

Paul Thornbrugh

Known as “Mr. Republican,” Paul was a businessman, patriot, public servant, politician, and most proudly a *family man*.

Chapter 01 - 0:52

Introduction

Announcer: Paul Thornbrugh was a patriot, public servant, politician, and businessman.

Paul served during World War II as a sailor in the U.S. Coast Guard. As a public servant he served on various boards and commissions in Kansas before moving to Oklahoma where he was a board member for the Catoosa Port Authority, and U.S. Commissioner for the Kansas-Arkansas River Commission. As a politician, he was county chairman for the Tulsa County Republican Party, presidential elector for the State of Oklahoma, and delegate to the National Republican Convention. Paul was known as “Mr. Republican.” His business life took him to Phillips 66 and Mid-America Pipeline Company, known as MAPCO. And he was also the founder of the first National Political Action Committee dedicated to business and energy policy.

Paul was 97 when he died May 17, 2018. But you can listen to his voice as he talks about his very interesting life on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 4:13

Paul's Parents

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is October 14, 2014. Paul, state your full name and your date of birth.

Paul Thornbrugh: My full name is Paul Edward Thornbrugh, initials PET.

JE: P-E-T.

PT: And I was born April 15, 1921.

JE: Your present age is?

PT: Ninety-three years old.

JE: We are recording this interview here in Tulsa in your home.

PT: Yes, my wife and I celebrated our seventy-fourth anniversary this year. Decided to get away from all housekeeping and all the other things, so we moved to a senior citizen's apartment house.

JE: Yeah.

PT: So she could retire too.

JE: Where were you born?

PT: I was born in Olathe, Kansas.

JE: Tell me about your mother. Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she was from.

PT: My mother's maiden name was Ethelyn Hoover. She was born in Quenemo, Kansas.

JE: What kind of a person was she? Her personality?

PT: My mother's father, my grandfather, was about a 25 percent Cherokee Indian. (laughing)

JE: Okay, what was his name?

PT: His name was James Thomas Hoover. But Mother, back in those days, she was a lady of the house and she was a wonderful mother and grandmother and stayed home and kept things going for us.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

PT: I had two brothers and a sister. My sister was five years older than me, her name was Evelyn. She was born in Olathe too, I think. But she's deceased.

I had two brothers younger than me; one was Billy Alford, he was in the navy in World War II, and he's deceased. My youngest brother was Alva Thornbrugh, he's also deceased.

JE: About your father then, what was your father's name?

PT: My father's name was Alva Lemuel Thornbrugh.

JE: Did he grow up in the Kansas area?

PT: He was born in Quenemo. He was born in the general area where we were. He didn't have any brothers or sisters.

JE: What did he do for a living?

PT: Well, a lot of things, but when he retired he was a Western Union Telegraph operator. But during World War II, he took a leave of absence and worked with the Parsons Ordnance Plant as a guard in Parsons, Kansas. That's 'cause all of us boys was in service.

After the war was over, he went back to Western Union Telegraph office and retired. He died exceedingly young with a ruptured appendix.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

PT: He was only about forty-nine years old when he died.

JE: Wow. The first house you remember?

PT: Well, I remember the Olathe, Kansas, we were right there by the railroad track to the Santa Fe depot. But we moved when I was young.

My dad was a Western Union Telegraph operator and they transferred him to Sweetwater, Texas, so we all moved out there to Sweetwater, Texas, to Hoover days and vaudeville days. Stayed there until after the Depression hit. They would cut back on time and my brothers and I was on quarters in Texas. I remember selling *Saturday Evening Post* and the banks all went broke that day we closed.

So we transferred back to Kansas, Garnett, Kansas, where my mother's father lived, James Hoover. Stayed with my grandfather for a while. My dad got a job on the railroad, then we moved on out from there to another state.

JE: Remember the cars back then? The first car you remember?

PT: Well, (laughing) my dad never owned a car. But my grandfather, I think he had a Model A Ford and then went to a Chrysler.

JE: That's quite a jump.

PT: Yeah, it was a used. Of course, those old Model As only cost about two hundred, three hundred dollars, something like that. But that's the first car I can remember.

And the first car we ever had, like I say, my dad didn't own a car but we got one from my grandmother, I think, and we had that. It was a Chevrolet.

JE: The first school you attended?

PT: Well, I turned to elementary school was in Sweetwater, Texas. And we lived on the same street where Sammy Baugh, the All-American great football player at Texas Christian College lived. That's where I was at school when we moved to Garnett. Then I went to the Irving Elementary School there in Garnett.

Chapter 03 - 2:00

Depression/Dust Bowl

John Erling: Nineteen twenty-nine the stock market crashed.

Paul Thornbrugh: Yes it did.

JE: You would have been about eight years old.

PT: My recollection is I knew it happened and I know what a low feeling and a lost feeling everybody had in the town. And jobs become insecure. My dad only worked maybe half the time that he did before. It was just a tough time.

JE: So the income for your family was cut back because your father only worked part-time.

PT: After things had kind of calmed down a little bit this thing I remember is that they had the CC camps and built buildings and did stuff like that.

JE: WPA program?

PT: Yeah.

JE: The Depression continues until 1932, and you're eleven years old. So you remember it was tough then for many families during the Depression. You're eight, nine, ten, eleven years old.

PT: Oh, yeah.

JE: It was tough years.

PT: It was. Well, life was a little better. I can remember that we were in our own home. The iceman used to come along and deliver ice. The milkman left the milk on the porch. As much as I can remember, at least we had a decent living.

JE: The Dust Bowl was 1930 to 1936. You were nine to fourteen years old then, and you were living in Kansas, weren't you?

PT: Oh, yeah.

JE: So did the Dust Bowl affect you there?

PT: Yes, and good. I remember that Dust Bowl in the rural areas.

JE: Tell us about that.

PT: That was before air-conditioning and everything else. It was just a miserable time for breathing. The Dust Bowl was more in the rural areas than it was in the city where we lived. I recall only that there were tough days and hot days.

JE: Dust seeping in through the windows?

PT: (laughing) Yeah, it would have, yeah. You had to leave the windows open because there was no air-conditioning.

JE: And then here comes all the dust.

PT: Yeah, it was dusty, you choked up a little bit.

JE: Some people talked about they would have to wear a mask over their face.

PT: Well, no, we didn't have to do that.

Chapter 04 - 2:17

Four Boys

John Erling: You went on to junior high school then where?

Paul Thornbrugh: The elementary school right there, you went on into junior high school in the eighth grade. And then when you become a ninth-grader, well, you went into high school.

JE: What year did you graduate from high school?

PT: 'Thirty-nine.

JE: Nineteen thirty-nine?

PT: Yeah.

JE: All right.

PT: Fact is, we went back to a reunion here about ten years ago or something like that.

JE: Okay.

PT: See how many of us was left.

JE: Did you go on to college, then, right out of high school?

PT: Not right out of that. I worked for [indiscernible], it's a service station. And my wife, later on, she and I were high school sweethearts.

JE: And her name?

PT: Freda, Freda Curtis. She was raised on a farm about ten miles west of Garnett. They suffered a lot from that dadgum dust storm too.

JE: When did you get married?

PT: June the first, 1941.

JE: Yeah.

PT: We were married at First Christian Church in Garnett, Kansas.

JE: How many children did you have from that marriage?

PT: Well, we're still married (laughing). We had four sons. The oldest boy was born when I was in service in 1942. He'll be seventy-two years old in December. I got home on a ten-day leave. My wife was out to the farm living with her folks. I got there and he was born the next day.

JE: How about that, isn't that great?

PT: (laughing) So then the second son was born in Garnett too. He's Paul Thomas or Tom Thornbrugh, he's the district judge here now.

The third son was Fred. Tom is sixty-eight, this other boy is sixty-two. He was born in Topeka when I was in the governor's administration out there in Topeka, Kansas. And he lives out in Massachusetts.

The fourth son, Michael, I was a division manager for Phillips Petroleum Company. Lived near Wichita and my office is in Wichita and Michael was born in Wichita. He'll be fifty-four in October.

JE: And we should say here that Tom is on the Oklahoma Court of Civil Appeals District Three. And then Mike works in Government Affairs for QuikTrip.

PT: Oh, yeah, Mike, he interned with me when I was down here in Mapco and headed up their department in Governmental Affairs. He now has got an excellent position with QuikTrip. He was at the state legislature here in Oklahoma for three terms.

JE: Yes.

PT: I had the pleasure of running his campaign.

Chapter 05 - 4:38**Military Service**

John Erling: Nineteen forty-one, December 7, Pearl Harbor Day.

Paul Thornbrugh: Oh, yes.

JE: What are your recollections of that day?

PT: We think about that. And I was telling my boys that most of us didn't know if where Pearl Harbor was or what it was. And when it come on the radio—there was no television—we were all kind of scared. And I remember that my wife and I went down to my grandfather's house, asking him, you know, "What's this thing doing in this war and all?"

Well, the only thing he remembered was an imaginal line in World War I in France.

(laughing) We were all concerned and scared and not knowing where we would go from here.

JE: You would have been twenty years old then on that date, 1941, December 7th.

PT: Yeah.

JE: What did you do? Did you join military then?

PT: Well, I at that point in time owned a service station. The draft board was started up and they were drafting people right and left. I didn't want to particularly be in the army; I thought the naval branches were important but I knew I couldn't wait around to get drafted. So I enlisted in 1942.

JE: You enlisted in the navy?

PT: It was the coast guard, but at that point, that was the navy. I was sworn in at St. Louis and went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and started my boot camp.

JE: By that time you had been married about a year.

PT: Oh, yeah, a little over a year.

JE: Yeah. Then you were with the US Coast Guard. What was your duty, where did you go?

PT: As I said, I ended up stationed on land for the first years of my service. And then, like everybody else, I mean, New York, New York went into a DE, Disorder Escort. The USS *Huron* was the ship that I was on and we got rammed. We were escorting a convoy and hit some depth charges and the captain couldn't drop bombs because we had a convoy of all these ships. So he, being a typical long-time navy guy, decided that we would ram that destroyer.

He headed that way and what happened was that we got rammed by one of our own ships in front of it as we tried to get there. So we had to abandon ship. So the seamen we had on there was killed from crash on the deck.

JE: You said that you abandoned ship, so that meant that you were in the water?

PT: Yeah, well, I went in the water and was picked up, I can't remember now what the name of the ship was that picked us up. And they towed that ship to try to get it fixed. It wasn't going to work. I can't remember, we saw Bermuda or someplace over in there.

I got transferred and went aboard the USS *William H. Gordon*, which was a transport, AP-117.

JE: Were you largely in the Atlantic during the war?

PT: I can tell you, I got a slip here with all the names. I was one of the charter members of the National World War II Memorial that Bob Dole got set up in congress. He put me on it.

I served aboard the USS *Huron* and then the USS *William H. Gordon*. I received ribbons, European Theatre, American and Mediterranean Theatre of War and African area, and had a bronze star, and I'm proud of the Good Conduct Medal.

JE: (both laughing)

PT: I told my boys that.

JE: What was your bronze star for?

PT: The ship that we was on that was hit.

JE: Okay.

PT: Because we stayed in there and tried to ram that thing and so on.

JE: What was your job?

PT: Well, we all had guards that we stood. I was on the cave guns on the aft part of the ship but what I did was I had a storekeeper rig, called a storekeeper SK, storekeeper was a petty officer. What we did was keep the payrolls and the transfer rolls and all of that sort of thing for the ship and also on land stations when we had it.

JE: How many years were you in the Coast Guard?

PT: About four years. I got out in May of 1945. I was on another ship then when that happened. And this is November 1945, USS *Monticello*. This is the division officer of that and he says, "It's requested that Thornbrugh, Paul E., SK2C, be released from further duties aboard this vessel and transferred ashore prior to the vessel's departure for the purpose of being discharged." It said, "No replacement is necessary for this transfer and none is asked it." That was the Lieutenant Commander of the USS *Monticello*. And that was November 7, 1945.

JE: Well, that was a happy day, wasn't it?

PT: Oh, yeah. So then I went ashore and ended up being discharged.

Chapter 06 - 4:34
First Elected Office

John Erling: And then you came back to Kansas?

Paul Thornbrugh: Yeah, my wife and only son, I was the only one aboard ship that was a father, I think. My wife was living out on the farm with her dad and mother.

JE: Then you settled into life there in Kansas, in what town was it nearby?

PT: Well, we were married in Garnett, Kansas.

JE: Right, and then when you came home from the war, where did you—

PT: And we went to Garnett, Kansas. That's where Curtis was born, the oldest son. And then the next son was born there. I owned a couple of stations.

JE: Gas stations?

PT: Yeah. My mother-in-law was a high Republican and a Republican chairman and all of that. And I had people encourage me to run for a county office about 1948, I think. It was the county clerk of Anderson County, Kansas. So I filed for that office and was elected by about twenty-seven votes, something like that. I beat an incumbent Republican, that was a Republican who had served there about four terms or so. It was a close battle but we did a lot of campaigning and had a lot of friends, my mother-in-law did and I did. So that's why we were elected.

About 1952 I served in my third term, the governor of Kansas offered me this position in his state government to head up the State Commission of Revenue and Taxation.

JE: You're twenty-seven years old, then, in 1948, when you win that election.

PT: Yeah.

JE: Did you become a Republican because your mother-in-law was a staunch Republican?

PT: Not necessarily. I liked the party, for what it stood and what it was doing. Back in those days, my folks, they were all Democrats but they were Conservative Democrats, would be equivalent to the Republican today. In fact, I voted absentee ballots when I was in service. Franklin Roosevelt was our president.

JE: Did you vote for him?

PT: No, but you know what? I had a high regard for him because he put the CCC, KFs and other things out, the jobs, and battled this depression and all. And he was doing things in this war that I liked a lot.

As a matter of fact, we were on our way to Cherbourg, France, heading over to Italy on a transport and the flags was half mast all across that ocean and we didn't know why. When we got to Auray, France, the captain got on the loud speaker and said that Roosevelt had died, our Commander in Chief.

I told my mother-in-law this too. I got a tear in my eye because, you know, he was our commander and he did a heck of a good job at it.

JE: Right.

PT: I remember that.

JE: Then you were a member of the Kansas State Tax Commission, the governor appointed you. Then you went on to another elected office?

PT: Well, one of the things that my job required of me at the state capitol there was I was responsible for the assessment and taxation of all corporations and companies. We had the Court of Appeals, a board of equalization. The local assessor assessed the local property, but this was people like Phillips and what-have-you-all, the railroads. The hearing would be before our board.

After about two or three years up there I had an offer, a good offer to join Phillips Petroleum Company. One of the things that I had to do in my job there with the Tax Commission was the legislature passed the law and I had to develop ratio studies that was made on whatever sales were made. The officers were required to put the sales price and what the assessed value was to get the ratio, because Kansas law was assessed at a two-market value, with a willing buyer, willing seller.

But Phillips offered me a job, the government job would have expired anyway. And it was just a great opportunity to get free business. So that's where I ended up in Midland, Texas, Phillips Petroleum Company, in a tax insurance claims division office and I transferred down there.

JE: What year would that have been?

PT: About 1952 or '53, I think.

JE: Phillips Petroleum at that time, who was the executive in charge of Phillips?

PT: Well, then that was Ford Smythe. Ford Smythe headed up the tax insurance and claims division. Boots Adams was the—

JE: Boots Adams?

PT: Yeah.

JE: Did you ever meet him?

PT: Yeah.

JE: What kind of a person was Boots Adams?

PT: He was a great free enterprise guy, a business guy, and the company had good retirements and good wages and good everything. So it was a good deal and a growing thing.

Chapter 07 - 5:02**Mapco**

John Erling: When did you start attending college?

Paul Thornbrugh: When I was in service I come back, I took a lot of off-college-campus college work, correspondence, and what-have-you on the GI Bill of Rights. When I was trying to develop the ratio studies the University of Kansas had the department that was helpful in that thing. I went over to KU and spent a lot of time and took a lot of courses during that period of time and off and on.

JE: You also attended the University of Tulsa.

PT: Well, that's after I moved down here, I just took special courses.

JE: Okay.

PT: When I was in there I took La Salle's School of Law correspondence and finished years of law in that.

JE: Where?

PT: La Salle University School of Law, La Salle's in, I don't know where the hell it is, Pennsylvania? They did stuff that I never did thought about this. But anyway, it was just correspondence. And I'd go in to take my final exams at the law school down here.

JE: At the University of Tulsa?

PT: Now, don't want to misunderstand, I only went there when I had the final exams.

JE: Right. But then you got a law degree by correspondence.

PT: Yeah, but I never went to the bar because I didn't have the four years of college.

JE: Okay. But that certainly didn't hold you back any, did it, at all?

PT: No, no, not at all. I had a very blessed life.

JE: So you were in Midland, Texas, how do you come to Tulsa, Oklahoma?

PT: Phillips did transfer people. They transferred me on an opening and the Phillips Petroleum Company division in Wichita, Kansas. That's where Michael was born. Then they run into some economic and they were consolidating divisions, so I was transferred to St. Louis for about six months. And then I went to Denver, Colorado. We lived there for about two or three years.

When I got an offer from Mapco in Tulsa, the general counsel for that company, he and I worked together in Midland, Texas, (laughing) in the tax insurance and claims. They offered me a good job. I resigned from Phillips and joined Mapco, yeah.

We moved to Tulsa then 1965, I think.

JE: With Mapco you were director of governmental and political affairs.

PT: That's correct. I was the division of taxation; we also handled the workman's comp and handled a lawsuit up to tax insurance and claims. If somebody had a wreck over at the

station or something and sued us or if one of the workers at the refinery at Kansas City got hurt and the union would get him up to get disability, that was a part of all of our work to do.

JE: And then you were coordinator of the Washington, DC, office.

PT: The owner and guy who built it, Bob Thomas, who turned a hundred in July—

JE: Yes.

PT: ...wanted me to go set up an office because we knew that the free enterprise system was suffering from governmental control and all of that thing. And that's what the political action committees were in the business area. We could set up an office there and work the congress area. So I went to Washington and located a place for a division office. Got it set up, got it staffed, and then coordinated it from there. I didn't want to move to Washington. (laughing)

They were all shocked when I turned down probably a president or whatever. Because the people I know of that went to Washington lost their family, and I wanted no part of that, so I coordinated. I went back and forth.

JE: Between Tulsa and Washington?

PT: And they had a staff, good staff in Washington.

JE: Tell me about Bob Thomas as a leader. What kind of a person was he?

PT: Oh, he was a tremendous guy. He built that damn thing and not only was he great in business but he was well respected. He used to go to Washington and testify before some of those committees. He was extremely capable and especially respected by all of the other utility companies and what-have-you.

He had visions where Mapco would expand in different areas. The employees kept growing and growing and the company got better.

In fact, I went to his 100th birthday here last year. He was a tremendous guy.

JE: You were helpful to the company in Washington, DC, office?

PT: I coordinated it. The thing that I always think highly and remember, I wouldn't last five minutes there now, was you could talk to both sides of the aisle.

JE: Yeah.

PT: They judged things and ruled on things, what their constituency wanted and what was best for them. And it wasn't based on what political aspect you was at all. In the all free enterprise system that was a fairly easy thing to do. And when they told you that they would support that deal or wouldn't, they kept their word.

At that point in time I thought it was a good thing.

JE: You retired in January of 1985.

PT: Yeah.

JE: You served Mapco for twenty-two years.

PT: Yeah, those were great years.

JE: You enjoyed that?

PT: Oh, well, sure. Did I ever? I got to spend since '65 till now helping raise our grandkids. My wife and I traveled a lot. We kept busy at other things and it was just a great life. I was glad I took that retirement when I did.

Chapter 08 - 4:42

Presidential Elector

John Erling: Politically you were involved in politics here in Tulsa.

Paul Thornbrugh: Oh, yeah, well, I was in my life. Matter of fact, when I moved to Tulsa, Bob Dole called the county sheriff of here, Ed Lawson, and told him that one of the good Republican leaders was going into Tulsa, Oklahoma. He wanted them to know that. Ed Lawson, I still laugh about that happening.

JE: Then you became county chairman for the Tulsa County Republican Party.

PT: That's correct, I did.

JE: I guess that was your first entry then?

PT: I enjoyed that very, very much.

JE: You were a presidential elector for the state of Oklahoma in '92 and '96.

PT: Well, you know all that. I was on the ballot as a presidential elector. Also, I attended three or four as a delegate to the National Republican Convention. In fact, when Nixon was elected and a lot of others was I was an elector and went to all those Republican conventions.

JE: Were you at the one with George H. W. Bush? That was in '92.

PT: Yeah, Bush's committee, not the ones in New York, but the ones in Dallas.

JE: When Nixon ran, Gerald Ford.

PT: Gerald Ford, Reagan, and I think I did Bush, but almost all of those I was coordinating some way here in this congressional district for their campaign. I was real fond of the elderly George Bush. He was easy to deal with and I thought he was a good President. But he had a connection with Jim Hughley and the oil business.

JE: Yeah.

PT: They were good friends.

JE: And Jim Hughley was former mayor of Tulsa, of course.

PT: Yeah. Ed Lawson was another one that was close to George Bush.

JE: Ronald Reagan, did you get meet him and be around him?

PT: Oh, yeah, I had a great—well, like I say, he pointed me to all these other things.

JE: You were appointed United States Commissioner for the Kansas-Arkansas River Commission by President Reagan.

PT: And then I got to be chairman of the board of Catoosa.

JE: The Catoosa Port Authority.

PT: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: Do you have any stories from any of those conventions?

PT: I think it was Dallas, Bush, or whoever it was, I went into reception, went into the restroom and when I come out there was two or three people standing in front of the door and I couldn't get out. So the one in front of me, I just moved him out, and the guy come over to me and said, "You know who that was you pushed out of the way?"

And I said, "No."

He said, "Frank Sinatra." (both laughing)

JE: Oh.

PT: And you know another interesting thing that I laugh about, a lot of my friends tell me that I never voted for a Democrat in my life. And just hard-shell Republican no matter what. I used to tell some of them that some of my shipmates and I was in New York City and the USO and some of those others used to have receptions and drink and eat or whatever for servicemen who were in the area. It was in New York, two or three of us went to one of them. And one of the greeters at the doors was Eleanor Roosevelt.

JE: Really?

PT: (laughing) And she was telling me, she said, "We're proud of you all and what you're doing and the things that's happening and if we could ever do anything at all, let us know."

And I said, "Yeah," the music was playing. I said, "Dance with me." (laughing) Well, she kind of looked funny and I got her hand but we probably went as far as that wall, just turned around, and that was it. So whenever somebody told me that I said, "Well, I danced with Eleanor Roosevelt."

JE: She was a real pleasant person.

PT: Oh, my yes. Yeah, she was greeting all of us guys as we come in the deal.

JE: That's a great story.

PT: (laughing) I don't know as I ever told my mother-in-law that or not.

JE: That you would dance with a Democrat? (both laughing)

PT: And by the way, the American people treated us servicemen with respect, no matter what, wherever we were and whatever.

JE: Yeah.

PT: I remember one time, Governor Ed Arn was going out of office and there was a guy name of George Tipper in Kansas that was going to run for the governor. And all of us was kind of supporting him. But a guy out of Dodge City was running against him and it was a tough election for the governorship. I told my mother-in-law, I said, "I've got to vote for my first Democrat, I'm not going to vote for that damn Fred Hall."

She said, "Paul..."

I said, "Fern, he's a chicken shit."

And she said, "Yes, Paul, but he's our chicken shit." (both laughing)

Chapter 09 - 5:10

Bob Dole

John Erling: How is it that you came to know Bob Dole? Was it in when you were living in Kansas?

Paul Thornbrugh: Well, as I recall, he was in legislature in Kansas, but I bet even the governor's office. Ed Arn was the governor of Kansas and that's where I first met Bob Dole. We had a Republican friend that was editor out at Phillipsburg, Kansas, and a good friend of my mother-in-law's. He liked Bob Dole too.

But there was a vacancy in the county attorney's office, I believe, in Russell, Kansas. Bob Dole got to be the county attorney of Russell County, Kansas, for a while. And when he was there I used to go out and see him. I'd go out there a lot, look over his things at the county courthouse and what-have-you and we'd go have lunch or something like that. He was a high-top veteran, Bob was. He ran for congress.

I said, "I told you, the Governor said to me, 'Paul, don't violate any law. You can help him out, do it.'"

And I did, and Bob was elected.

JE: What was it about Bob Dole that you liked?

PT: He was a truly great American. I remember when his campaign, Huck Boyd was developing a brochure, "Why Bob Dole Shakes Hands Left-handed." See, Bob almost lost his arm in the service. He's a Purple Heart guy.

And Bob said, "No, that was something I did for my country. I'm not going to use it to get votes to do that." So he didn't do that.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

PT: He was honest, he was sincere, he had a great love and a respect for this country and his people. When he told you something you could believe it. He never double-crossed, he never switched, he stayed with what he thought was right. And he developed that kind of a relationship with people. And he was wounded and all of that stuff but he also was a good representative of the people's rights in congress. And he did it not in a slam-bang, negative way, but how he really felt and what he really did.

JE: He had a good sense of humor too, didn't he?

PT: Oh, God, yes, he was funny. (laughing) Like he told me, he was high on advice and low on money.

JE: Tell us the story about the spanking of Michael, your son.

PT: When I was the division manager at Phillips Petroleum Company in Wichita, Bob was in the congress, he called me one day and was going to be in Wichita. He was going to get an endorsement, television, or whatever it was, and he wanted to know if I could pick him up at the airport and take him down there.

I said, "Sure." For some reason, I don't remember why, in my car and I had Freda and I had Michael, he was just a little guy, about four or five, maybe something like that. They were with me in the car and we went out and we got Bob Dole at the airport. Bob stayed at a hotel there in Wichita.

On the way back into town, Michael got to kind of fussing or acting up and his mama just kind of gave him a little smack. (laughing)

Bob Dole, when he got back to Washington, he sent Michael a sympathy card. (both laughing)

And that's another thing, Bob Dole kept his word no matter what. And he had a great feeling of compassion. Mike's got elected to the legislature, Bob wrote him a congratulations. Mike's still got the letter, and he said to him, "I'm glad that being spanked in front of a congressman didn't deter you from an active life in politics.

JE: (laughing) That's great. Well, we know that Bob Dole was in the '76 presidential election. He was the Republican party nominee for vice president.

PT: Yeah, we helped him, yeah, I did.

JE: Gerald Ford, then, was his running mate. And then in '96, Bob Dole was the Republican nominee for president.

PT: That's the one that I helped him in here in '96.

JE: And that was when he was challenging the incumbent president, Bill Clinton.

PT: Right. Yeah, we had a little office, in fact, Elizabeth come down to visit with us.

JE: His wife, Elizabeth Dole?

PT: Right, yeah.

JE: Bob Dole would have made a good president, do you think?

PT: Oh, hell, yeah. I still got a couple of these brochures somewhere. Moving, I stored up everything, hell, I can't find half of it anymore.

JE: You still, don't you, by phone? You still—

PT: Oh, yes, we've kept contact.

JE: It would be fun to listen in and hear some of your conversations with him.

PT: We have fun ones, we do. Oh, I know why I got him, I think he died laughing. I reminded him of my poem that some of us adopted when Obama was elected President. Old Kansas

and Southern California someplace said I know they'd help do that. And it went like this: "I'm proud to be an American, and I'm happy to be free. But, you know, I wished I was a dog and Obama was a tree." (both laughing)

JE: So he got a kick out of that with you, of course.

PT: I told him, "That's a Republican show," but they never used it.

JE: Yeah. (both laughing)

Chapter 10 - 4:17

Mr. Republican

John Erling: You're known here in Oklahoma as Mr. Republican.

Paul Thornbrugh: Well, I'm honored and, yes, I'm proud of it.

JE: Many people would come and ask your advice for running for office.

PT: Still do. I still get calls once in a while from old neighbors that we used to have and wanted to know what position I thought on something. And I told them what it was and why. But in the last few years since my wife died, I lost a lot of heart. I'm not as active as I was. And of course, I'm older too.

JE: Right.

PT: I can't get around. And the party's changed a lot. I used to never miss a convention, never missed a conference, never missed a preaching, nothing. But I haven't been to one for several years and I really don't know a lot of those people in the leadership.

JE: Would you have considered yourself a moderate Republican or a conservative?

PT: I'd say conservative in the terms of not being a big spender and not doing this and that. Like Obama. I would never the Obama health plan. Even now I can see what's happening to insurance companies. The things that you had before you don't have. And I can see it happening to places to like hospitals and healthcares and all of that, that the monies that they used to be able to get is not there now. So they cut back a lot on their own activity.

The doctors scare the hell out of me, and I told Tom Cole, who's been a longtime friend of mine that I wished to hell they would have called the Medical Association, the leaders in that to testify on some of those damn things. Used to be able to get an appointment pretty quick, but you can't anymore because they can't control who they take in to be the patient.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

PT: When you go in now you have to sit down in front of a computer and go through all this other stuff before the doctor sees you and all of that sort of thing. The doctor is

overwhelmed with patients and the time that he has to take to do all these other things that they never had to before. And it's really making a lot of difference in my view.

JE: What do you think of what we call the Tea Party today?

PT: Well, I have to be honest, I don't really understand what their bottom line is. But what I see and who they support and why they do it makes me think of that other party that I was talking about.

JE: What did you think of Barry Goldwater?

PT: I liked him. I was up in Washington and I had a lunch where the senators and all of them have their lunch. Goldwater walked in and I was telling him, "Well, the Panama Canal's taking a beating 'cause of just stubbornness." Just laughed about it.

He said, "Let me tell you something. I know a man up here that's more stubborn than me."

I said, "Who?"

And he said, "Henry Bellmon." (laughing)

JE: Because he voted to return the Panama Canal to the Panamanians.

PT: Yeah.

JE: What was your view of Henry Bellmon? Did you like him?

PT: Oh, yeah, I liked him, you bet I did. He was honest and forthright, I mean, what he said was being honest. He was a good governor.

JE: How about Dewey Bartlett, governor?

PT: Oh, I thought a lot of Dewey Bartlett, I really did.

JE: You worked in his campaign?

PT: Oh, yeah. He was one person, again, who was honest and forthright and he cared about the people he represented, he really did. He never tried to double anybody down. I liked him a lot. I thought he did a good job.

JE: There's a story about President Gerald Ford, when he came to Tulsa, he was speaking about Bob LaFortune.

PT: Gerry Ford always was mispronouncing words and people laughed about some of that. When Gerry Ford was introduced, he stood up, greeting the people, he was glad to be there and see all that thing. And Bob LaFortune was the mayor then. And he says, "Mayor Bob Lawfortuna." Because I watched old Bob, we just stand there and died laughing about it.

JE: And the crowd laughed and Gerald Ford had no idea why they were laughing, did he?

PT: No, they never laughed out loud but they were all snickering. And I asked Bob about that many times. (laughing) I helped Bob on his mayor's campaign.

Chapter 11 - 5:56**Chairman of the Party**

John Erling: What President that you met do you think was the best President?

Paul Thornbrugh: Oh, I think Ronald Reagan.

JE: Ronald Reagan was the best?

PT: I really do. And I had a high regard for him. Believe it or not, when I grew up, Harry Truman was part of the Prendergast machine up there in Kansas City, everybody thought. But I thought when he become President, in the matter in which he did, with the atomic bomb and all, he did a fantastic job. So all's well that ends well.

I thought the peanuts guy from Georgia was the worst damn President we ever had.

JE: That would be Jimmy Carter.

PT: Jimmy Carter.

JE: Did you ever vote for a Democrat for President?

PT: No I didn't. Sometimes I did not vote for the, the—

JE: The Republican?

PT: But I always did for President, I never had a problem with that. I liked some better than others, but, no. Like I said, I danced with Eleanor Roosevelt. (laughing) But sometimes when you don't vote for them when you're a Republican you're only giving him a half a vote.

JE: Who were mentors for you that influenced your life?

PT: Bob Dole is one that I liked a lot. And there was a lot of people that I had a good respect for. And frankly, I thought the first George Bush was a good President. I knew young George. I think one of my boys was in school with him in Midland, Texas.

JE: Oh?

PT: It might have been Tom, I'm not sure. But I've been disappointed in many.

JE: When Richard Nixon got involved with Watergate that must have been a big deal.

PT: Richard Nixon, I got a letter from him right up there. Yeah, I was disappointed in him. And I remember when he was governor of California. And I thought Richard Nixon could have been, in many ways, soothed things. But like anybody else, hurt and disappointed and sometimes maybe a little ashamed of what happened to him on that—

JE: Watergate. Were you asked or tempted to run for some office like the state legislature or even congress here in Oklahoma?

PT: Oh, I've had people suggest it to me, but I just said, "I'm interested in what I'm doing and my family life. I've been there in the light, I know what they're going through. And I help them, when the ones that I think are worthy and somebody we need to enlist."

So I don't have a problem with that, but from time to time somebody'd suggest that there's going to be a congressional seat open or there's going to be this or that and, "Did you ever think about running for it?"

JE: So are you saying that your family was more important to you than just—

PT: Oh, my gosh, yeah. And not only that but I spent enough time helping other people that I didn't want any part of being sometimes as that other area.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

PT: I just didn't have the interest and desire. I was president of school boards and I was the head of a lot of association deals in leadership, and I enjoyed doing it. But in a political field, I would never run for President or didn't want to run for congress. Didn't want to run for mayor. And I served as a city councilman. I was a city councilman in Derby, Kansas.

JE: Were you a supporter of Jim Inhofe?

PT: I support him like I am this year, because number one is, I think he's done a good job. I thought he was a good mayor. Right now, if I know anything, we need a majority in the United States Senate. He's important there, all things being equal, to keep that. But just on one or two occasions I've, you know, been sorry that I have.

JE: Well, that's the way it is with human beings.

PT: Oh yeah.

JE: On—

PT: Well, you get disappointed in things that happen. Most of the time I've been lucky in many ways that people ask my opinion on something and it's only my opinion, but I tell them what I see and what I think other people are thinking too. Actually, it's kind of interesting to help people get elected.

I enjoyed my chairman days with the party. It was during a bad time, the Nixon deal, but when I was chairman we organized all the voting district into districts and we had districts chairmen. The district chairman would get together with all the various precinct chairmen, go over things together to have conventions and work on sorting out the vote and all that sort of thing. And block captains and people who would go out put up yard signs and make phone calls.

My wife was one of the good ones. I don't know how many people she called on the phone to just remind them, if they haven't voted, please do so. (laughs)

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

PT: I still get some people that ask me sometimes what I think about certain candidates. And I think Tom Cole is one person that we need more of in the congress. He's been, I worked with him when he had this committee and when he was Secretary of State. I knew his mother. But Tom Cole is an extremely politically smart person and he's got a good, good grasp on what makes things work. I like him.

JE: Well, I know you're proud of your family and you're proud of your political involvements and all, so you've lived a good life, haven't you?

PT: I have led a blessed life. I've had a good home and I was lucky to have the sweetheart that I got. Our boys were a lot of fun. We enjoyed all of them. They all had nice homes and a good mother. They all got their education. And we had a chance at my retirement to help raise some grandkids. (laughing)

JE: Yeah (laughing).

PT: And I'll tell you what, that's great, guy, those grandkids are wonderful. We love them all. (laughing)

Chapter 12 - 3:17

Two Mother-in-Law's

John Erling: How would you like to be remembered?

Paul Thornbrugh: Well, it's like I have a lot of good remembrance of my dad. He was an honest man, he never did anything to embarrass us or to cause sorrows of that way. I just want to be remembered, I was never perfect, I don't ever claim to be, I make mistakes like anybody. But I hope they all have good memories of the days we had as a family. We went on vacations, we went on picnics, we went to see sports. They all were Boy Scouts. We helped them all, thank God, to get into the college and get the college work done. And then later watching their kids. (laughing)

I have nothing but wonderful memories of my life. Of course, the war was a hard one to go through, being gone all that time. And not everything pleases me, it's like I told my boys and their mother, in all of my seventy-seven years of being with her, high school sweetheart, they done things she didn't like, but she would tell them and then it was forgotten. She didn't carry a grudge, she forgave and she didn't go on and on. She just said it, that's the way she felt, and that was over and gone.

I could see that in my boys.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

PT: They got a damn good mother. I always laughed, she's got a great sense of humor and her mother—my mother-in-law—had a great sense of humor too. I liked her a lot and we got along good. One time we were over at her house when one of my boys, and I said to him, "Curtis, you need to go to a barbershop."

And his grandmother Fern said, "Paul, he ought to know whether he wants a haircut or not, Andy."

I said, "Fern, do you know what the penalty for bigamy is?"

And she said, "No."

And I said, "Two mother-in-laws." (both laughing) She laughed.

I remember one night, we lived in Derby and Wichita and I had to go to Omaha, Nebraska. We had some legislative matters up there to go and I left like on about a Tuesday or Wednesday, and I didn't think that I'd get back until Sunday. But we finished that thing up on a Friday morning, so, hell, I just got in my car and drove all the way back to Wichita. It only took maybe seven, eight hours. Got home about three o'clock in the morning.

I unlocked the door and went on in. And I heard this little voice from the bedroom say, "Is that you, John?" (laughing)

And I said, "No, but tell John the rent's due tomorrow," and then we laughed. (both laughing)

JE: That's cute.

PT: She had a great sense of humor. She was a wonderful person.

JE: Well, I'm sure there are many people who if they were sitting here would say, "Thank you for what you've meant to our community." And so I do that on behalf of—

PT: Well...

JE: ...all these people who were influenced by your life. Thank you for visiting with us here at [*Voices of Oklahoma*](#).

PT: Oh, I'm the one who's honored and has pleased. A lot of things I wouldn't do over again, but that's not because it was bad, it was just wrong.

JE: (laughing)

PT: Like I told my kids, "I'm not perfect, by God, I make mistakes like anybody. But I try not to make the same one twice."

JE: There you go, right.

Chapter 13 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on [*VoicesofOklahoma.com*](#).