battle was to be fair, you know, to be fair to all sides and to give everybody an opportunity to be heard. I felt good in coming out of that with the friendship of labor. I don't know that I had their strong support, but I had their friendship and respect, and in later years when I got into statewide politics, I think that's one of the things--they would say, "We didn't always agree with him, and he certainly didn't always support the things we wanted, but he was always extremely fair and gave us a full opportunity to present our position."

CBG: Did you have any sense or any recollection of people outside of South Carolina taking an interest in this right-to-work legislation? In other words, were there any national interest groups?

REM: Well, of course, they had the national labor groups, and then there was the beginning of a right-to-work organization. They weren't as involved here as the business community and the business leaders; and then the Chamber of Commerce, which probably was stronger than it is today; and the Textile Manufacturers Association, which was then the industrial group in the state, the Farm Bureau. All of those organizations rallied around in strong support of the right-to-work law. The national influence came through the labor organizations, the AFL-CIO and others, who supported their local groups in opposition to it.

CBG: How did you line up the forces for the chairmanship?

REM: Well, that again was like anything else. It was a one-on-one, person-to-person type thing, and when the chairmanship came open, people encouraged me to seek it. It wasn't an easy decision because Judiciary was my first interest and what I wanted most, but they persuaded me that it would be the wise thing to do. I had to get off the Judiciary Committee when I became chairman of the Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee. It turned out later that it'd been a wise decision. I wasn't too sure of it at the time. But I think it gave me recognition as a committee chairman--involvement as a committee chairman--that proved to be very helpful later on.

CBG: Would this be a thing that you thought would be the payoff in the long run?

REM: I think so. I think that was sort of the thing--if you look back--that got me some recognition, you know, in the business community and around the state among all the various groups and organizations. I

began getting invitations to speak and to talk to them. But yes, I think that was the beginning of an opportunity to become recognized around the state.

CBG: What were some of the major issues then that you as a journeyman, if not an experienced legislator, as a committee chairman, saw surfacing in the middle fifties? Were any such things as dealing with the tax structure and revising the tax structure?

REM: Yes. Oh, yes, that was the kind of thing you began to look at because it was archaic, and you recognized that something had to be done about it. Timberlands were taxed as if they had no value at all; in fact that was becoming a very valuable natural resource. At the same time, we wanted to develop it. The whole tax structure in the state was sort of out of kilter. In dealing with the imposition of the sales tax we dealt to some extent with some modifications in the income tax, and we began to raise the exemption and increase the percentage of income tax at the state level on the upper end. The higher percentage at the higher levels affected only the high income people, and that was deductible from your federal income tax, so it wasn't, you know, something that those people opposed. I can recall having a group of business leaders come down and suggest to us, for instance, that we add another bracket to the income tax. That was almost unheard of, but they thought it was a good way to raise additional revenues and a way that wouldn't really create a hardship on individuals in a high income tax bracket.

But education was the thrust and the major thing. We all recognized that we had to do something educationally. We had to get people in school and keep them in school and educate them if they were going to take a job in industry. At that time even the textile industry wouldn't employ anybody who didn't have a high school diploma. They were looking for high school graduates. Now they had a lot of older people who had grown up in the industry, but all the new industry coming in, the DuPonts and all, not only wanted high school graduates but they wanted them to pass a high school equivalency exam that was posing a serious problem. So we recognized we had a real problem in quality of education, we had a problem in training. We got into that later on in a very aggressive way with the technical education program, but it was quickly recognized that our people were not equipped for industrial employment. Industry had to spend a lot of money to prepare them for those jobs. They had to be really oriented toward manufacturing-type work rather than agricultural labor. When the fish were biting, you know, they were accustomed to going fishing, or when the hunting season opened they were accustomed to going hunting. They couldn't work in industry and do that. But they took to it, and I think that's where we got a national reputation of giving people that day's work for a day's pay. Productivity was high, and it was a pleasant surprise, but we still had the problem of people oriented toward a whole new way of life in South Carolina.

CBG: Did you do much traveling during this time outside of the state to tell the South Carolina story?

REM: Not in the early fifties, No. Later on, as time went on, I would take some trips with the Development Board. I would take some trips, you know, at the request of the governor, but not in those early stages. We would work with industrial prospects naturally. They would bring them in, and then the legislative delegation was the development board the, you know . . .

CBG: Yes.

REM: . . . their everything.

CBG: Yes.

REM: So they brought them to see us, and we would work very closely with what was then the State Research Planning and Development Board and work the industrial prospects.

CBG: In talking about a state, one often talks about the role of the state in relation to that of the national government. Did you have any sense that this 1950's period could be called a period of national dominance or states' rights, or was it more balanced?

REM: [chuckles] Well, it was really just a great big confrontation between the national government and the states. That was probably the height of it, the forties and fifties, when states were almost declaring their independence, when--what was it--the interposition resolution was going around.

CBG: Yes. Calhoun's old ideas. [chuckles]

REM: People were promoting that. The repeal of the national income tax was going around because the main objective behind that was to take the money away from the federal government and put it back with the states where we could get it directly and thus take away federal control. At that time, Southern states wouldn't accept federal funds, just as a matter of state policy and position, the reason being federal control. So that, yes, was a period of great confrontation, I think, between the national government and the state governments.

CBG: What about the leadership of the state along about this time? Was the governor, as you saw it from the legislative perspective a powerful position, or were these legislative leaders like Blatt and Brown more significant?

REM: The power was always in the legislature. No question about that. And the governor's influence depended on the person and the personality of that person. We'd gone through the period when it was just a confrontation with Governor [Olin D.] Johnston over the Highway Department, and it was a narrow margin, almost like the Congress operates today with Republicans and Democrats. "You are for me or you're against me," and you voted that way, too. I think Mr. Byrnes, who, certainly because of his history and who he was and all, was a powerful influence in state government. In the early stages, he had strong support from all of the leaders in state government. He had come with such an overwhelming support from the people that he was on one end of the spectrum while other governors were on the other, just being involved in one controversy after the other. The governor has never had that kind of power as we all talk about it. He has a lot of influence, and it depends on how well he uses it and on his ability to maintain a relationship with the legislative leaders.

CBG: Evidence of that is sometimes described as the school of the gavel when, in effect, the legislators bring up young governors or have in the past. That may not be true today. Do you think there's any merit in this idea of going through the chairs, so to speak, or through various stages of development?

REM: You know, I've often said yes, and the reason I say it is that you don't go out and pick a fellow off the street to head one of the major corporations.

CBG: Or a university department. [chuckles]

REM: Or a university department or the president of the university.

CBG: Right. [chuckles]

REM: You know, there is a trend now to go into business and get a university president because running a university has become a business. It's finance. That's primarily what it is. You've got to be able to manage and control and be a good leader and a good executive. So somebody who had not served in state government, who has no real knowledge of how it works, would have difficulty going in there and accomplishing anything in the time that you had, four years. It'd take you a year or two to find out how the

system really works, and so often back then you had people running against, and you'd run against the leaders and then come in and have to work with them and that was very difficult because you came with a split. You came with a built-in confrontation with them, and it took a long time to ever be able to put it together and to be able to accomplish things. I found that my having served in the House, served as a committee chairman, having served on conference committees, on pre-conference on the state appropriation bill was just like going to school. It was a good experience, and when I became governor very suddenly, after the death of Senator [Olin] Johnston and the resignation of Mr. [Donald] Russell, it was a good, comforting thing to know that I was then working with those people that had been my friends through the years and could pull them together and begin to talk about working together and accomplishing things. "If we'll work together, we can get a lot of things done, but we can't if I try to go one way and you try to go the other." So, yes, I think it was most important. And too, you know, you always talk about--Mr. Blatt talks about his school, you know.

CBG: Yes.

REM: All of us came through his school. Fritz Hollings was one of his young protégés. I think I came along as another one of his young protégés and neighbors from Allendale. That was one of the things that people would talk about, you know, "you're too close to Sol Blatt," or "you're under the influence of the Speaker." And those were the kinds of things you had to live with and deal with, but being a friend of the Speaker, you know, made it possible for you to get a lot more things accomplished than it would have done had you been always in opposition to him. And the same thing with Senator [Edgar] Brown. Though I'd known him very pleasantly and all, I had never been as close to him as I was to Speaker Blatt.

CBG: Well, some people criticize strong leaders for not being able to be flexible and change. Do you think the influence of a strong leader like Blatt gave a stability to this period of potential confrontation that may have contributed to South Carolina's success?

REM: I really think so. I really do. Some people may not agree, but I think having the strong, stable, consistent leadership of Sol Blatt and Edgar Brown helped steer us through a very critical period and helped us come through it in as good shape as we did. I think you mentioned a willingness to be flexible. I've never seen an inflexible good leader. It just can't be that way. If you ever find a dogmatic person that is just set in his ways and will not listen and will not bend or will not compromise, he's not going to be a good leader and seldom does he ever get in a position to be a leader. I have found that what people say about politicians compromising is the strongest quality they do have, is to be able to compromise. I used to say quite often

that there were three ways of doing something, your way, my way, and the right way. And that wasn't always wrong because quite often when we compromised, we did it the way it should have been done and the best way. Maybe that wasn't always true, but generally that held up.

CBG: Yes. What about your own ambitions now? Did you begin to think of yourself as a potential candidate for the state senate?

REM: No. I really never had an interest and never developed one in going to the Senate from Allendale County. We had one senator and one House member, so it didn't make that much difference whether you were in the Senate or the House as far as the local government was concerned. The only difference was the senator ran every four years, and the House member every two years. I felt that being a committee chairman I had as much or more influence, so there was no real reason for me to look at the Senate. I always had a very good working relationship with the senator from Allendale County. We got along extremely well. We'd have our local differences over appointments. He'd have his friends, and I'd have mine. We'd differ occasionally on how we ought to do something or what we ought to do, but it never was anything that caused a split or caused us to have any falling out with each other.

CBG: Who was that senator?

REM: Ed [Edwin] Myrick.

CBG: Mr. Myrick, yes, I believe we mentioned him.

REM: Yes. He served throughout my time in the House. We served together, and Allendale had been very divided. He had a running political feud with a former senator, Martin Thomas, who owned the Coca-Cola Company. I had some feeling that my coming along as an outsider and not being affiliated with either of those factions had something to do with creating a more stable situation there because he stayed in. He had opposition, but he would win, and we would work quite well together.

CBG: Did any other ambitions cross your mind, like running for the Congress?

REM: No, I had none at that time other than to serve in the House and be a committee chairman because, coming from Allendale County, you didn't have the options and opportunities to do much else. It was one of the smallest counties in the First Congressional District, and Mendel Rivers was the congressman. Nobody

ever even entertained the idea of running against Mendel, and you certainly wouldn't if you were from Allendale County. Secondly, he was a good friend, and his top administrative assistant was a person originally from Allendale and was very close to the family, my wife's family, and close to all of us. Of course, my family, being from Berkeley County, felt the same way about Mendel Rivers. And I had no desire to be a judge. I reckon I made that decision without knowing I had made it. Bill Rhodes always wanted to be, so when the judgeship came open in our judicial circuit--Judge Johnson who was from Allendale County had been the judge for years and years. When he retired, I supported Bill Rhodes very strongly. We'd had an understanding a long time prior to that. He could run for that position with my full blessing and support.

CBG: What was going on with your family at this time? Were you making it as a lawyer?

REM: We were going through the normal problems of trying to start up a law practice. With the family coming along, the children coming, and my being in Columbia at least three days a week during more than half the year and having become active and involved as a committee chairman, it took even more time because there were always things that people wanted to talk to you about, either here or they'd come to Allendale to see you. That took time away. So I was having the normal struggle of trying to keep a balance between my legislative duties and my responsibilities at home to the family and to my law practice. That wasn't easy.

CBG: On the whole, could you stay out of debt?

REM: Well, it was difficult. Fortunately, my father continued to--I call it subsidize or underwrite . . .

CBG: Yes.

REM: . . . for, you know, several years by sending us a normal allowance and then helping when we needed things, and we soon got the law practice going. Tom Lawton, who was from Allendale, had joined me, and, of course, he was always there in the office. So Tom really kept the office going. I did most of the trial work, and that could be done during convenient times. Then the terms of the court were set, but you could always arrange a schedule where you could be there for that.

CBG: Plus something has to be said for legislative experience again, gaining the confidence of the population and perhaps generating clients that otherwise you wouldn't have.

REM: That was what most people ran for first, was to get known, get recognized and to develop their law practice. Quite often people would do it, serve a couple of terms, and then quit. It went through my mind.

CBG: Yes.

REM: You know, as to that, whether I should stay home and really build the law practice. I found that being involved was a very worthwhile thing and a contributing factor, and it helped in developing the law practice. Allendale had been cut off from Barnwell in 1919, the newest county in the state, and was sort of dominated by Barnwell politically and legally, and I came in as a young fellow who wanted to establish a law practice there and who was willing to work real hard and had begun to do that. So I think being in the legislature and gaining some recognition certainly contributed to that, giving people more confidence in coming to see you rather than going to Barnwell to see Mr. Blatt or Senator Brown.

CBG: Giving all of these contacts, how did it come to pass that you became a candidate for lieutenant governor?

REM: Well, I think it was, again, like becoming a committee chairman, like running for the House, being at the right place at the right time, and mostly luck. And I have said that about my career. I have been fortunate to just be in the right place at the right time and have an awful lot of luck along that line. As a judiciary chairman, I was perfectly happy and thought I had settled in and was willing to stay there and just be chairman of that committee as long as I could stay in the House and could maintain that position. I suppose what again caused me to change my thinking was Mr. Blatt. He seemed to have influenced my life a good bit, you know, coming to the legislature, helping me, being sort of one of his young boys that he took in and helped and gave recognition to. We had a vacancy on the Supreme Court coming up, and all of us thought he was going to run for that vacancy, and no question about him being elected. He had the votes. So when it was obvious, a lot of my friends began to talk to me about running for Speaker, and that threw me into the Speaker's race. So I opted to do that, running against the speaker pro tem who's a very close friend of mine, Tracy Gains from Spartanburg.

END OF SIDE TWO

CBG: This is Tape 4, Side 1, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair. This is the McNair Oral History Project. Today's date is May 18, 1982. Governor, we were talking about the complex of events around the end of the 1950s and the fact that you were thrust into the speaker's race.

REM: Well, the opportunity presented itself when, as we said, Mr. Blatt was going to Supreme Court. So I was able to put together something with Rex Carter, who was from Greenville, an upstate, big county/lower state, small county combination. The two of us felt very firmly that we both had enough votes for me to be elected speaker and him to be elected Speaker *pro tem*. Unfortunately or fortunately, whichever way you look at it--and right now you can take it either way--Mr. Blatt surprised us all by bowing to, really, some pressures from the whole business community of South Carolina that he stay in the House. He decided not to seek the position on the Supreme Court. With that, I immediately withdrew my candidacy and stayed as chairman of the Judiciary Committee. Rex Carter, by the way, continued his interest, and we all decided that he should because he had run the race, and Tracy Gaines had opted to stay in the race for speaker and not drop back down and stay as Speaker *pro tem*. So with all of our encouragement, Rex ran for Speaker *pro tem* and was elected, and thus went on to become Speaker. I went back to the Judiciary Committee after that, and after that experience and exposure, people began to talk about statewide politics. There would be some press stories, and we began to get those feature stories that you get in the press. Charlie Sanders, who's now public relations director for Greenwood Mills, I believe, wrote one of the first feature stories on "the young man on the move and with potential." Bill Workman, who was then a reporter and probably one of the more prominent and respected and best political reporters who covered the legislature, began to take note of it. I began to get invitations to speak to the various statewide organizations, and people began to talk about you as being a potential candidate for statewide office.

CBG: What was the motivation, perhaps, or at least the rationale, as you would call it, for the business pressure on Blatt to stay on?

REM: I think Mr. Blatt had been such a stabilizing influence in this state, you know, strong fiscal responsibility, always very pro-business, and they felt very comfortable with him. I think it was the fact that he was undecided, too. It wasn't solely that. He had some strong questions in his mind whether he wanted to go on the Supreme Court. Mr. Blatt likes his friends. He likes people.

CBG: Yes.

REM: And I think it began to weigh on him that on the Supreme Court you lived a more isolated life, and you couldn't really be with your friends. It wouldn't be active. It wouldn't be the involvement that he had enjoyed in the House, and thus he decided that that just wasn't for him. Probably the same kind of decision I made when I opted not to want to seek a judgeship and not to ever have any interest in being a judge. I just never have felt that was my thing. I never felt my personality and disposition and temperament and all particularly suited that.

CBG: In coming back now, after all of this exposure, to the Judiciary Committee, did you contemplate a statewide race?

REM: Really, I didn't give serious thought to it, again for the sole or for one important reason, Allendale. Being from Allendale County, again, one of the three smallest, you just didn't get into statewide politics. In addition to that, that was the area that had the fewest people of any section of South Carolina. So you had all the odds, the political odds, against you. Again, I just wasn't sure that somebody from one of the three smallest counties could be elected to statewide office. We had been going through and were still going through that big county, little county, upstate, lower state thing, and though Senator [Ernest F.] Fritz Hollings had been elected from the lower state; he had come from Charleston with a big population center base support behind him. So we really had a concern about it. And didn't give too much serious thought to it.

CBG: How did it develop that that you got into the race though? I mean, did some adviser come along?

REM: Well, I think what really got me interested and got my attention was continued encouragement. Fritz Hollings was in the House. He was Speaker *pro tem* back in his time, and he was going to run for governor. There was some talk about my getting in, all very premature, that I really didn't pay any attention to. And all of us decided very quickly that you couldn't have two people from the lower part of the state, and then when Mr. [Donald] Russell was coming along, running for governor, of course, we then had Burnet Maybank as lieutenant governor. That name was magical in the state, but people began to talk to me about running for governor, not lieutenant governor, when Mr. Russell was vacillating and wouldn't make up his mind and wouldn't declare what he was going to do. Folks started talking about that. That soon settled itself when Mr. Russell decided to run for governor.

CBG: What was Russell's position at this time?

REM: He was president of the University [of South Carolina].

CBG: Was that somewhat unique, to find a university president perhaps coming in . . .

REM: Very, very, very unique. He had always had a strong interest in public office. We had always felt and later had it confirmed that his real interest was in the United States Senate. He'd been with Mr. Byrnes most of Mr. Byrnes's career and had continued his interest at the national, and international levels.

CBG: Did he serve as an attorney or an adviser or administrative aide to Byrnes?

REM: He was Mr. Byrnes's number two man everywhere Mr. Byrnes ever went. When he was War Mobilization director and when he had all the other positions that he had, he brought Mr. Russell in to sort of be his number two person.

CBG: It would have been Byrnes as number one and Russell as . . .

REM: Yes, right.

CBG: I see.

REM: And Russell had been a very successful lawyer, had made a lot of money practicing law in a very prominent law firm in Spartanburg and had gained some national recognition in representing, I think, Drew Pearson in a lot of his libel suits and had won them. So, Mr. Russell was very prominent and had become a very well-to-do lawyer, and thus Mr. Byrnes took him in. Because of all of this, everybody strongly supported him for the presidency of the university. We felt that was just an ideal situation with his name and experiences, and it proved to be because he did such a tremendous job there of really building the university. I suppose Mr. Russell deserves an awful lot of credit for really taking the university and moving it on very quickly.

CBG: We were able to reach out.

REM: Brought in some strong faculty people, was able to get strong support from the legislature for programs, used a lot of his money, subsidized faculty members himself, gave his salary back because he didn't need it. That caused me to give some thought to it, and it began to build, and that's when I thought seriously and did end up running for lieutenant governor. The last couple of years, I had been taking

invitations all around the state, listening to what people were saying and feeling the waters as you do, testing the temperature, and I found a very good response, particularly from among the legislators, former legislators, and business people that I would get to see and had seen.

CBG: That's where this Labor, Commerce, and Industry Committee. . .

REM: That's where it came in good. . .

CBG: Yes, yes.

REM: . . . and then worked on the Judiciary committee with the myriad of stuff that came before it.

CBG: The Judiciary Committee is important not only in terms of the work it does, but politically because of the contact with the various county courthouses, would you say?

REM: Well, with the legal profession and the business community, because the Judiciary Committee handled a broad spectrum of work really, probably a wider range of legislation than any of the other committees. A lot of things would go to other committees and end up in Judiciary, and it was very important. It was a committee that was important to the judiciary, to law enforcement, to the business community, to the legal profession. So it gave you a contact with all of those groups of people around the state, and I found that I had generated strong support from the law enforcement and legal professions, from the judiciary because of working on the committee and doing things and a reform-type legislation that was good for all of those groups.

END OF TAPE