

George Nigh

George served four different terms as governor, more than anyone else in state history.

Chapter 1 – 1:06

Introduction

Announcer: Governor George Nigh served four different terms as governor of Oklahoma—more than anyone in state history. In 1950, at age 23, Nigh became the youngest member of the state legislature when elected to the House of Representatives from Pittsburg County. He introduced the bill that made *Oklahoma!* the official state song in 1953. When he was 31, Nigh was elected Lieutenant Governor, the youngest in state history and the youngest in the nation at the time. In 1966, Nigh was elected Lieutenant Governor of Oklahoma again and served until he was elected governor in 1978 and was re-elected in 1982. He presided over state government during two of the most controversial moral dilemmas of the 20th century: horseracing and liquor by the drink. Listen now to George Nigh talk about his interest in becoming governor at a very young age, those who influenced him, and the road to the governor’s mansion. We would like to thank our founding sponsors who make our mission possible—preserving our legacy on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 5:30

Early Years

John Erling: Today’s date is May 1, 2009. Can you please state your name, your age and your date of birth?

George Nigh: (Laughter) I am George Nigh. I am 81 years of age. I was born June 9, 1927 in McAlester, Oklahoma.

JE: Where are we conducting this interview today?

GN: We are on Grand Lake at the Cherokee Yacht Club.

JE: This is appropriate for you to be here because as tourism director you enjoyed Grand Lake.

GN: It's fantastic. I've always enjoyed Grand Lake. In fact, today, the day that we are doing this interview, we have a place on Monkey Island. We have four guests staying with us: my wife's sister and her husband from Dallas and their son and a friend from Las Vegas. The guy from Las Vegas just cannot believe this is Oklahoma. He said it's supposed to be waving wheat sweeping down the plain, desert—dry and desolate, arid like West Texas. He can't believe that here we are in eastern Oklahoma in Green Country. I drove him all around the lake and told him that this is just one of the many lakes that we have. He said this is not the Oklahoma he ever thought of. In fact, he said when he left today for Las Vegas, before I came here for this interview, that he wanted to come back and consider buying a place here on Grand Lake.

JE: Let's take you back to your parents. How did they come to Oklahoma?

GN: It's kind of strange how my parents met. My mother was born in Vinita, Indian Territory, before Oklahoma was a state. Her parents lived in Vinita, close to where we are today. They worked in a movie theater and after my mother was born they moved to McAlester. My dad was from southwestern Missouri. He ran away from home and strangely enough, I never met his family. I never met his mother or his father. His mother died and his stepmother...they didn't get along. He ran away from home and then she refused to ever let him come back. So any time my family tried to go back and visit my father's father, she refused to let him be seen. It was strange—you know that was 70 or 80 years ago. I never met them, but my dad came to McAlester, Oklahoma and started working in a neighborhood grocery store. In the meantime, my mother's father had opened a neighborhood grocery store, so they met at grocery meetings and that sort of stuff. Then dad went into World War I overseas to France. They were sweethearts while he was gone. When he came back and they got married. I became the fourth of four boys and then 15 years later, from the same parents, I had a younger sister born. I was one of five kids. I never lived anywhere except McAlester. I came back to McAlester after I got home from the Navy at the end of World War II. Then I hung around McAlester most of my adult life until I went to the capitol.

JE: So you grew up in McAlester and went to elementary school there?

GN: Yes. It was called Washington School. Strangely enough, it was right across the street from my daddy's grocery store. I grew up working in the grocery store. At recess, I was the one who sold the penny candy. (Chuckle) So, that's where I worked all of my life. Basically, the only job I ever had growing up was working in my dad's grocery store.

JE: Junior high and high school?

GN: I went to both in McAlester. I graduated in 1945. World War II started in 1941 when I was a freshman. All of my high school years were during World War II. In World War II, you would be drafted when you turned 18 and you went into the Army. A bunch of my

buddies from high school knew we were going to go into the military because of the war—but we all wanted to go into the Navy. The Navy had a program that if you would enlist while you were in high school, they would let you go back to your high school and graduate and not call you to active duty until after you had graduated. Then all of you who enlisted together would go through boot camp together. So about 15 of us from McAlester high school enlisted in February 1945 and joined the Navy. I was in boot camp when Japan surrendered, so I am legally, technically a veteran of World War II, but I was in boot camp. I always say that Japan heard us coming and just gave up. (Chuckle)

JE: So then where did you do your service?

GN: I was aboard an aircraft carrier called the Ranger. It was the original aircraft carrier built from the keel up as a carrier. They had converted ships that were made into aircraft carriers but the Ranger was actually built from the keel up. When I left boot camp, I was assigned aboard the Ranger and we went from San Diego down through the Panama Canal up to New Orleans, around to Pensacola Florida, up the East Coast to Virginia and up to Philadelphia dry dock. Then we went back down to Pensacola, Florida and we trained pilots to land on aircraft carriers. I was the guy on the deck with the flags bringing the planes in and it was scary. (Laughter) They were new pilots. Some of them, it was the first time they had ever landed, and they would crash into the ship! It was scary!

JE: Did you nearly get clipped?

GN: Well, we ducked a couple of times. When you consider what other people did in the service, it was just fun. I am so appreciative of veterans who really, really served, mine was just kicks.

Chapter 3 – 8:40

First Election

John Erling: You came out of the military in 1946 and then you went to college?

George Nigh: Yes. I have to back up and tell you that in junior high I was in a vocations class. People are always asking me, “When did you first decide to be in politics?” I didn’t come from a political family, John. I just loved politics as a kid. I used to listen to Franklin Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats on the radio before television. I loved listening to Franklin Roosevelt as he talked to America. So in a ninth grade vocations class at McAlester, at the beginning of the semester you were asked to write down what you wanted to be when you grew up—doctor, lawyer, merchant—we were to study that for that semester. I wrote down Governor in the ninth grade. My teacher said, “I don’t know how we are going to study that.” But all my life I wanted to be governor of Oklahoma, nothing else.

So when I came out of the Navy to go to college, I figured I needed to start to build a political base. I didn't want to go away to college. The closest one to me was a junior college in Wilburton called Eastern Oklahoma A&M Junior College—about 30 miles away. I went there for two years so that I could come home every weekend, work at my dad's store, and start making political contacts in Pittsburg County. I knew I'd have to go up the ladder. You can't be governor until you are 31. Then after I spent two years at Eastern I went to East Central in Ada, which was 60 miles away. I still came home every weekend. I started going around the county just meeting people and making friends. I didn't know when I was going to run for the legislature, but I knew I was going to. Suddenly there was an open seat. If you want to get into politics, an open seat is the best way because an incumbent has a 99% advantage. You have to throw the guy out. If it's an open seat, then you can pick between people. So there was an open seat in Pittsburg County. As a senior in college at Ada, I filed and campaigned during my senior year. I got elected strangely enough and became the youngest member in the Oklahoma legislature at that time.

JE: How old were you?

GN: I was 23. It was 1950. It was fun.

JE: Did you get any respect? You were 23 years old.

GN: Well, I'm glad you mentioned that because that's a political lesson people ought to learn. If you are disrespectful to your opponent, you sometimes turn people toward them. I had an opponent who was a very respected attorney in McAlester. He was much older than I. His name was Willard Gotcher. I liked him, but he was indignant. He would say things like "I know that George is a good boy. I'm sure when he grows up, he'll make a fine public servant. When he has to shave every day, can you imagine how big a deal that's going to be for George?" I looked much younger than I actually was, frankly. He ridiculed me. It was so beneath him to campaign against this kid, that I won a major political upset by beating him.

JE: You didn't address any of those bombs that he was throwing at you?

GN: No. About the only time I ever addressed it—one night I got carried away—he really was attacking me. We had what we called speakings in those days. All of the candidates for county office in Pittsburg County went around to all the schoolhouses and had pie suppers and big crowds and speakings. You rotated times of speaking. One night, he spoke before I did. There were 600 or 700 people there. He really belittled me and said some bad things about how young I was. I said, "I don't remember you or anybody else that's attacking me for that reason, coming down to the train station the night that I was inducted into the United States Navy to go away to war. I don't remember anybody standing there saying, 'He's too young.' If you're not going to stand there at the train depot and tell me that I'm too young to fight for my country, then don't tell me I'm too young

to serve in the legislature.” It worked. It really worked. But I have to tell you—I was really embarrassed I reflected upon it, because the war was over when I was in boot camp. I didn’t want to make a big deal about it because I was embarrassed to say that I was a veteran of World War II—this guy actually was very decorated veteran of World War II.

JE: But it probably stopped him?

GN: It stopped him. It killed his campaign and I got elected.

JE: You were then elected for four terms?

GN: Yes. I served eight years in the House of Representatives from Pittsburg County. I have to be honest and say that I enjoyed it, but that wasn’t what I wanted to be.

JE: No, but during that time you were a student and you taught school?

GN: The campaign was during my senior year in college. So actually by the time I was sworn into the legislature I had graduated.

JE: Okay.

GN: In those days, the legislature met every other year. The Supreme Court had held that teachers were not state employees, if you can believe it. A teacher was considered an employee of a school district, not the state. The Oklahoma Constitution and the laws would prevent you from having two state jobs at the same time. Since they had ruled years before that—that teaching wasn’t a state job, people that were teachers could actually be in the legislature and teach at the same time. I got elected to the legislature and I didn’t know what I was going to do for a job, so I went back to work for my dad in his grocery store. I gave a commencement speech in Hartshorne, Oklahoma the year I got elected to the legislature. It was the same year I graduated from college. The principal of Hartshorne High School the next year became the principal of McAlester High School. He came to me and he said, “You need to be a schoolteacher.” I said, “I don’t want to be a schoolteacher, I want to be governor.” He said, “No, you need to be a schoolteacher.” He convinced me that I could be in the legislature and teach school at the same time. He said, and I’m very flattered that he said this. He remembered my commencement speech where I said that you could be anything that you want to be. You know, I was just five years older than the students that I was addressing at the Hartshorne commencement. He said, “Any person that can hold the students attention for that long like you did in a commencement speech, needs to be in a classroom.” So I went back to East Central and got my teaching degree in the summer. They hired me to teach, of all things, Oklahoma History in McAlester High School. So for the eight years that I was in the legislature, I taught high school for seven. I had a great time, but after eight years in the legislature, I knew that that wasn’t what I wanted to do.

JE: Let me take you back—I was reading about Sen. McCarthy—during that time he said communism had infiltrated all forms of government. Did you remember any of

that happening?

GN: Yes. I remember it very well. I thought he was an extremist. He was a Democrat and I'm a Democrat but I thought he was an extremist. He didn't represent my views. I remember those days.

JE: It didn't affect anybody in Oklahoma?

GN: No, not in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is a very conservative place. Even the Democrats here are basically a lot more conservative than the actual Democratic Party. It didn't affect anybody here.

JE: Somewhere along the line you bought your first car?

GN: (Chuckle) I bought my first car in 1953. It was a Ford Fairlane Victoria. It was ivory over black I think.

JE: Beautiful.

GN: I paid more for that car than I made in a year's salary teaching high school. I never will forget that—my folks thought I was crazy.

JE: You were going out on a limb weren't you?

GN: Yeah! Of course, I've got to admit—I really had three jobs. I taught high school, on weekends I worked in my dad's store, and when the legislature was in session I went to the capitol. Now I have to say, I gave up my teaching salary when I went to the legislature. I did not draw two salaries. But during the interim, when I would go up to legislative committees, I could get paid. I was holding down three jobs really, and I was single, so it was easy.

JE: I bet you wish you had that car now?

GN: Oh yeah!

Chapter 4 – 5:19

Carl Albert

John Erling: You were in Pittsburg County—Sen. Gene Stipe County.

George Nigh: Yes.

JE: When did he begin to be the overpowering figure for that county?

GN: It's kind of funny. Gene Stipe was elected to the legislature in 1948. When I went to the legislature in 1950, he had already been there two years. We were both from the same county. He served in the legislative branch of government longer than any other American ever served. Now, this tells about Pittsburg County liking young people at that time—strangely enough, he got elected to the legislature while he was in law school at OU. He lived in Norman at the fire station upstairs with the firemen. That wasn't

uncommon. Legislators would come into the city in those days and stay in bunks at the Oklahoma City fire station. His dad was in the coal mining business down in the Pittsburgh-Kiowa area of Pittsburg County. He was a poor boy and he just captivated Pittsburg County politics and served forever.

JE: Did he ever have advice for you?

GM: Yes he did. He always had advice for me. I have to say, right up front that we were always friends. I also have to say that he never ever in all the years that we served together asked me to do anything improper. He was a good public servant from my vantage point. Keep in mind that Pittsburg County played politics pretty heavy. Carl Albert—the most powerful man in the United States Congress lived a block and a half from me. When I worked my daddy's grocery store growing up, I delivered groceries to Carl Albert when he was home from Congress. Those days, Congressmen came home a lot. Can you imagine a kid in college wanting to be governor and delivering groceries from my dad's grocery store to Mrs. Albert? They always allowed an extra 30 minutes for me when Mrs. Albert had an order, because I would sit down at the breakfast table and talk politics to Carl Albert. Can you believe it? I loved it!

JE: He was kind to take time to visit with you, not everybody would do that.

GN: Oh yes! Carl was wonderful. Just imagine, here's a guy that grew up and went to a two-room schoolhouse for eight years in Bugtussle, Oklahoma. He came to McAlester high school because they didn't go past the 8th grade in Bugtussle. From Bugtussle, Oklahoma, Carl Albert went on to become Speaker of the House of Representatives. But in college he was a Rhodes Scholar and a national debate champion. He was just the most brilliant and kind man. Can you imagine me as this college kid wanting to be governor? Here I was sitting at his feet and I was taller than he was. You know, the little giant from Little Dixie—he was short. He was little, but big and powerful. I tell you that because later when I ran for lieutenant governor he worked for my campaign. When he was inducted as Speaker of the House of Representatives I was one of his special guests. When I was inaugurated as governor of Oklahoma, he spoke at my inauguration. When he passed away, I spoke at his funeral.

JE: Wow.

GN: I was the last speaker at his funeral. Here was this guy that I delivered groceries to that was the most powerful man in the United States Congress. I think it's important John that I point this out, hoping that people will listen to this—particularly young people who will listen to it. In 1950, when I was first elected to the legislature, my mother was active in the American Legion Auxiliary. Her best friend from McAlester was the state president of the American Legion Auxiliary. They asked me to be one of the speakers at Girls State to talk about government. I went to Girls State for 50 consecutive years.

We came home from Europe one time from a trip and Donna said, “Why are we going home?” I said, “Because I have to go speak at Girls State because I am trying to keep my record going.” They had a big 50-year celebration. I skipped a year and I’ve been every year since. I’ve spoken at Girls State 59 years out of 60. Boys State is held Miami, Oklahoma about 30 miles from where we are sitting right now. I’ve spoken at Boys State probably 40 times. I made my first commencement speech in 1950. It’s now 2009 and I’ve never missed a year of making at least one commencement speech and some years I gave as many as 20. Now, that long story is to tell you that I love to be around young people—I always have. I would stand up at Girls State and Boys State Commencement and say this. “I am a professional politician. I make no apologies for it.” I tell people there is nothing wrong with public service or with politics.

Chapter 5 – 3:12

Best Friend

John Erling: You said friends—can you touch a little bit on your best friend, Paul Carris?

George Nigh: This is 2009 and I can almost tear up when you mention Paul Carris. It was phenomenal. We were almost joined at the hip. Everybody should have a friend just like Paul. It’s kind of funny—my mother dated his dad. His mother dated my dad. We used to say we could have been twins. We were born two days apart. I was born June 9 and he was born June 11, 1927. We lived a block apart in McAlester. We were in the same room from first through eighth grades. We were locker-mates in junior high and into high school. We joined the Navy together. We were best man at each other’s wedding. We were godfathers to each other’s kids. We spent our birthdays together, either on his birthday or mine, up until he passed away in my last year in the governor’s office. We probably didn’t miss two birthdays. We were on the train going to boot camp in 1945 on my birthday and we were in boot camp on his birthday. A year later, I am on a ranger and we go to the Atlantic and he’s on a boat and he goes to the Pacific. We pulled into Pensacola, Florida and I called my mother. She said, “Have you talked to Paul?” I said, “No.” She said, “He just pulled into Mobile, Alabama and he’s looking for you.” It was my birthday. We were 60 miles apart, so I got on a bus and went over there to meet him. He was my campaign manager for the legislature, for lieutenant governor and for governor. I appointed him to the Commerce Department on the Commerce Commission and to the Racing Commission. People would tell me that I shouldn’t appoint him just because he was my best friend. When I appointed him to the racing Commission it was very controversial. I called him and I said, “Paul I want you to leave the Commerce

Commission and go into the Racing Commission.” He said, “I don’t know anything about horses.” I said, “No, but you know something about me. I want to show the people of Oklahoma that I want to know what’s going on in that department. They are worried about the Racing Commission with horse racing and gambling coming to Oklahoma. I want my very best friend there in every closed meeting so that anybody that does anything or says anything, knows that I am going to know about it.” We were inseparable. Every New Year’s, wherever we were in the world, one of us would call the other one at midnight. I guess the first thing you did was kiss whoever you were with at midnight and then I would call Paul or he would call me. That’s kind of ridiculous, but he was so meaningful to me. Whenever I needed help, he helped me. If he needed help, I would help him. We went through everything together. To this day I still miss him and he’s been gone 30 years. He’s still my best friend.

JE: Wow. You are fortunate because we do have friends but I don’t think many of us have a best friend like that.

GN: Yes. Back to my car that I bought in 1953, we bought identical cars. Our first cars were identical. (Laughter)

Chapter 6 – 4:49

State Song

John Erling: In ‘53, Oklahoma had its state song, which was Oklahoma, A Toast.

George Nigh: Yeah.

JE: Somehow you as a young legislator didn’t feel that song was good enough.

GN: Let me fast forward, as lieutenant governor, I asked the legislature to make the lieutenant governor chairman of tourism and recreation. For 12 years, I was chairman of promoting Oklahoma. People used to call me Oklahoma’s cheerleader.

Now, I want to go back then, from that day, go back to 1943. I’m upstairs in our house in McAlester, no air conditioning. I’m laying on my bed, windows are open and I got the radio on and it says, kid would have. Even today, the iPods, well, I just had a radio on.

I suddenly sat up and said, “They’re singing about my state.” I can remember exactly the first time I ever heard this song, Oklahoma. Back in those days, they had Lucky Strike Hit Parade and every Saturday night, Lucky Strike Cigarettes sponsored a program. They counted down the ten most popular songs in the nation.

Four or five songs from a stage play about our state made number one on the Lucky Strike Hit Parade. It’s the most known state or country song around the world to this day. I’m just this kid in high school and I said, “Wow.” Little did I know then, I go to the legislature in 1953, ten years later.

I thought, that song, that's the excitement around the world about our state. I'm tired of John Steinbeck. In fact, I took privileges of the floor in the semi-centennial for the State of Oklahoma. They invited John Steinbeck to be the guest of honor. The guy who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. The guy who put Oklahoma, gave it its image that to this day, holds us back.

I took privileges of the floor and I said, "I can't believe he's going to be the guest of honor," in 1957, at our 50th celebration. They withdrew the invitation. That was '57, so in '53, I decided that I wanted the image of Oklahoma to be like the stage play. I introduced the bill to change it from *Oklahoma, A Toast*, to *Oklahoma*, from the stage play *Oklahoma!*

JE: Well, it wasn't all that easy.

GN: It was not ea-Let me tell you. I was teaching Oklahoma history. I thought it'd be a piece of cake. Everybody's saying, "Oklahoma," wherever you went. Fifty foreign countries, Oklahoma was produced on stage. I introduced this bill to change it. I thought, "Piece of cake." A guy I call, "Old Man Huff" and he's probably 20 years younger than I am today, but he was Old Man Huff at that time, he also taught Oklahoma history, I think over in Ada.

He took the position to oppose my bill. I couldn't believe it. There was only microphone in those days in the legislature and he got up and he started hollering and screaming and preaching. He said, "I can't believe you're going to change a song that was written by pioneer, steeped in tradition and couched in history, and you want to change it to a play written ..." I won't forget this phrase, "You want to change it to a play written by two New York Jews who've never even been to Oklahoma? And they say, 'taters and ter-may-ters?'"

I go, "Whoa." I'm looking around and he is making this impaction plea and he says, "This is our song." He starts singing *Oklahoma, A Toast*. He leaves the microphone and starts walking on the floor singing, "Oklahoma, Oklahoma, fairest daughter of the West."

He's walking at and he gets the legislators by the arm and makes them stand. It's the state song. "Oklahoma, Oklahoma, it's the land I love the best." He just walks all over the legislature and he still got the floor, and so I can't interrupt him. He starts crying. Tears are coming down his cheeks, and it ends, "But I have not told the half, so I give you Oklahoma. it's a toast we all can quaff."

I said, "Quaff? He won't tater or ter-may-ter, but he'll quaff? Not quoff, he'll quaff." Anyway, I looked around and I saw that bill going down the toilet. That wasn't a good phrase in those days. You're just flushing it away. I asked for unanimous consent to postpone consideration of that legislation for one legislative day.

Old Man Huff, didn't catch on to what I was doing. He didn't object to delay it. That meant, I could bring it up the next day. I got on the phone and first, I got the state representative from Chickasha. The college there used to be a college for women. OCW, Oklahoma College for Women and actually, their course was all girls.

I said, "Can they sing Oklahoma?" He said, "Yeah, we just did that production not too long. I said, "I want your girls choir up here tomorrow. They're going to perform music from Oklahoma!, on the floor of the legislature." He said, "I'll get them here." Then I got on the phone and called Ridge Bond, who then lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Who's Ridge Bond? Ridge Bond is the only Oklahoman ever to star as Curly on Broadway in Oklahoma!, but more important than that, he graduated from McAlester High School. Ridge Bond was in high school with my brothers and I was just a little bit behind, so I knew Ridge Bond from McAlester.

I called Ridge in Tulsa and I said, "Ridge, you still got any of those Oklahoma! costumes?" He said, "Oh yeah." I said, "I want you down here tomorrow. You're going to sing Oklahoma for the legislature." He said, "When are we going to rehearse?" I said, "There ain't no rehearsal."

I got to tell you something else, there was a music company called Jenkins Music Company in Oklahoma City, so I called them and I said, "This is State Representative George Nigh. You got any legislation you're really interested in?" They said, "Yes, we do." I said, "I need a piano." They said, "Okay Representative Nigh." They sent out a piano the next day.

The next day, I get up on the floor of the legislature and I said, "Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent, the privileges of the floor will be given to the girls' course from Oklahoma College for Women and to our friend, Mr. Ridge Bond of Tulsa, Oklahoma." No one objected.

The girls' chorus came in and they sang Oh What A Beautiful Morning, and they sang People Will Say We're In Love. They did sing all those things. Then suddenly, the piano player started that, "Boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom," coming up from the bottom of the piano's ... The lower keys coming up. Ridge Bond in his Curly outfit, kicked open the doors into the legislature with his cowboy boots and his thumbs in his belt and his hat on his head, and he came in and he started singing, "Oklahoma where the wind comes-" and the legislators stood and cheered and applauded as they sang Oklahoma.

The entire crowd in the gallery, all 200 of them, stood. Of course, I had put them up there. I had gotten all the secretaries to come in and sit up there and they stood and cheered. The whole crowd sang Oklahoma. When he ended Oklahoma, "O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A, Oklahoma. O-K, yeow!" Then I said, "Mr. Speaker, I move approval of House Bill 1042, to make Oklahoma the state song." And it passed.

It's a long story, but it's a true story. To me, it summarizes my excitement for Oklahoma and I think that what is helping Oklahoma today, is that, we've always been proud to be from Oklahoma, but when we left the state, we never really did brag about it.

To me, I think you can look around. There's so much about Oklahoma for which to brag and you can tell the stories and the images of this state, and that helps us in economic development. People don't want to put a business, they don't want to put a plant, they don't want to have a vacation at a place that has a bad image. To me, image just like for a politician, is critical for a state. A hotel that has a bad image ain't going to be full often. Image is critical. Once you get people interested in you because of image, then repeat business comes from services and enjoyment and liking it. You got to live up to your image.

Chapter 7 – 3:26

Okies

John Erling: It was Dewey Bartlett who promoted the Okie image?

George Nigh: Yes. At first we didn't get along. We had a Republican governor and I was his Democratic lieutenant governor. We had some issues, but I didn't think the lieutenant governor's role was to bring bad stuff to the governor. I also thought, and he agreed, that the lieutenant governor was an elected official and he should be doing something. That's when I became chairman of Tourism. Dewey Bartlett was the first governor that could have been re-elected under the law. During his administration we changed the law that a governor could succeed himself, so Bartlett became the first governor to run for re-election. He was our second Republican governor, Henry Bellmon being the first. Bartlett worked on the image. But in my opinion, he picked the wrong word. I picked Oklahoma! And he picked Okie. I told him, "There are just enough people who resent the word Okie. It doesn't make a difference whether they are Democrat or Republican. You are going to get the dyed-in-the-wool Republicans, but you are going to lose the dyed-in-the-wool Democrats. Those that are in between, who are registered Democrat or registered Republican, could vote either way—but with the term Okie you are going to offend just enough people to lose the election." I think that's what he did. He came out with the Okie brand. He had a little pin that said OKIE, meaning Oklahoma Key to Industry and Enterprise. He came out with an Okie steak, like a Kansas City Sirloin. He got with the Restaurant Association of Oklahoma and they cut a special steak. They even had a special branding iron. You could go into a restaurant and they would cook your steak but first they would brand the word Okie on it. There are just enough people that don't care what good he does, they don't like the word Okie. I'm convinced that that image of that word defeated him for re-election.

JE: So he used the term for a campaign?

GN: Yes, but not his personal campaign. It was a campaign to promote pride in Oklahoma, but

he used the word Okie. You would go to his office and he would put a pin on you that said "OKIE". Okie from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Now, the song "Okie from Muskogee" came along and that was kind of fun. But it was the Okie from *The Grapes of Wrath* that was the Okie that people resented. While I appreciated his effort to do it around state pride, but to do it around the word "Okie" just ticked people off. Isn't that a strange thing? You can serve successfully four years as governor and do a good job and then in my opinion, the term Okie, in his administration just as he was running for re-election, did him in.

Chapter 8 – 10:07

Lieutenant Governor

John Erling: Let's come back to 1958. I believe you were 31 years old. You ran for the first time as lieutenant governor. The incumbent was...?

George Nigh: Cowboy Pink Williams.

JE: Thirteen men campaigned for that office?

GN: Yes. I was a state representative from McAlester. Like I said, I'll go back to the ninth grade, I wanted to be governor. I didn't want to be in the legislature, but I served there eight years. To be real honest, I didn't want to be lieutenant governor. I enjoyed being lieutenant governor and I was there 16 years, but I wanted to be governor. I was just climbing a ladder. At the end of eight years in the legislature, I decided I needed to run for something else. I looked around and I couldn't run for governor because I knew I wouldn't win it. Howard Edmondson was running and won it. I knew I needed to get to a statewide office. I could put together a good campaign, so I ran for lieutenant governor against my own advice of never running against an incumbent if you don't have to. But, I took a bunch of my friends and we toured the Democratic counties in Oklahoma. We took a poll and we asked two questions. The first question was: "Can Cowboy Pink Williams be defeated for re-election for his second term?" The poll was overwhelmingly "No, he can't be defeated." The second question was: "Are you going to vote for him?" The poll was overwhelmingly, "No, I am not going to vote for him." Those were the only questions I asked. So based on the results of that poll, I ran against Cowboy Pink. There were 13 of us running, including the Mayor of Tulsa, James Norville and including the Sheriff of Muskogee County whose last name happened to be Kerr. He was not kin to Robert S. Kerr, but this was at the height of Bob Kerr's popularity. He got a lot of votes statewide just with the last Kerr. So in the Democratic Primary, I ran second. That's why I am for runoffs. I had 100,000 fewer votes than Cowboy Pink. But with so many candidates and so many people saying they were not going to vote for him, as an

incumbent he didn't win it without a runoff. I knew the race was to get in a runoff with him. I didn't campaign to beat him in the primary—I campaigned to beat the other 11 so I could be Number Two. This is not bragging, this is just political—I ran 100,000 votes behind him in the primary and three weeks later I beat him by 100,000 votes. It was just an anti-vote to him.

JE: Why was there such an anti-vote?

GN: Although he was a neat guy, he just didn't have the image. Keep in mind that the lieutenant governor is a heartbeat away from the governor's office. In case something happened to the governor, you are the governor forever. Cowboy Pink had got elected on a lark—mainly because of his name on a postcard. He beat an incumbent. He was an unknown with a funny name who ran for office and won, but he couldn't stand up for a re-election. He just didn't hold water. They voted for him not knowing him, but once they knew him they didn't want him to be next in line for governor.

JE: You were 31 at the time, was your age used against you during that campaign?

GN: Yes. Strangely enough my age works to my advantage. Here comes this young guy out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, J. Howard Edmondson, formerly from Muskogee, a County Attorney in Tulsa County. His brother Ed was in Congress. Howard was 32 years old—a year and a half older than I. So, he was sweeping the state in a youth movement. He was so dynamic. He was the John F. Kennedy of Oklahoma. He was Mr. Personality. He carried 76 counties in the general election out of 77—he only lost one county. Howard was in a youth movement. He was in a runoff with Bill Atkinson who developed Midwest City and who was the “Old Guard”. Howard was running to throw the Old Guard out. Bill Atkinson was running as a successful businessman—that's what we need, not a politician. So my youth worked for me. Howard was captivating the youth movement and here I was running for lieutenant governor a year and a half younger than he was. Of all things, Bill Atkinson endorsed me in the runoff for lieutenant governor against Cowboy Pink. He would say, “I'm for young people too and I want Nigh to be my lieutenant governor.” (Chuckle) So both of the candidates for governor endorsed me the kid because one of them had the youth movement going and one of them was trying to make the youth movement part of his campaign. This is funny—I carried all 77 counties as lieutenant governor in my first statewide race. Howard Edmondson carried 76, so for four years Edmondson would get up and I would say, “I am the lieutenant governor of all this state—you don't represent all of it!” (Laughter)

JE: The two of you being so young put you on the cover of *LIFE* magazine.

GN: Yes. I recently was at a book sale in Texas at a farmers market, and I saw that very *LIFE* magazine and I bought it. I have it.

JE: Good.

GN: That's the year Nelson Rockefeller was elected and the year Barry Goldwater was elected and I looked and here's Howard Edmondson and George Nigh in the same

magazine as those guys. He was the youngest governor in the nation and I was the youngest lieutenant governor in the nation, and the state treasurer, Bill Burkhart from Pawhuska. He was the youngest treasurer (in the nation). He was 34. So in the general election that year, there were only 4 offices up for general election that were not settled in the primaries. They elected a 31-year-old lieutenant governor, a 33-year-old governor, a 34-year-old state treasurer, and a 70-year-old secretary of state.

JE: So you and Howard Edmondson had a good relationship?

GN: Yes. I think what was unusual about it was in the general election running against Republicans, for the first and only time in Oklahoma history, we ran as a team. We had joint billboards with his picture and my picture. We ran joint TV and radio spots with us both on them. We attended the same rallies. We campaigned as a team. It's never been done again that way. Let me tell you John, I think the lieutenant governor and the governor ought to run as a team. The Constitution ought to be changed. You wouldn't want a vice president of a Democratic party and a president of a Republican party serving together because their mission is to kind of bring each other down. I think the lieutenant governor ought to be the partner of the governor.

JE: Didn't that bother you though? Here's J. Howard Edmondson, just a year and a half older than you—he probably had declared at 14 that he wanted to be governor. (Laughter) And he was ahead of you in that regard, did that bother you?

GN: No. It was so much fun and he was so much fun. His wife Jeanette, bless her heart she is deceased also, she was a wonderful, wonderful lady. Howard was elected in 1958 as governor. I was elected in 1978, 20 years later. In the meantime, Howard had passed away. His widow Jeanette, was still a friend and worked on my campaign. I made a campaign vow that I would not promise any job or any appointment to anybody until after the election. I made none of those promises. I told them after I was elected I would serve the best I can. On election night in November 1978, 20 years after Howard was elected, I'm in a hotel room with my wife. We were waiting to go into the convention center to declare victory. Jeanette was with us. I turned to her and I said, "Jeanette, I want you to be secretary of state." So the first person that I ever offered a job to as governor elect of Oklahoma, was the widow of the man who had been elected governor with me when I was lieutenant governor 20 years before. That's how good our relationship was.

JE: Was she one of the first females?

GN: There were females who were in state government, but she became the major female.

Chapter 9 – 4:31**The Shed**

John Erling: Talk to me about the shed.

George Nigh: The shed? How do you know about the shed? (Laughter) John, you've been doing your research! I was single all the time I was in the legislature and teaching high school and my first term as governor. I was a bachelor lieutenant governor. The shed, wow, that's a place in history for me. A group of my friends rented a former sorority house in Norman close to the OU campus. A bunch of guys lived there. It was an old small sorority house, but there were about 10 permanent guys who lived there. I had been elected lieutenant governor and all of these guys have campaigned for me. Most of them were going to law school or lived in the Norman area. So as a single lieutenant governor, for four years I lived in what was called the shed. It was fun. Ten of us permanently lived there, but there were always a bunch of guys coming in and out, either for a few months or a few years. There are three things I should say about the shed. The first is, we each had assignments. If you lived in the shed you had an assignment. You also each had a nickname. Bob Scarborough was from Altus. He told everybody what to do, so he was called Mother Scarborough. I spoke at his funeral. I loved him dearly. He was a wonderful man. Everybody had a nickname. Mine was "The Gov." I will just tell you that almost everyone that lived in the shed ended up in my administration. We became so close. I said, "It's not wrong to appoint your friend to an office if your friend can do the job. What's wrong is when you appoint a friend who can't do it." I made no apologies for appointing my friends. I appointed enemies. I appointed Bob Funston and he ran against me for governor. I was so impressed with him during the campaign that when it was over I asked him to come work for me. I appointed Henry Bellmon the head of welfare for the State of Oklahoma. Henry Bellmon had been the first Republican governor of our state. He was a Republican United States Senator who came home. I was a Democratic governor who needed help with the Department of Human Services. I called Henry Bellmon. He was living in Billings, Oklahoma. I asked him to come out of retirement and to be head of welfare for DHS. He said, "Why would I do that?" I said, "Because I need you and Oklahoma needs you. You can bring instant credibility to a state agency that's having credibility problems. As a former Republican senator appointed by a Democrat, they'll know that there's no shenanigans or hanky-panky going on." I'll never forget what Henry Bellmon asked me. He said, "If I accept this job, will I run the agency or will you run the agency?" I said, "Henry, you've been governor and you know what a governor wants in an agency. That's the only answer I can give you. You go run it. You'll know how I want it run." So he took it. So, back to the shed, it's okay to appoint friends or enemies or total

stranger if they can do the job. The other thing about the shed was they had a big parking lot close to the football stadium. My assignment every couple of years would be to direct parking. I was the lieutenant governor standing out on the street telling people to park here for \$2. (Laughter) People would come and they would roll down their windows and say, "Nigh! You finally found an honest job!" But it paid our rent. The shed was a wonderful experience for me. To this day I still see those same friends.

Chapter 10 – 7:46

Moonshine

John Erling: In 1959, we had Prohibition and lots of moonshine.

George Nigh: Oh yeah.

JE: Why don't you explain to the youth who will be listening what moonshine is.

GN: Moonshine is illegal homemade whiskey. You made it by the shine of the moon. You made it at night so that you supposedly wouldn't be found because smoke would come up out of the woods. Moonshine in the eastern hills of Oklahoma particularly was very popular. It's kind of like down by Krebs, Oklahoma they used to have what they called Choc Beer. It was illegal. It's legal today. It comes from Choctaw Beer. But in the territorial days, liquor was legal. When we became a state our constitution prohibited it, so on November 16, 1907 they were pouring whiskey down the drains. We went through all of these prohibition days in Oklahoma, but people were making illegal moonshine or whatever you want to call it. If you were in politics and you advocated the appeal of Prohibition, you generally lost. You had moonshine, which was homemade whiskey, but you also had real whiskey, which was snuck in by bootleggers across state lines. It was appalling to me that bootleggers would be prominent citizens in a community and it was illegal. My point was, if it's illegal and everyone knows where you can buy it, that means the sheriff knows where you can buy it. That means they are ignoring the law. If they are ignoring that law, what other laws are they ignoring? I think if you have a law you're supposed to enforce it. Howard Edmondson who was running for governor didn't want to say he was for repealing Prohibition because politically he thought that would hurt him. He took a clever stance. He said, "Vote for me and we will be either wet or dry." He wasn't saying it was going to be one way or the other, but he was saying it will be one way or the other and if we have a law it will be enforced. He wanted to submit it to a vote of the people to decide whether the state was wet or dry. He got elected and carried 76 counties.

JE: You were asked that question too when you ran for lieutenant governor. What was your answer?

GN: I said that I would support the same position that Edmondson did.

JE: But you presided over the debate in the legislature?

GN: Yes, that's probably the first time the lieutenant governor really was president of the state senate. We say that the lieutenant governor is president of the state senate, meaning he is the president of the senate and he presides over the joint session. But the senate doesn't want the lieutenant governor there presiding. I had only presided ceremoniously. But about three days before the vote of the appeal of Prohibition, the leader of the senate and Howard Edmondson called me and asked me to preside over the debate. I said, "Whoa, that's going to be tough because they don't want the lieutenant governor there." They said, "We want you there because we know you will preside by the rules and you are not there with an issue. We need someone that understands the rule of parliamentary procedure, but has no issue in whether it passes or fails. I stayed up for three days refreshing myself on all of the senate rules so that I could preside on motions, amendments, votes, time limits and all of that stuff. They did not want me to give up the chair to somebody else. As long as I sat there I could preside. If I went away, they would have to get somebody else. They weren't sure a fellow senator could tell a senator what to do. I sat there for six or seven hours without food or drink or going to the restroom. The legislature voted to submit it to a vote of the people. The people voted to repeal Prohibition. I supported it and I support the law and the rest is history. We've changed the law several times.

JE: Were there prominent families who you believe became wealthy through bootlegging?

GN: Not that I know of. There were prominent families that bootlegged. I can tell you that the most prominent bootlegger in McAlester was citizen of the year for the American Legion. I thought it was ridiculous. But, that's part of those laws that you have—it is the law, but the majority of the people don't want it to be the law. Let me tell you an interesting thing. I went to Biloxi, Mississippi when it was dry to speak at a convention there. I drove over from New Orleans. There were flashing neon lights on the way to Mississippi for whiskey, liquor and bars, but Mississippi was dry. I asked one of my legislative friends in Mississippi about it. He said they reached a gentlemen's agreement among the northern part of the state that wanted it to be dry and the southern part of the state that wanted it to be wet. They passed a tax on illegal sales of liquor. This was a state law in the 1950s that the state tax commission would come into these liquor stores in Biloxi, do an inventory of their sales and fine them, but it wasn't a misdemeanor or a felony—just a fine. It was all around the country. The wet and the dry counties would reach an agreement. That was the way it was in Oklahoma. You could have your bootleggers as long as you didn't have legal sales. The reason bootleggers were popular and the reason people who drank didn't want to have legal liquor is that you didn't pay any sales tax on it and you could get it delivered

by cab and you could get it 24 hours a day. I thought that was ridiculous. That's why as a legislator I supported legal liquor that you could enforce. To me, that's the secret, not whether you sell or don't sell liquor, but whether or not you have an enforceable law. I told the legislature when I was governor not to send me a law that was unenforceable because I would veto it.

Chapter 11 – 2:26

Tourism

John Erling: When you were lieutenant governor you were especially interested in tourism?

George Nigh: I wanted the lieutenant governor to have something to do other than sit around and twiddle his thumbs. I used to say that the lieutenant governor was the insurance policy you hope you never have to cash in on. I developed the lieutenant governor's handshake. Every morning I would go down and shake the governor's hand. You put your index finger on his wrist and if it's beating you go back to bed because as lieutenant governor you don't have a dang thing to do! (Laughter) I told Dewey Bartlett that it was ridiculous that the lieutenant governor has nothing to do and he's a heartbeat away from being the head of this state. I convinced the legislature to create the Department of Tourism and to put the lieutenant governor in charge of it. It gave me a chance to be the champion of that kind of economic phase of development in the state.

JE: You ran with that for many, many years and that to this day is attached to your name.

GN: Yes. I am very proud of that. We created the countries. There already was a Green Country, where we are today doing this interview. But when I was lieutenant governor we divided the entire state into countries. I came up with the slogan, "Oklahoma, the state of many countries." We had Red Carpet Country, Green Country, Frontier Country, Kiamichi Country. There were six of them. Then I convinced the legislature and the governor to match funds if the counties in these "countries" would organize themselves, we would match them for advertising dollars. If they raised \$100,000 to promote Green Country, the state would give them another \$100,000 to promote Green Country. Until this day they are still doing that. We expanded it to include lake associations. We call it the multicounty program now. If all the counties around Grand Lake start a fund to advertise the lake, the state will match their advertising dollars up to a certain amount.

Chapter 12 – 2:50**Campaign for Governor**

John Erling: To follow your political career, in 1962 you ran for governor?

George Nigh: (Chuckle) I generally don't bring that up John—why would you bring that up? (Laughter)

JE: Maybe I shouldn't.

GN: That's the race I lost.

JE: Whom were you running against?

GN: Remember then, governors could not success themselves. Howard Edmondson was finishing out his four-year term as governor. I was lieutenant governor with statewide name recognition. If I ever wanted to be governor, that then was the time. I was still single. I had a lot of tie to campaign. I had 24 hours a day. I didn't have a family that I had to worry about. So I campaigned for governor in 1962. I have always regretted it. I tell people that once I got into the campaign I wouldn't have voted for myself. I just didn't sense that I was ready for it, even though I had been around a long time. I ran a poor campaign and I ran against some big names. Also what affected it was Howard Edmondson and I had gone in as the youth movement. He went into office very popular, carrying 76 of 77 counties and he went out of office very unpopular. We ran as a team, so I was a part of the unpopularity. One young guy was trying to succeed another young guy and the youth movement had failed.

JE: Who was elected in 1962?

GN: Our first republican governor, Henry Bellmon. Bill Atkinson was the democratic nominee in that race and he lost to Henry Bellmon. Bellmon not only got all of the Republican votes, but he was such a guy that that great in-between group of voters, who usually voted democrat, liked Henry Bellmon. He got the middle voted and just sapped the strength out of the Democratic party.

JE: What did you think then about your goal to be governor?

GN: I thought it was over. Having lost the governor's race in 1962, I keep saying I was single, but in January of 1963 I met the lady that was to become my wife, Donna. One of my former history students in McAlester was working for an airline in OKC. We were friends and he told me I needed to meet this gal who was a reservations person for TWA Airlines. So we had a blind date and seven months later or so we were married. She is still the love of my life.

Chapter 13 – 6:38**Senator Robert Kerr**

John Erling: Let's take you back here, because even though you lost, you still became governor.

George Nigh: (Chuckle) Yeah.

JE: Because Senator Robert Kerr, a very powerful senator from our state, died.

GN: January 1, 1963. OU was playing in the Orange Bowl. Howard Edmondson, the governor of Oklahoma and John F. Kennedy, the President as the United States are attending the Orange Bowl. I was still single. I was in McAlester at my parents' home spending New Year's with them. We were watching the bowl game and I got a call from Ed Montgomery, a reporter from *The Daily Oklahoman* asking me if I wanted to comment on Senator Kerr's death. I said, "What?" He said, "You are the acting governor. The governor is out-of-state, Senator Kerr just died and we need an official comment." I said, "Senator Kerr just died?" He said, "Yeah." I made an appropriate comment about how a tree had fallen in the forest. I was hanging up the phone, and as I am hanging it up it starts ringing again. Governor Edmondson's Press Secretary John said the governor wants to talk with you, but he's meeting with the president right now. They were at the Orange Bowl having a meeting about the news that Senator Kerr, the most powerful man in the United States Senate, from Oklahoma—died during the Orange Bowl. Under Oklahoma law at that time, the governor filled any vacancy in Congress. It's not like that now, but that's the way it was then. So after Senator Kerr's funeral, Governor Edmondson resigned. It was the end of his term. It was the end of my term as lieutenant governor and I had lost running for governor, but I became governor for nine days in January of 1963. The only humorous story there is that I had made a bet with a guy. I was running for governor the previous summer and I said to the guy, "I want to be the next governor of Oklahoma." He said sarcastically, "You'll never be the next governor of Oklahoma!" I said, "I will bet you \$100." Family made that. Well, Sen. Kerr died, Governor Edmondson resigns and I become governor. In the meantime, I had lost the bet so I had to pay him \$100. So I called him and I said, "I want my \$100 back, and I want the \$100 that you owe me." He said, "You didn't get elected governor." I said, "That wasn't our bet. You bet me I wouldn't be our next governor and I am." (Laughter) So he sent me \$200.

JE: So you were governor for nine days?

GN: Yes.

JE: Did you do anything as governor?

GN: Well, you obviously know the question—so you know the answer too. The biggest thing was that Senator Kerr, who was so powerful—

JE: Talk to us about him. Were you around him much?

GN: Yes. Okay, let's go back to Senator Kerr. He was a lovable giant. He owned Kerr-McGee oil company. He was the richest man in the United States Senate. He had his own private airplane so he would fly back and forth every weekend. He was the only member of the delegation in the country who would fly home in his own airplane. He would be here in Oklahoma all of the time. He was always around. He was so lovable. He was so tall that when you talked to him he just kind of leaned down and put his arm around you. He was so powerful that *LIFE* magazine wrote that President John F. Kennedy gets through Congress what Robert S Kerr will let him have. Bob Kerr was so powerful that my recollection is that the first public appearance outside of Washington that President Kennedy made as President of the United States was down in a Big Cedar, Oklahoma to dedicate the scenic drive from Talimena, Oklahoma to Mena, Arkansas. John F. Kennedy flew in and spent the night in Kerr's cabin in Poteau, Oklahoma up on a hill. Kerr flew in his rocking chair. John F. Kennedy had a bad back and Kerr had a rocking chair for him on his front porch. They had a ribbon cutting, etc. Back when I was in college, Kerr had a youth organization in Oklahoma, it has a name but I can't think of it right now. On every college campus there was a group of students who worked with Bob Kerr for Oklahoma. Supposedly it was nonpolitical, but we were all Kerr people. I was president of it at Eastern and then when I transferred to East Central in Ada, I was president of it there. I worked with Bob Kerr for years as a college kid. In 1950 when I ran for the legislature—I will never forget this—on the steps of the county courthouse in McAlester, Oklahoma, Pittsburg County, we were having a speaking. I walked up to Senator Kerr and I said, "Senator Kerr, I am George Nigh." He put his arm around me and said, "Oh George, I of course know who you are. But that's smart young man." Then he told me something John. He said, "George, I predict you'll go somewhere in politics if you'll remember three things. Always give your name first, so the other guy can act like he knows who you are. Number 2, always read the newspaper before you leave home so that wherever you go you'll know what they're talking about. Third, never pass up a men's room. (Laughter) It's 59 years later and I still remember it. He was so lovable and he was so powerful. Let me back up. He died January 1, 1963. In those days when you went to press if you were printing a national publication, you basically only printed it in one place. Today, they print magazines in four or five places across the country. Back then they would have to print it three days before the dateline of the magazine. So to get a January 3 copy of *LIFE* magazine, it had to be printed perhaps on December 31. They printed Bob Kerr's picture on the cover of *LIFE* magazine and called him the uncrowned king of the U.S. Senate. They published it and he died. It went on the newsstand after he

died. Isn't that something? They published it the day before he dies, he dies, and it goes on the newsstand two days after he dies as the most powerful man in the United States government.

JE: Yes.

Chapter 14 – 4:48

Kerr / Kennedy

George Nigh: I flew back with him from Washington one time when I was lieutenant governor on his airplane. He said, "I'm going home. Do you want to fly with me?" I said, "Yeah." He taught me how to play gin. He always wore suspenders. Big Bob Kerr would put his thumbs under his suspenders and snap them while he was talking to you. He was the richest man in the Senate.

John Erling: He came from oil money, Kerr-McGee.

GN: Yes. He was the first governor actually born in the state of Oklahoma, after statehood. So anyway we were flying back on his plane and he was teaching me how to play gin. He told me never to pick up any card that you could not play immediately. The co-pilot came back and said, "Senator Kerr, we are about to make our descent into Oklahoma City." Kerr got up and changed clothes. He put on his suspenders so he wasn't the wealthy Senator that was up in Washington, D.C., but Bob Kerr from Ada and Poteau, Oklahoma. He was powerful.

JE: To be around Carl Albert and Bob Kerr—I mean, you knew you were living a blessed life.

GN: Yes. I mentioned that Kennedy came to Big Cedar, Oklahoma to dedicate Talimena Drive at Bob Kerr's invitation. Well, Bob Kerr had campaigned for Lyndon Johnson for President. Bob Kerr is one of the reasons that Lyndon Johnson became Vice President. Lyndon Johnson ran against John F. Kennedy for the nomination for president for the Democratic Party. They selected Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy and Bob Kerr convinced John F. Kennedy that he needed Lyndon Johnson to carry the state of Texas—otherwise he wasn't going to be elected president. This guy ran against him! And Bob Kerr was his manager. Howard Edmondson, then the governor of Oklahoma, was active for Kennedy's campaign for president at the Democratic convention to get the nomination for president. Kerr's people were so mad at Edmondson for supporting Kennedy over Lyndon Johnson. They ran the Democratic Party. They would not allow the Democratic governor to be a delegate at the national convention. I was a delegate, but he was not. At the end—they thought, well, he's the governor so he needs to be an alternate delegate, meaning he wouldn't have a vote so he couldn't vote for John F. Kennedy on the floor. In

those days, the rules were the only way that you could make a speech from the platform of the Democratic convention you had to be either a delegate or an alternate. So they made Howard Edmondson without thinking, but knowing that he didn't have a vote. But they gave him the microphone up on the stage and Howard Edmondson seconded the nomination of John F. Kennedy for president of the United States and the entire Oklahoma delegation vote was for Lyndon Johnson. Because Kerr and Johnson were such good friends and they bring in the Democratic Party, our state's delegation was seated down front on national television. The entire time Edmondson was speaking as governor of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma delegation was standing at booing on live television. Okay, so you've got the picture?

JE: Yes.

GN: Okay. So Kennedy becomes president and Kerr invites Kennedy to come to Oklahoma and doesn't tell Edmondson. The highway department comes into the governor's office one day and said, "Governor Edmondson, do you really want us to pave that road from the top of the mountain down into Poteau like Senator Hamilton wants us to?" Edmondson said, "Why would we pave a road from the top of the mountain down into Poteau?" They said, "So President Kennedy's helicopter can land there. He's going to fly in on Air Force 1 to Fort Smith and then take a helicopter over to Poteau. He doesn't have a place to land. They want them to land on top of the mountain in we don't want the president coming down to land on a gravel road." Edmondson said, "Kennedy is coming to Oklahoma?" Edmondson told me this story. Edmondson calls the president of United States and says, "What's the deal? Bob Kerr was against you and I was for you. You're coming in to Oklahoma for Bob Kerr to dedicate highway and you don't even tell me?" Howard Edmondson said that John F. Kennedy said, "I'm not coming in to dedicate a highway—I'm coming in near to kiss Bob Kerr's (pause) rear-end. Howard Edmondson told me this personally. The president of United States didn't even tell the governor of Oklahoma who was for him, that he was coming into Oklahoma to kiss's rear-end, because Kerr was that powerful—from Poteau, Oklahoma. Can you imagine that?"

Chapter 15 – 7:41

State Lodges

John Erling: I wonder if we have ever seen as powerful a person...if they can become that powerful since?

George Nigh: No, I don't think so. The unusual thing about it that got us off on all this was what happened during my nine days as governor.

JE: Right.

GN: The unusual thing about all this is that Carl Albert, the speaker of the house, the most powerful man in the United States Congress, was best friends with the former speaker of the house from Texas. Carl was his assistant, so when he left as speaker Carl became speaker of the house. So his best friend was the speaker from Texas and Bob Kerr's best friend was Lyndon Johnson from Texas. So, Oklahoma's two most powerful politicians were best friends to the two most powerful politicians in the United States Congress who happened to both be Texans. So, Bob Kerr, using his political influence, talking about pork barrel in today's world, got federal funds to help tourism in southeastern Oklahoma to build to state lodges, Fountainhead and Arrowhead. They had the groundbreaking before they ever got the money, but they were promised the money. Then Kerr died, and I became governor. The money is appropriated but hadn't been designated for Oklahoma. Edmondson resigns and I become governor for nine days. He calls me at the shed and he says, "I forgot to tell you something. We haven't signed the contract yet for the two lodges and the contract signing date falls during your nine days as governor. You have to seal the deal with the federal government during those nine days. I can't be here to help you because I have to go to Washington, D.C." I called the appropriate person with the federal government and I said, "Okay, I need to make sure that the money is still set aside for Fountainhead and Arrowhead." He said, "Yes governor, it is. But I have to tell you that it's pretty tough to keep it." I said, "Suppose I wanted to delay the contract and let the next governor, which would be Henry Bellmon sign it?" He said, "I can't guarantee you that the money would still be here. I've already had four calls from United States Senators wanting to know if the money that was going to Oklahoma is available. With Kerr being dead, they were going to try and take the money away from Oklahoma. I said, "If I go ahead and sign it, and the next governor decides he doesn't want to do it, can we get out of it?" He said, "Sure, but you need to nail it down."

JE: Right.

GN: Fountain and Arrowhead became very controversial during those days. I wasn't saying that we had to build them. I was just saying let's give the next governor the right to decide. But I had to nail this money down. I was accused of a lot of staff.

JE: Why was there a controversy?

GN: There were a great number of people who didn't want Fountain and Arrowhead. *The Daily Oklahoman* was against it and was editorializing against it. I don't know why. I think they thought I was making some kind of a deal. I tried to explain that I was saving it to the next governor could decide if he wanted to do it. What happened was, the Tourism and Recreation Commission, of which I had been chairman, got split on it. Some of them were told that if they would vote no they would be reappointed to the commission.

Suddenly, some of the tourism and recreation commissioners who had been approving this, decided to vote against it. I said, "You can't do that." They used as their logic, that it was something that was several hundred pages long and they hadn't had a chance to read it. I called an emergency meeting of the commission on live television. I made them sit there and read every line. I hired lawyers and they read every line. We sat there for hours. (Chuckle) I said, "You I'm not going to say that you haven't read it."

JE: (Laughter)

GN: Isn't that terrible? Finally three of them came up to me and said, "We've been sitting here for three hours. When we get through reading it, we're still not going to vote for it. Why don't you just fire us?" That commission served at the pleasure of the governor, and I was governor. I said, "I can't fire you if you haven't done something. So we are going to sit here until we read it all and then we're going to vote." He asked me to cease and desist with the reading and call for a vote and then fire them. I said, "Okay." So we sent word to the presiding officer that at the point in time when they moved to quit reading the federal contract and put it to a vote, before they put it to a vote they were to recognize the governor of Oklahoma. So they made the motion to cease-and-desist reading and call for a vote. They passed the motion. Then presiding officer said, "Okay, before we call for a vote, the governor is here and we are going to recognize him." So on live television I got up and I said, "This commission serves at the pleasure of the governor and it is no longer the pleasure this governor that the following members serve." Then I read off about five names of people that were going to vote no. I knew who they were. I didn't fire the ones who were going to vote yes. Then they moved to adjourn the meeting. I went over to the mansion and I said, "What are we going to do now?" They said, "We have to appoint some new commissioners." So during the night from 10 PM till 7 AM the next morning I called people who had been sitting in the meeting who had heard the contract being read. I asked them to turn around and come back to the city and not tell anyone what they were going to do but I told them, "You are now a new member of the Tourism and Recreation Commission." So at 7 AM the next morning in the Blue Room I had a commission meeting. The press was there. They vote to approve the contract for Fountainhead and Arrowhead with the federal government and that was the only thing they did, because the next governor fired them. (Laughter) So we nailed down the money, but I got attacked because we made the deal and so forth. The interesting thing is they always say these are Nigh's lodges. I always say, "These are not my lodges. My name is not even on there." Because the next governor went to Washington and renegotiated the deal and got an extra million dollars, signed the contract and built the lodges. But all the years those who have criticized those lodges said they were mine. All I did was save the money that the

next governor could make a decision. Now that may sound defensive but that's how sometimes politics work. But I wasn't doing anything wrong and I don't think the next governor, Henry Bellmon did anything wrong. He signed a good deal. Fountainhead and Arrowhead were wonderful for a period of time. Unfortunately, the state let them fall into disrepair and had to get rid of them.

JE: So the private sector took them over?

GN: Yes.

Chapter 16 – 5:44

Perle Mesta

John Erling: You brought the international convention of Jaycees to Oklahoma City?

George Nigh: Yes.

JE: You brought to town one of the greatest party givers, Perle Mesta. Talk about her and her father.

GN: Well, Perle Mesta, it's kind of funny—there again it gives me a chance to brag about Oklahoma—because Perle Mesta from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, whose maiden name was Skirvin, lived in the Skirvin Hotel. Her dad built the Skirvin Hotel, which has just recently been refurbished. It's a wonderful facility even today. But Harry Truman was president of the United States and Perle Mesta was a very wealthy lady from Oklahoma who ended up in Washington, D.C. Because she was widowed and she was wealthy, all she does is throw parties. She was known as a party giver in Washington. Now, she's not just partying. The interesting thing about Perle Mesta is that people who wanted to get other people together—let's say you're somewhere else and I'm somewhere else—and somebody just wants to get John Erling and George Nigh together so that they could get something done—they would go to Perle and ask her to throw a party. Perle Mesta would throw a lavish dinner party at her home and seat John Erling next to George Nigh. Something would happen. Pass a bill—pass an amendment—defeat a bill—etc. So throughout many years, Democrats and Republicans, although she was a Democrat, Perle Mesta was known as the hostess with the mostess. She was appointed Ambassador to Luxembourg. The big deal about being the Ambassador to Luxembourg was that Perle Mesta from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma became the first woman in American history to be an ambassador to a foreign nation. Then, they wrote a musical about her called *Call Me Madam*. It was the life story of Perle Mesta. It starred Ethel Merman and Donald O'Connor. It was one of the great Broadway musicals.

JE: So, she had charisma.

GN: Oh yes. One of the funny things about Perle Mesta is when we had the Jaycee party in Oklahoma City as you mentioned, I wanted to have a lavish reception. I thought, how about we put it Perle Mesta, the hostess with the mostess from Washington, D.C. to come back to Oklahoma City and stay in her father's hotel and she would be the hostess for the reception held at the Skirvin Hotel for 70 countries around the world. So I flew to Washington to ask Perle Mesta to come home and be the hostess. We had the Secretary of State and we had three or four national officers who were coming in to speak on behalf of the United States of America to these outstanding young men from 70 countries around the world. We met with her and she said, "I'd like to do it, but I charge a fee of \$1,000."

JE: What year do you think it was?

GN: It was about 1965. I didn't have \$1,000 in 1965. I said, "We will cover your airfare, would you consider reducing your fee?" She sat up straight and looked a little indignant and she said, "I never reduce my fee. It's not fair to the other people who invite me that I would cut my fee for any group once I have charged them the higher fee. But I do want to come home, so I'll come for free, but I will not reduce my fee." (Laughter) I said, "Okay. I understand that." So she came. Years later, my wife Donna and I were guests at *The Ed Sullivan Show*. It was a live show. Ed said said, "We have some very special guests here tonight." He asked Donna and I to stand up and something hits me in the back of my head on live television. I turned around and it was Perle Mesta! (Laughter) She had her program in her hand. I hadn't seen her and she hadn't seen me, but when Ed Sullivan asked me to stand she hit me in the head. Then Ed Sullivan said, "And we have Former Ambassador Perle Mesta." Later after the show, Ed Sullivan had us backstage and it was so much fun. Years later, Perle got sick and came back to Oklahoma to live in a home that her father owned—not the hotel—but what is now called Mesta Park in Oklahoma City. Her sister called me and asked me if Donna and I would come to her home to see her. She was very lonely. She had been so popular. Everybody wanted to see her and no one wanted to see her. She was sick and no one would come see her or call her. Of course we said yes. So Donna and I went to visit her. You talked about *LIFE* magazine a while ago. Donna and I went to visit Perle Mesta and they took a picture and send it off and in the second issue of *People* magazine is a picture of Perle Mesta and me and Donna in her home visiting her at her home in Oklahoma City and a few weeks later she passed away, but, what an Oklahoma icon. Today it's Reba and Garth and Vince and Toby, Carrie Underwood and five Miss Americas. We have all these icons, but back in those days we had all of these political icons.

JE: Why were you at *The Ed Sullivan Show*?

GN: I have to say I didn't know Ed Sullivan but one of the people on his staff was from Sapulpa, Oklahoma and was a friend of mine. I was up there and called her and she said, "Would you like to go to The Ed Sullivan Show?" I said, "Yes!"

Chapter 17 – 11:14**Lieutenant Governor Again**

John Erling: In 1965, you were out of office for some time?

George Nigh: Yes. I was out of office for four years doing public relations work and managing the Jaycees convention—I got paid for that. I met Donna and got married. We had our son Mike and our daughter Georgeann and then suddenly decided I wanted to get back into politics. But when I married Donna, she didn't know I ever was going to get back into politics and I didn't either. I thought, I'm not going to run for governor again—I'm going to start over. I had been a popular lieutenant governor, although I couldn't get elected governor. I decided to go back and run for lieutenant governor because people identified me as a lieutenant governor and in charge of tourism and that sort of stuff. So, I ran for lieutenant governor again four years later and got elected.

JE: When you met Donna, she was a TWA reservation agent, but she also had reservations about marrying you?

GN: Oh yeah! (Chuckle) I like that word—she did have reservations. First of all, she had never been around politics. I had run for governor and lost, and she wasn't sure she wanted to be in politics. She didn't like the public life and I didn't know that I was going to run for an office again. I have to say that *The Daily Oklahoman* and the *Tulsa World* ran stories calling me Oklahoma's most eligible bachelor. I was 36 years old and never been married. I had been lieutenant governor, been governor, been in the legislature and taught high school. Then I am marrying this TWA airline reservation clerk. Donna would say, "What's the big deal? They are telling me that I am getting such a good deal by marrying the state's most eligible bachelor. He's \$100,000 in debt. He doesn't own a home and he doesn't own a car and he doesn't have a job. I'm out of debt and I own my own home. I have a job and I have a car and I'm getting a good deal?" (Laughter) She never could understand why they would always say this girl is so lucky to be with the most eligible bachelor. It's true. I was \$100,000 in debt when she married me. I didn't have a car. We moved into her house and drove her car and then I found work. (Chuckle)

JE: You campaigned for Preston Moore for governor?

GN: Yes. It would have been the 1966 campaign, because elections are always in even years and you take office in odd years. I had gotten the nomination for lieutenant governor really easily. I thought the governor and lieutenant governor should run as a team. Edmondson and I had done it. Preston Moore had gotten the Democratic nomination for governor, so I told Preston, "Why don't we run together?" He didn't want to exactly campaign together, but he wanted me involved in his campaign. So as a lieutenant governor who had gotten the Democratic nomination, and was supposed to be a shoo-in,

I made a political mistake in that I devoted my time to his campaign instead of mine and I almost lost. I became officially involved in Preston's campaign and I managed to schedule. Bill Kerr, Bob Kerr's son, was his campaign manager. All of the polls just about showed me running away with the lieutenant governor's race. Preston was leading the governor's race and was supposed to win, but the vote closed at the end and he lost and I barely won my race. It was a rude awakening for me. Let me tell you why. Let's go back in history. When I appointed Howard J. Edmondson as United States Senator, he served until the next general election and then he had to stand for election. He had become an unpopular governor and I appointed him Senator and that made a lot of people mad—that was a deal. So he ran to fill out the unexpired term. In the Democratic primary was Fred Harris, State Senator from Lawton, who beat Howard. And in the Republican primary was Bud Wilkinson, the most popular man in Oklahoma because of OU football. He was a national championship OU football coach. He was an icon running for United States senator. He was a shoo-in. We talked about the Jaycees. They have what they call the outstanding young men of America. They select 10 outstanding young men every year from across the country. Oklahoma, at that time had only had four men that had ever been selected. Three of them ran for United States Senator in the same election—Bud Wilkinson, Fred Harris, and Howard Edmondson. They were in the runoff. Harris beat Edmondson in the Democratic primary and then was running against Bud Wilkinson. Bud Wilkinson was for Barry Goldwater for president and he made the mistake that I just made. Bud Wilkinson said, "I want Barry Goldwater to be the president and if you want me to be your senator, vote for Barry Goldwater for president." Barry Goldwater was running against Lyndon Johnson, who was from Texas and very popular in Oklahoma at that time. People didn't want Barry Goldwater for president. The last time this state ever went Democrat for president was that election, when Lyndon Johnson carried Oklahoma. But Bud Wilkinson, the most popular man in Oklahoma at the time, and maybe the most popular man in Oklahoma history, lost the race for United States senator because he spent his time campaigning for somebody else. That's a big lesson. Can I tell you another something you don't know?

JE: Sure.

GN: I mentioned Bill Kerr, Bob Kerr's son, was Preston Moore's campaign manager. My son married Bill Kerr's daughter later on. So Senator and Governor Kerr's granddaughter married lieutenant governor and governor Nigh's son. Neither one of them were in politics. They met without us even knowing they met.

JE: How about that?

GN: So Bill Kerr and I share grandkids.

JE: But in the end, Dewey Bartlett...

GN: In 1966, I campaigned for Preston Moore and Dewey Bartlett won. Dewey Bartlett later went on to become a United States Senator.

JE: Then in 1970 we have David Hall?

GN: David Hall beat Dewey Bartlett for re-election. Going back to earlier in this interview, when I talked about the word Okie. David beat Dewey Bartlett because Bartlett tried to make us Okies and that was not popular.

JE: David Hall was an attorney from Tulsa?

GN: He was a district attorney, originally from Oklahoma City and then moved to Tulsa to be the district attorney over there.

JE: He was quite a charismatic person wasn't he?

GN: Yes, very charismatic. It's kind of funny. Dewey Bartlett was the first governor who could run for re-election and David Hall beat him. David Hall was the second one who could run for re-election and David Boren beat him. So, the first two governors who could run for re-election didn't make it. Then David Boren decided not to run for re-election and ran for United States Senator. That's when I decided that I would run for governor again.

JE: You ran for governor in 1978 and then what you just described took place then at that time?

GN: Yes, 1978 was my first term as governor. In 1982 I became the first governor to be re-elected. Dewey Bartlett ran for re-election in the defeated by David Hall and I got re-elected lieutenant governor. David Hall ran for re-election and was defeated by David Boren and he got re-elected lieutenant governor. So I served with four different governors as lieutenant governor. I mentioned earlier that you really don't want to run against an incumbent generally. David Boren was the Governor of Oklahoma and very popular. I presumed he was going to run for re-election, so I was getting out of politics having never been governor. I said that I couldn't be lieutenant governor anymore. I was just not going to run. Then suddenly David Boren decides he was going to run for United States Senator and I thought wait a minute. I decided to get back into politics because they wouldn't have to campaign against an incumbent. I changed my mind, decided to run and got elected.

JE: We should mention that David Hall did do some time. He served 19 months of a three-year sentence for extortion and conspiracy convictions?

GN: Yes, it did not happen while he was in office, but after he left office he was found guilty of violating some laws. I think the interesting thing is that you should take a lieutenant governor's office seriously because you're a heartbeat away from being the governor. I became governor twice while I was serving as lieutenant governor. Once with just a nine-day term and once with just a five-day term. You have to care about who becomes the lieutenant governor because suddenly he or she could be the governor. It doesn't have to be for 9 days—it could be for 2 years. You should know when you go vote for

the lieutenant governor, that whether they are of the same party or a different party— if that Governor’s office becomes vacant, whoever is the lieutenant governor, regardless of party, regardless of their viewpoints, is going to be governor of Oklahoma. So in my opinion they should run as a team. In Oklahoma law, the lieutenant governor is also the governor when the governor is out of state.

Chapter 18 – 4:30

Governor Nigh

John Erling: You were known as Good Guy Nigh. Didn’t they take that and try to use it against you?

George Nigh: Yes, they did. It’s kind of hard for me to say that I’m a good guy. It started out that one of my opponents in my governor’s race was attacking me and labeling me as a good guy. He was saying if you want a good guy for governor then vote for George, but if you want a strong governor and somebody who will really do something then vote for me!

JE: Who would this have been?

GN: Someone who today is a good friend of mine, Larry Derryberry. We are good friends now, but he was running and I was running and his line was if you want a good guy, vote for Nigh. We had a staff meeting one day and they said, “He’s calling you a good guy and it’s hurting our campaign.” I said, “What’s wrong with being a good guy?” They said, “Well, it doesn’t show that you are strong.” I said, “I’m not going to be ashamed to be a good guy.” I asked myself what good guys wore. You have to think back to the old-time movies. Let me ask you John, what do good guys wear?

JE: A white hat.

GN: Right. I told my staff we were going to become nice, good guys. We took off our suits and coats and ties. I said lets wear jeans for the rest of the campaign and a white hat. Pat and TJ Henry lived in Lawton and owned some clothing stores. Pat was one of my state campaign managers. I told her I wanted 5,000 white hats. I had to order 5,000 because the hat production line had shut down, but if you placed an order for 5,000 hats they would start making them again. She told them to make the 5,000 and the ones we did not use she would sell in her store. We sold the white hats for \$5 each. So all of my volunteers put on white hats and blue jeans. For months my wife and I never dressed up, we just wore jeans and a white hat. In David Boren’s campaign they carried a broom because they were “sweeping clean”. Eisenhower had a slogan “I like Ike” and he became president. If Nigh is a good guy, why can’t he become governor? It actually probably bailed my campaign out.

JE: You were sworn in in Tulsa when Governor Bartlett resigned. Tell us why you chose to do that.

GN: Well, I had a committee that was working on my inaugural. Boren left to go to Washington and I was going to be sworn in as governor and I thought that if I was sworn in in Oklahoma City it would deflate the inaugural activities, the ball and the swearing in ceremony. Besides that, Tulsa felt left out. Everything was at the capitol. I was going to put a governor's office in Tulsa when I became governor. I wanted Tulsa to know that George Nigh thought that it was a critical part of Oklahoma. I decided to go to Tulsa to be sworn in. Strangely enough, there was a place there called Bartlett Square. I had been Lieutenant governor under Bartlett. They had named the Square in his honor. I didn't choose it for that reason, but because I had campaigned in Tulsa at Bartlett Square in July and I handed out cards. A lady who was not for me said, "It'll be a cold day before you are ever elected governor." I remembered exactly where I was when she said that to me—I was next to the water fountain. I decided that I wanted to be standing at that water fountain to be sworn in. (Chuckle) The weather dropped below freezing the day that I was inaugurated in Tulsa. I was the first governor inaugurated outside of the capitol. But I was standing exactly where that lady had told me that it would be a cold day before I was elected governor. In my inaugural address I told the story and I said, "It is a cold day and I am governor of Oklahoma!" (Laughter) I just had fun with it.

JE: Then you went back and you were sworn in in Oklahoma City but it was nice of you to do that.

Chapter 19 – 8:23

Names We Know

John Erling: Let me throw out some names—President Carter, you were around him?

George Nigh: Jimmy Carter and I were good friends. We heard him speak in Pawnee, Oklahoma and my wife turned to me and said, "That man ought to be president." He was so genuine and so sincere. He was a good guy and a wonderful man in my opinion. He was not necessarily the administrator people thought he should be, but he had a hands-on philosophy and he wanted to be involved in everything. That was difficult for him as president, but he was a good human being. Jimmy Carter initiated the plan that he would invite every governor and some legislative leaders to the White House for lunch while he was president—one at a time. The first state that he invited was Oklahoma. My wife and I got to go up and do that. I don't know if he completed all 50 states or not, but I know that Oklahoma was the first state that Jimmy Carter invited officially to the White House.

JE: Vice President Walter Mondale, were you around him?

GN: Walter Mondale and I were friends. Jimmy Carter came to Elk City, Oklahoma one time. I went out there and met him. There was a picture of us on the front page of *The New York Times*. Jimmy Carter signed it and I framed it and had it in the mansion. Years later, Walter Mondale came through town and he stayed at the mansion. Three or four days later I was walking through the room where this paper was framed and I noticed something new and I had never noticed it before. On the bottom half of the page was a picture of Walter Mondale. He had taken it out of the frame and wrote, "George, I am your friend too! – Walter Mondale." And he hung it back up on the wall. (Laughter) I went on the J.C. Penney Board right after I left the governor's office. W. R. Howell from Claremore, Oklahoma was the CEO of J.C. Penney. It's strange how this interview is coming together. I had met him when he was a Jaycee in Norman, Oklahoma. Years later when he was CEO of J.C. Penney he asked me to be on the board. I went to my first board meeting wearing a new suit I bought from J.C. Penney. I was the only guy at the meeting wearing a J.C. Penney suit. It was a great company and I had a great time serving on their board. When I arrived in NYC I had just left the governor's office. I had no aid, no security and no car. I was getting my luggage and it was pouring raining outside. I bent down to make sure my luggage claim tags were right. Another guy kneels down next to me and his raincoat that he had over his shoulder hits me in the head accidentally. He was down checking his bag tags too. It was Walter Mondale who had just run for president and lost. So here he is a former vice president and here I am a former governor and we are getting out own luggage, which we should do. Walter Mondale looked at me and said, "Real life's hell isn't it?" (Laughter) That's all he said to me. We both laughed. He got up and left and I got up and left. (Chuckle)

JE: As long as I am dropping names, lets talk about Ronald Reagan?

GN: I think Ronald Reagan showed that if you put people in that you trust and that you can count on, that they can run it, but Ronald Reagan did not try to run the day-to-day activities of the presidency. He spoke in generalities and then had his people take care of things. My only personal meeting with Ronald Reagan was over energy. It's kind of funny, because back when I was governor from 1978 to 1986 we were trying to make America energy independent. Jimmy Carter said in my presence, "Because Governor Nigh has talked to me, I believe in energy independence. America will be energy independent in four years." He said that in Texarkana, Texas when he was president. Jimmy Carter believed in energy independence and so did Ronald Reagan and here we are still dependent on foreign oil. I also met with him in 1982 when Oklahoma was doing so well economically with energy, Ronald Reagan contacted me and said, "I would like to come address a joint session of the Oklahoma Legislature." I said, "Great!" And he flew in and did that.

JE: George H. W. Bush?

GN: I knew him as Vice President and Barbara. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I've always said if any grandchild could pick his grandparents, right at the top of the list would be George and Barbara Bush. They are wonderful people. Strangely enough we are doing this interview today and tomorrow night I am going to see George Bush in Tulsa. Former President Bush and Former President Bill Clinton are both appearing in Tulsa tomorrow night for the Salvation Army and my wife and I will be there. I never will forget when Bush was vice president and the governors went up there to Kennebunkport and visited with him. We pulled up in a car and he was standing out in the driveway. We got out of the car and he said, "George and Donna, it's so good to have you at our home." That's the kind of guy he is. I really do personally like him and Barbara very, very much.

JE: One more name, President Bill Clinton.

GN: President Clinton and I became buddies when he was governor of Arkansas and I was governor of Oklahoma. To this day we are still very good friends. My personal relationships with Clinton are long and many. I was at several governors' conferences with him and I was in his campaign. When he was governor of Arkansas, he was my presenter when I was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. That's how close we are. Last year, my wife was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame and Bill Clinton did a video for her induction. I think the closeness that we have is evidenced by the fact that during the Oklahoma City bombing—I was no longer governor, but I was president of the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond. I am sitting at my desk and I hear this tremendous boom. To show you how dated I am I said, "I haven't heard a sonic boom in a long time." It was the sound of the Oklahoma City bombing. Clinton was President of the United States and he called me and asked me to be chairman of a committee that would raise funds that would guarantee a college education to any surviving child of the bombing. I have to say that Governor Keating did a wonderful job. He also raised funds, as did lieutenant governor Mary Fallin at the time.

JE: As youngsters, you both were young and knew you wanted to be in politics?

GN: Yes.

JE: The stories are pretty much the same in a way.

GN: Absolutely. Clinton met President John F. Kennedy at Boys Nation and that's how he knew he wanted to be president.

Chapter 20 – 7:27**Issues**

John Erling: Let's talk about pari-mutuel betting, Remington Park and Ed DeBartolo.

George Nigh: Remember, my history was in tourism. People in Oklahoma wanted racing.

Some counties didn't—but the state as a whole did. We put it to a vote of the people and we won. We wanted to build a racetrack and I got people to make the land available. Suddenly, something happened and DeBartolo announced that he wasn't going to build a racetrack in Oklahoma. So OU was in the Orange Bowl and OSU as in another bowl game. I was governor. So there were two Oklahoma teams playing in bowl games in Florida. I was trying to get DeBartolo into Oklahoma. He was from Ohio. He has a place in Florida that he takes his management to each year and it coincided with New Year's when both OU and OSU were playing bowl games. As governor of Oklahoma, I had flown to Ohio to meet with DeBartolo. He told me he was coming and then later he said he wasn't. I took the state airplane and I flew from Miami over to Naples, Florida to tell him he had to come to Oklahoma. He changed his mind. He was impressed that I showed up out of the blue to talk to him. He told his people to build a racetrack. I am always honored that at times when he would come to Oklahoma he would say, "I'm here today because of that man right there, George Nigh." He said that even when I was out of office.

JE: But wasn't there some there some hesitation? I think *The Daily Oklahoman* wanted him to reveal personal financial date and he balked at that?

GN: Yes, and I agreed with him on that. *The Oklahoman* and I disagreed on several things and that was one of them. I told him that Oklahoma wanted him in Oklahoma and he came. Yes, *The Oklahoman* was very upset about it, but we brought in pari-mutuel racing. I think that a way to close this would be the 1982 campaign for re-election and the 1984 tax increases. We've talked about George Bush the father, who may have been defeated because they asked him about whether he was for tax increases and he said, "No." He said, "Read my lips, no new taxes." And then while he was president he raised taxes. But I think he should have. I was governor in 1978 and Oklahoma was in an oil boom. We were doing very well. Yachts were on Grand Lake. People were wearing gold bracelets and necklaces and chains. We were in a heyday. I ran for re-election and they asked me if I was for raising taxes and I said, "No." I have to tell you and I am not bragging, in November of 1982 I was re-elected. I'm the only governor to ever carry all 77 counties to this day. I want to be honest with you. I was flattered to think that Bob Kerr didn't do that and Howard Edmondson didn't do it and Brad Henry didn't do it. I can name all of these names of people that didn't do it. I am the only governor that did. Had the election been two weeks later, I wouldn't have, because in 1982 Penn Square Bank failed. The economy

went belly up. I was re-elected governor in November and carried every county. I got the most votes that any governor had ever received. Two weeks later Oklahoma had its first failure of revenue in its history. During the heyday of the state, I had created the rainy day fund. It was my idea to not spend all of the money that we had, but to set it aside for hard times. I got re-elected and we had a failure of revenue. We don't raise enough money, but we have a rainy day fund. So I get us through the first year without any tax increase. I can keep this going because I had this rainy day fund set aside. The second session came in and we still didn't meet our revenue estimates. I thought what am I doing here? They were talking about firing teachers. The highway patrolmen were pulling their cars over to the side of the road because we couldn't afford the gasoline. We canceled the Highway Patrol classes and I, being a history teacher said, "I didn't become Emperor of the Roman Empire to preside over its fall and demise. Nor did I become governor of Oklahoma to see our schools close and our laws are not enforced." So I came out for tax increases and they called me a liar. All of my political career, even after that, people would say, "Well, he lied." People would ask me, "Would you have done something differently?" I didn't know how to answer that question. Henry Kissinger was in Oklahoma one day speaking at OSU. He gave me my answer—Republican Henry Kissinger. They asked him the same question—if you had it all to do over again, would you do anything differently? He said, "Absolutely not! I would do nothing different!" Well, you know you would, but he gave me the answer. Henry Kissinger said he would do nothing differently...provided you gave him the same information today that you gave him when he made that decision. Now, if you want to give me different facts, I might make a different decision. I thought, there's my answer. Sure, there would never be any tax increases had I known that we were going to close down schools. I think that's a good way to close discussions in politics. If you take the facts as they were when the person in politics made the statement, and compare them to the facts as they existed the day that they made their decision... Let me close with this. John F. Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon basically because of a television debate. They took a national poll and the people that saw the television debate said Kennedy won. The people that listened to it on the radio said that Nixon won it. They couldn't see Nixon and they couldn't see Kennedy. Nixon had a 5 o'clock shadow and he refused to wear makeup. Kennedy looked like a movie star. Nixon sweated profusely and would be mopping his brow on television and Kennedy was cool and collected. Kennedy said if he was elected president he would invade Cuba. Richard Nixon as the vice president of the United States and the nominee for president said, "That's the most irresponsible statement I've ever heard. We would not invade Cuba." Now, on national television Kennedy said he would invade Cuba and VP Nixon said if he was president that he would not. Well, Kennedy wins the election and discovers that the Eisenhower Administration had been

planning with Nixon's knowledge the invasion of Cuba. Here, Kennedy said he would, and Nixon said he wouldn't, but Nixon knew they were planning it and Kennedy didn't. But when he found out as president that they were planning it, he went on public television and said, "I was wrong, we will not invade Cuba. I should not have said that" because he was giving away our plans. He said that we wouldn't and yet he then as president went ahead and planned it. No one really accused him of being a liar, but he misspoke. He misspoke the truth and Kennedy misspoke the truth, but based upon the facts as they existed no one really thought that they should be called liars.

Chapter 21 – 4:39

Lucille Ball

John Erling: A young person who listens to this who is interested in politics and public service do you have some words for them?

George Nigh: I'm proud to be a professional politician. I want the young people of Oklahoma and America to be interested in public service and run for public office all through your life. Do good service, do good work and be good people. There's nothing wrong with a politician unless you do something wrong.

JE: I should say in your private life you and Donna have done wonderful things like the Donna Nigh Foundation. By the way, you've always been the youngest, but I think you are one of the oldest to become president of a university at the University of Central Oklahoma?

GN: I was the oldest person in Oklahoma history ever hired as president of a public university.

JE: We have the Nigh Institute of State Government?

GN: Yes.

JE: The George and Donna Nigh Public Service Scholarships where students must participate in public service. It must make you feel good that that entity continues on?

GN: The legislature created that and Donna and I are very honored. Every public and private higher educational institution in the state selects one person every year to participate in the George and Donna Nigh Scholars Program. They get a \$1,000 scholarship and all-expenses-paid trip to Oklahoma City to attend a five-day government seminar. We are involved in it, but I don't run it and I don't manage it and I don't select the scholars. The president of every university selects the outstanding public-service student on their campus to participate, and what an honor that the legislature would do that.

JE: Here you are 81 years old. You look years younger.

GN: And when I grow up I am sure I will be a fine man! (Laughter)

JE: We've enjoyed listening about your life today and appreciate your time and your

willingness to talk about it. You would have to say that you have lived a very charmed life.

GN: I have. I am very fortunate. I've had a wonderful life. I got to fulfill my dream. I listened to Bob Kerr's encouragement and Carl Albert's encouragement. I listened to my friends and tried not to disappoint them. If they voted for me once, I wanted them to vote for me again. I tried to live up to what they expected. I'm not the smartest man in the world. I never claimed to be a Rhodes Scholar, but that doesn't mean I don't understand government. I would encourage people to run for public office. To win, you have to get the most votes but don't do anything wrong to get them. That's a good way to wrap this up. I was lieutenant governor and Lucille Ball who was the No.1 television star in America from the *I Love Lucy* show comes to Oklahoma to speak to a youth conference sponsored by the Kiwanis Club of Oklahoma. I was to introduce her at Taft Stadium in Oklahoma City and a very small crowd attended. The Kiwanis Club did not get very many young people out that night. They came to me and said, "We have a problem. Miss Ball won't get out of her car because the crowd is too small and she flew in here from Hollywood, California for a couple hundred high school kids at a football stadium. She won't get out of the car." I was going to introduce her, so I said, "Let me go talk to her." It was a dark window and I couldn't see inside, but as I walked up to the window she rolled the window down. She was sitting in the backseat with dark sunglasses on. I said, "Miss Ball, I am George Nigh, the Lieutenant Governor of Oklahoma. I am to introduce you. We are so honored to have you here in Oklahoma. We are just so appreciative of you being here." Miss Ball looked at me and said, "How did someone so young get to be the lieutenant governor of Oklahoma?" Okay, so she's a comedienne. I thought she would enjoy a good joke. So I responded, "I got the most votes." The window rolled up in the car pulled out of the driveway and drove off and she flew back to California. (Laughter) So, I want to end this interview by telling you that to be successful in politics, you have to get the most votes. (Chuckle) I've remembered that day ever since I told that to Lucille Ball. I thought I was being funny, but she just rolled up the window and drove off in her car. So young people should study government, study history and know your people. You are their voice. Run for public office. There's nothing wrong with being in politics.

JE: Thank you George. This was wonderful. You are so giving to this by sharing such great stories. I appreciate it very much.

GN: You're welcome!

Chapter 22 – 0:20**Conclusion**

Announcer: Thanks to our sponsors, you have heard another Oklahoma oral history story. You may consult our For Further Reading section for more information about former Oklahoma Governor George Nigh. Share these stories with your friends, heard only on VoicesofOklahoma.com.