

Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

Preface

by Donald A. Ritchie

Jesse R. Nichols was the first African American hired as a clerical staff member of the United States Senate, where he worked from 1937 to 1971. Black men and women had long taken part in the activities on Capitol Hill. Black laborers had helped to build the Capitol building and continued to maintain it. They served as messengers, groundskeepers, carpenters, cafeteria workers, and in similar service capacities, but were long excluded from the clerical staff.

In the 1870s, after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which granted voting rights to black Americans, two African Americans, [Hiram Revels](#) and [Blanche K. Bruce](#) had served as senators, and a number of black men were elected to the House of Representatives. However, there were no black representatives between 1901 and 1929, nor any black senators between 1881 and 1967. During this period, the city of Washington grew largely segregated, and while Congress never adopted official segregation rules, a de facto segregation spilled over into the Capitol. During the early years of the twentieth century, doorkeepers ushered black visitors to the "colored gallery" in the Senate chamber. Cafeterias and restaurants in the Capitol and office buildings, although staffed by black cooks and waiters, barred blacks from eating there. Not until the 1960s did the racial barriers begin to tumble.

Jesse R. Nichols was born on June 14, 1909, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Since there was no secondary school for black students, his parents sent him to live with grandparents in Oklahoma, and later to attend Alcorn high school and college in Mississippi. In 1930 he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., intending to pursue a career in medicine. The Depression interrupted those plans. Nichols worked in a Washington delicatessen before taking a job with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In 1937 Mississippi Senator [Pat Harrison](#) put him on the staff of the Senate Finance Committee, where Nichols worked with Felton "Skeeter" Johnston, a white native of Clarksdale, who later became Secretary for the Majority (from 1945 to 1955) and Secretary of the Senate (from 1955 to 1965). At a time when the regular staff of the Finance Committee numbered only three, Nichols created the position of document clerk-librarian, handling the committee's vast collection of tax codes, hearings, witness statements, and assorted publications. He set up the committee for each meeting, whether public or executive session, providing the senators with paperwork and capsule information on each witness. For three decades he worked with the senators, staff, press, and lobbyists, providing the committee records that they sought.

In 1949 and 1950, the black journalist Alice A. Dunnigan published a series of articles on the black staff at the Capitol, which appeared in *Service* magazine published by Tuskegee Institute. In these articles she observed:

Because finance plays such an important part in the activities of any individual or organization including the United States Government, we decided to take a look into the Senate Finance Committee, which is housed in the Senate Office Building.

Here we found Jesse R. Nichols serving as document clerk and librarian.

Nichols is the first Negro ever to be appointed to a clerical position in the Senate. In 1936, he was appointed to messenger service in this committee by Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi, and was elevated about six months later to assistant clerk of this committee. He has charge of all documents and publications connected with the Finance Committee.

He is now the oldest employee, from the standpoint of service, on the committee having served under three different chairmen: Senators Harrison, [George Millikin](#) and now George again.

Nichols is a native of Mississippi, but came to Washington some nineteen years ago to enter school at Howard University. During the depression years he dropped out of school and took a job with RFC, where he worked for nearly four years before being appointed to this position.

He said his experience with this committee had been outstanding. His life has been enriched by the contacts which he has had with outstanding men and great orators.

In 1967, on the occasion of his thirtieth anniversary on the Senate staff, several members of the Finance Committee, led by Delaware Republican [John J. Williams](#), rose in the Senate chamber to pay tribute to Jesse Nichols, who, said Senator Williams, had worked under a series of influential committee chairmen, and who had "earned the respect of those former giants of the Senate, each of whom was proud to call him a friend." Senator Williams added that "it is refreshing to meet a man who throughout the years has served the Senate and his country with but one thought in mind; and that is, to do his job to the best of his ability, always remembering that as a Government employee he is a servant of the people."

Senator [Russell Long](#), then chairman of the Finance Committee, warmly concurred. "Jesse Nichols is really one of God's best people," said Senator Long. "He works any hours that may be required, does anything requested of him to the best of his ability, serves everyone with courtesy and provides any assistance he

can, without complaint about long hours or inconvenient times." Senate Republican Leader [Everett Dirksen](#) added his endorsement, testifying to Jesse Nichols' "diligence, devotion, and to his capacity, competence, and public service." Senator Dirksen concluded by noting that "30 years of faithful and devoted service certainly deserves to be taken account of in the proceedings of this body. I salute Jesse Nichols for his devotion."

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard Press, 1980), *The U.S. Constitution* (Chelsea House, 1989), *History of a Free Nation* (Glencoe, 1991), and *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard, 1991). He also edits the *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee* (Historical Series) (Government Printing Office). A former president of both the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.

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Jesse R. Nichols

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Interview #1: From Mississippi to the Senate

(March 26, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Ritchie: You came from Mississippi, and you mentioned that you and [Felton] "Skeeter" Johnston [Secretary of the Majority and Secretary of the Senate] came from the same home town. Where was that?

Nichols: That was Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the northern part of the state. It's about seventy-five miles out of Memphis. During my childhood, the Delta was the richest part of the state. Now it's reversed. Cotton was king at that particular time. My father was a plumber. And he had quite a business. He was connected with a leading builder that built school houses and barns and that type of thing on plantations. My father did all of his plumbing work.

There were five of us in my family. I never worked a day in my life until I came to Washington, all of my working was with my father. My father was well liked by the better white community in Clarksdale. He sent four of us off to college. I went to Alcorn College, which is located in Lorman, Mississippi. That's down past Vicksburg. It's between Vicksburg and Natchez, Mississippi. I finished my high school there. I went to two years of college -- I left Alcorn before my junior year of college -- and transferred to Howard University.

Ritchie: Why did you do that?

Nichols: A classmate of mine (we finished high school together at Alcorn) came directly here. He had relatives here. I continued at Alcorn for two years and then I came to Howard because I had decided at that particular time that I was going to pursue a medical degree. At that time, Howard had a program where you didn't have to have a bachelors degree before you were admitted to Med school. When I was at Alcorn, I was a musician and as such had many outside experiences playing towns around the state. Frankly, I did not

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have a major in college, and after a long discussion with my high school classmate, made the decision to go to Howard University.

When I got to Howard I had to take the sciences required for entrance into the Med school. I had them in high school, but I needed chemistry and zoology. I came to Howard in September, 1930. That was the beginning of the Depression.

I was admitted to Howard and was doing quite well. Howard had a quarterly system at that time. I took some very heavy subjects when I came, including chemistry, zoology, and French. People wanted to see a person that had that kind of a mind that he thought he could take such a heavy schedule. Anyway, I wrestled through until the spring. I was looking for work, and no work was to be found. So I was getting ready to return back to Mississippi, because everybody that was up in this section of the country was heading back home. But a man across the street had a delicatessen. He had been watching me and he liked what he saw. He offered me a job the week before I was supposed to return home. I accepted the job. After that, the second day I worked for him, I was put in charge of the delicatessen, because he didn't want to get up to do the necessary stuff [laughs]. I spent three years with him at that delicatessen. He gave me a room where I could live. I ate out of the delicatessen throughout the week, and on Sundays I would go out and get a decent meal.

Ritchie: Were you still going to school at the same time?

Nichols: He would let me take a couple of hours for school. If you were taking chemistry or a science, you had one hour of lecture and two hours of lab work. But it got to the place where I had to drop out. It was either eat or leave school. During those days I was living in the 1600 block of R Street. At that particular time there was only one black family on that block. They had a fraternity house right across the corner from 16th and R -- white kids had the fraternity house -- they used to come up, and they would be hungry. I would let them slide on the sandwiches and stuff like that. I listened to them, and they told me how it was that they went about getting in the government, how they got a government job.

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So when I got ready to take my vacation, the first time I returned back to Mississippi, I told my father what I had heard. They said you had to have somebody that knew something about you who would give you a good reference. My father listened to me, and he went down and talked to this contractor -- I've forgotten what his name was -- and the contractor said, "That sounds interesting to me. I would like to talk with that youngster." My father set up an appointment for that Saturday, and I went there to his office, he had a great huge office, and he listened to me tell what I wanted to do. He said, "Young man, when you go" -- no, he said, "Boy, when you go back to Washington, you will have a letter or a call from Senator [\[Pat\] Harrison](#)'s office." He said, "I will take care of the rest of it." And he did. He wrote a letter, and some years later I happened to go into the file marked "Jesse Nichols" and pulled that letter out. I just happened to see that file.

But I said, "If I got a chance to know the senator, I could take it from there." And it panned out just about as I expected.



Senator Pat Harrison

Senator Harrison at that time, and Senator [James Byrnes](#) of South Carolina, were the two most powerful men on the Hill. The senator would be talking with everybody in the front of his office and they couldn't do anything with him, and then they'd call me out from the back and say, "Come and get him and take him home." They said, "He'll listen to you." And that was unusual for a man of his stature to listen to a colored boy. But that actually happened.

He was a member of the Burning Tree Country Club, and he would call up the Finance Committee office and say, "What you doing, Jesse?" I would say, "Senator, I'm doing so-and-so." He would say, "That's fine, get the car and let's go to the ball game." Or go to the Burning Tree Country Club. I carried him out there and he said, "You got anything to do?" I said, "I've got something to do at the office." He'd say, "You need to take a day off. Take the car and go on home." We were just like that, Mr. Ritchie, up until the time that he passed. He passed on a Monday, and on that Saturday prior to the Monday, he sent me down to get Senator [\[Walter\] George](#) to bring him out. Senator George said that two thirds of his conversation was to make him promise that he'd look after Jesse Nichols as long as he was in the Senate.

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So Skeeter Johnston made this job for me. At that particular time, the [Russell Senate Office] building was being renovated, installing air conditioning. We had storerooms up in the attic, and the people who were installing the air conditioning were turning all of the papers, the hearings, and reports and stuff into a pile. So I started digging them out and separating the tax bills and tax

hearings from the tariffs, and at that time Finance had Veterans stuff and I had to take that out. At one time, Skeeter would take his vacation and I would take mine. Sometimes we would work it that I would come in on a Friday and fill the requests for hearings and that type of stuff, and I wouldn't see him perhaps until the next Friday. We had a wonderful working relationship.

Ritchie: Had you ever met Skeeter Johnston before, when you lived in Mississippi?

Nichols: No. Skeeter had a brother and mother that lived in Clarksdale. They had a big department store where his mother worked. She knew my family. My family, as I say, was a very prestigious family. To look at us here in the Senate you would think we were two brothers. When he became Secretary to the Majority, after he came back [to the Senate], every time there would be a change in the [committee] membership, the first thing he would do was to get to that senator and say, "I've got a friend, Jesse Nichols, over there. I want you to do so-and-so." And when they came in at the first meeting, what they wanted to do was to meet Jesse Nichols.

Then we had a period of time when the Republicans came in [to the majority], in the 80th Congress, Senator [\[Eugene\] Millikin](#) became chairman. He was a very brilliant man. In fact, I think that we only had one senator who was not gifted in the law or some outstanding field other than just being a regular senator, and that was [Harry Byrd](#) of Virginia. I knew that I would never be clerk of the Finance Committee, but I helped so many people, so many lawyers, so many tax people to get their stuff. We had this little calendar, somebody would come into the office asking about a bill and they'd say, "Well, I'll look it up in the calendar." The fellow would say, "No, let's ask Jesse." I didn't have to look at the calendar, I'd tell them where it was, or what the number was, and so forth and so on. I worked on every Social Security bill up

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until '71. The same thing with tax bills. The Senate shifted, as I said, from Democrats to Republicans [in 1947] and the first thing that the Republicans did, the first line of business, was to let it be known that Jesse Nichols is the document clerk librarian. That was the first order of business. It switched back and forth [between parties], but I kept that job.

Ritchie: I wanted to go back just a little bit and ask you again about your education. You mentioned that you had four brothers and sisters.

Nichols: Yes.

Ritchie: Did they get a chance to go to college, too?

Nichols: Yes. My oldest brother dropped out. He followed in line with my father. He was a plumber. He went to Tuskegee and took plumbing. He became a master plumber, eventually winding up in Los Angeles. My baby brother, who is twelve years my junior, he received his Bachelors degree from Howard and also he graduated from the School of Dentistry. And that was a rather unique and interesting story, that particular instance.

Senator [\[John\] Stennis](#) came on the scene as the senator from Mississippi. [\[James\] Eastland](#), I think, came on before Stennis. I got a call one morning out of the blue. He said, "Jesse Nichols?" "Yes." "This is Senator Stennis. I just wanted to know why we great Mississippians had never met." He wasn't on the Finance Committee. He talked, and I thought: I know I've got something that the senator wants. He said, "Well, what are you doing there right now, Jesse?" I said, "I'm doing such-and-such a thing." He said, "Well, drop that and come on upstairs." He was on the fourth floor. He said, "I want to talk to you." He told his office staff, "When that man comes in, don't stop him, let him come in." And we talked, just like you and I are talking here. And it developed, it finally developed what he wanted. I was a cabinet maker, and Skeeter Johnston told him, "If he says he can do it, he can do it." What it amounted to was hanging a mirror over a wall where you had about an inch and a half of leeway over the mantle, up or down. And I did that. Mrs. Stennis said, "Just send the bill to the senator." So I came back to the office and got my letterhead out and I prepared

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the bill [laughs]. He sent a check and he called me, and said, "The next time you do something like that, you can just call me and tell me when you are going to do it, and I'll be there to help hold." Because Mrs. Stennis had told him that I had had my brother to help.

The reason that I tell this story is because my brother was trying to get in the School of Medicine at Howard and they passed him over for three years. It wasn't because of his grades or that type of thing, because he was good. So Senator Stennis asked me again to do something, and I said, "That's a funny thing, senator, you called just as I was getting a telephone call from my brother." I said, "He's getting a run-around up at Howard University trying to get into the School of Medicine." He said, "Well, I will write a letter to Dr. Johnson," who was Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the president of the school. I said, "Senator, I know all about those letters and things. You can write your letter in such a way that you can read between the lines." He said, "Well, Jesse, I will send Miss. So-and-so, my private secretary, to your office. I will dictate to her and she will come down and read you the letter, and if you're not satisfied with what I said, then you dictate a letter to her and I'll sign it." I said, "That's fair enough, senator."

So I had the advantage of both the senator and the school, because I knew that Senator Stennis was assigned to the appropriations over Howard University. To make a long story short, my brother had received a letter telling him that he didn't have the qualifications. It was kind of a way that if your uncle was a doctor and had gone to Howard, or a cousin, you got in. So Senator Stennis sent that letter to Dr. Johnson, and Dr. Johnson called the head dean and showed him the letter and said, "I want you to find out what happened on this youngster's case. They traced it down, and then they said, "Well, he failed such-and-such a thing." They called my brother up, and he said, "No sir." He had his transcripts. So he had to report back to the senator, and he did. Then they called my brother and said they made an error, somebody in the recording office had recorded somebody else's grade in his file. They had been sending that wrong information out for three years, to McGill up in Canada, to Meharry [Medical College in Tennessee], and to Howard. So my brother got admitted that fall. They gave him his choice of either dentistry or medicine. My brother,

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when he graduated from the Dental School, they gave about seven awards. He got three out of the seven.

I put him on a plane for Los Angeles. My people had moved from Mississippi to California. My two sisters were teaching out there. They both had received their Masters degrees. When my brother got into professional school, we all contributed to see that he had nothing to do but study. Then he went out to California and some dentist was leaving to go to a convention in Belgium, and he took charge of the dentist's office. They were so impressed that when he took the dental exam -- like the bar exam -- and he passed it, they assigned him to be in charge of the Hubert Humphrey Dental Clinic for the County of Los Angeles. He's still there. He's retired now.

Ritchie: When did your family move from Mississippi to California?

Nichols: They moved, I would say, in a period from around '43, somewhere along there. I had one sister to move with her husband first. He was a physician, and a graduate from Meharry. And then the rest of the family migrated to California. I have two cousins now in Mississippi.

Ritchie: I was going to ask you, how different was it living in Washington, D.C., than living in Clarksdale, Mississippi? And what did you think about the city when you first got here?

Nichols: Washington?

Ritchie: Yes.

Nichols: I didn't find it too much different when I came here. I went through that period when everybody and his brother was poor. I never saw so many long lines of people, hunger lines, and people selling apples and that type of thing. This fellow that I told you about, who had the delicatessen, he was actually in the rackets. He was a racketeer. But he was impressed with the way that I carried myself so he never would let me pursue any of those things. He had other people to do that kind of work. He sold gin and backed numbers and

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that type of thing. So, I really didn't have to work too hard, compared to what they were doing. I started out at a salary of \$12 a week. As I said, I got my food and I lived pretty comfortable then. I was able to save money.

When I started in the Senate, the appropriation for each one of those committees and the salaries of the employees of the committees was left entirely to the chairpersons. [The salaries are published twice a year in the Report of the Secretary of the Senate.] That's the reason I knew that Skeeter got a salary up to \$3600, and they had a slot where Skeeter was able to create this job for me. As I said earlier, I felt that if I got a chance to meet the senator, I could take care of myself from then on. Senator Harrison asked me one day, when we were riding home on a Friday night, "Jesse, I'd like you to come by in the morning and take me to Burning Tree." Everything in the car got quiet. He sat up on the right front seat. I said, "Senator, it so happens that I've got a job to do tomorrow." He said, "No, we're not working tomorrow, you don't have a job to do." I said, "Senator, you don't think I can live off the little salary that you pay me." Everyone got quiet, Skeeter wouldn't open his mouth, and Mrs. [Catherine] Blanton, who was the Senator's secretary, she was sitting there. He sat up there chewing on his cigar. After a while he turned around and he said, "Mrs. Blanton, what are you paying Jesse?" She swallowed and swallowed. I was getting eighty dollars. They told him that, and he said, "Hell, that ain't no money. Give him some more money." I drove about two or three blocks, and he turned around and said, "Jesse, I want you to take me to Burning Tree tomorrow morning." I said, "What time?" [laughs] But those were some wonderful years.

Ritchie: Pat Harrison sounds like a fascinating person. I've read about him. . .

Nichols: He was.

Ritchie: But what kind of a man was he? How would you describe him?

Nichols: The senator was a lawyer. He loved sports. It made no difference what kind of sports it was, if you could listen to him arguing with me

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on the front seat of the car, trying to get me to come to a wrestling match or something like that. I didn't care nothing about no wrestling match. But he would go even if nobody else would go. All he wanted to do was play bridge, play golf, and go to all the football games. When the Redskins first were playing, I went to most all of those things. Mr. [Clark] Griffith gave him a gold card. When any other person went along with him as a guest, they all paid the fare. One particular person would pick the tab up. He'd hand me his gold card and say, "Go on." We went on where the president and all those big people were.

But wherever he went, he'd be turning around to make sure that I was taken care of. He'd say, "You take care of him first, and then you can talk to me." I was smoking at that time, and all the cigars that they gave for gifts, if it wasn't a certain brand, or he couldn't trade them in -- the secretary did the trading -- I would be the recipient of all the cigars!

But there was a wonderful history back behind Senator Harrison and President [\[Franklin\] D. Roosevelt](#) that's worth looking into. Roosevelt tried to defeat Pat Harrison. He tried to defeat Walter George and several others. But Pat Harrison played a terrific part in getting Roosevelt the presidential nomination. At that time the chairman of the Democratic Party became the Post Master General.

Ritchie: Oh, Jim Farley.

Nichols: Farley. Harrison worked with Farley to persuade Democrats to nominate Roosevelt for president. There was a fellow who was president of one of the railroads, and they had a whole car, and they would leave and they would go out to California and all around, just these four or five men on one car. The senator didn't have no money, but he was the life of the party on that particular train. But they persuaded Jim Farley to take a vice president from Texas.

Ritchie: [\[John Nance\] Garner](#).

Nichols: Garner. To take Garner as his running-mate, and they pulled it off. That's the type of politician that he was. But they [Roosevelt and Harrison] had words. Before they had words, Harrison used to like to have, after a big tax bill, he liked to have all the reporters sitting around in the office and they'd shoot questions at him. At that time, the District of Columbia had three commissioners, and it was time for the president to appoint a new commissioner. One commissioner always came from the Corps of Engineers. Senator Harrison was being facetious and he told the gentlemen that he happened to know who the new commissioner was. He would just leak a little information to them. He gave them

the name of George Allen. George Allen had helped run the senator's campaigns, and that type of thing. At that particular time, George Allen was the night clerk out here at the Wardman Park Hotel. He leaked George Allen's name and they broke out of the office, jumped in their cars, and headed down to the White House, and grabbed the president, and told him they knew who this new commissioner was. He never heard of him! So he wanted to find out where they got that information. They told him that Pat Harrison had given it to them. So then the president had to call him to ask him who the hell George Allen was. [laughs]

Those little stories lead up to something big. George Allen was appointed commissioner of the District. George Allen could tell funny stories to keep you laughing from the time you sat down. He used that to get in with [Harry Truman](#). Harry Truman played poker, and when he became president George Allen would ride down on that presidential boat, and he'd tell jokes. There was another fellow who was over the radio, TV was just in the process of coming in, that gentleman became General [Eisenhower](#)'s liaison over in the War Department. Butcher was his name, Harry Butcher, and Harry Butcher and George Allen and a bunch of them leaked the name of Eisenhower to President Roosevelt [for military command in World War II]. Does that sound strange to you? That happened. The President listened to George Allen, and as I've said, if you've followed, he came from being a night clerk. He knew some rich fellow that was an oil man, who died on a plane from California coming over here. He worked himself up to be on the board of that particular oil company, I forget what company it was, but he was instrumental in getting President Eisenhower

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to buy this place up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But that's the kind of stories that came along that people in general didn't know anything about.

Ritchie: Harrison had a reputation as a great story teller and humorist. Did he talk about Mississippi a lot?

Nichols: Oh, yes. [Laughs] At one time the senator lived on Cathedral, right off of Connecticut Avenue, where there's a turn-off to go back down to the park [Rock Creek Park]. He would have people coming from Mississippi to tell him what was happening, and so on. He would be listening and they were talking and all at once this fellow said, "Senator, you know that [expletive] so and so down there?" And the minute that they'd do something like that, or say something like that, he'd change that conversation right quickly and start talking about something else. He didn't want to tell them that "I respect this man that's driving this car. He's no chauffeur." I wasn't his chauffeur, see. He was just that type. They would send him this food from Mississippi, this smoked sausage -- I haven't had any

since he passed -- and syrup, you had that Louisiana syrup which is different from maple syrup, different as night and day.

The second day that I went to pick him up, the first thing that he told the cook, he said, "Fix Jesse's breakfast." He hadn't even met me then. She came in and said, "You had your breakfast?" I said, "Sure I had my breakfast." She said, "Well, the senator wants you to have your breakfast." Then she started making these waffles, and pancakes, and started cooking that sausage. By the fourth day I told my wife, "Don't fix no breakfast for me." [laughs] So, Mrs. Harrison came in there one morning when I was sitting down reading the paper. She said, "Jesse, since you're sitting down reading the paper and eating up the food, you can make yourself handy by bringing in some wood for the fireplace." Just at that time the senator had come down the stairs, and he said, "What did you say, Edwina?" She said, "I was telling Jesse that since he's sitting down here doing nothing, eating up the breakfast, he can make himself useful." He said, "As long as Jesse is around me, if he stays away all day long, don't you ever ask him to do nothing. He works for the committee. He's not no servant." He said, "I buy the food and hire these maids to cook it. You ain't got nothing to worry

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about that kind of thing, but don't you ever ask Jesse to do anything." He was just like that.

He almost killed himself. He used to drive a great big Chrysler coupe and he drank pretty heavy sometimes at the office. He tried to make that turn off River Road into Burning Tree and cut down a telephone pole like he took a saw and cut it off. He never touched a car since then. If somebody else wanted to take him somewhere, you know, they'd be down at the Washington Hotel or someplace, he'd say, "Nope, I don't ride with nobody but Jesse." When he died, Les Biffle -- do you know Biffle? [Secretary for the Majority, later Secretary of the Senate.]

Ritchie: Yes.

Nichols: He came up and touched me on the shoulder and said, "Don't never worry about another job. Anything that you have to have, you come to me." I had never asked him in my life for nothing. And that's the way the different people wanted to do it.

You see, President Roosevelt had interceded in the selection of the majority leader [in 1937]. You probably heard about that one. The Senator from Arkansas died.

Ritchie: [\[Joseph\] Robinson](#).

Nichols: Robinson died. They were on the [funeral] train coming back, and Roosevelt interceded on behalf of Senator [\[Alben\] Barkley](#). And Barkley beat Harrison by one vote.

Ritchie: How did Senator Harrison react when he was defeated?

Nichols: He didn't like it. But as I said, he was a poker player and he'd keep those kind of things to himself. I almost burned up a brand-new car coming from Burning Tree to get him to the Senate when they were voting on a civil rights bill - - no, it wasn't a civil rights bill, it was a poll tax bill, because

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civil rights wasn't at that time. He said, "Hell go. I can buy another car." He said, "They need me there for this vote." I started through a red light, and he said, "Whoaaaaa." [Laughs] That's the only time -- I was young and I would try things just to see what would happen. I have had that fellow George Allen and the senator in the back of the car, going to Burning Tree, and I have made fifty and sixty miles going down Constitution Avenue, just to see what would happen.

Ritchie: Did you ever get stopped?

Nichols: Never -- oh, we did have one incident where George Allen was the commissioner and he had issued an order that the District would not fix any tickets for anybody, regardless of who they were. We had a delegation coming in from Mississippi, it had something to do with veterans and we went down to the Veterans Bureau. The senator got out of the car and he turned around and he said, "Wait right here, Jesse." I said, "I can't wait here, senator." He said, "Wait right here, Jesse." So I just parked the car and sat there, and got my newspaper and started to read. A cop came by and everybody else started flying running, but I just stayed there. He said, "Move." I said, "Put the ticket on the car, if you're going to give a ticket." At that time, people up here [in Congress] had the low tag numbers. The cop got out of the car and said, "Let's see your permit." I gave him the permit. And he put the ticket on my permit!

I got back to the office and I was furious. A staff member said, "Don't worry about it, Jesse." I ignored it, and a couple of days after that they issued a warrant for me. So I told them that they better get it straight. They called down there and they said that they had issued that edict that nobody would get tickets fixed. I said, "Well, if you don't get it straight, tonight I'm going to give it to the senator himself." And I told him, "If I give the ticket to the senator, you know what's going to happen." So the fellow said, "All right, we'll take care of it." So what they did, they printed a little story that Jesse Nichols had been driving in Washington for so many years and didn't have no accidents, no tickets, or nothing, and he needs to be commended! [laughs]

Ritchie: Well, when you started to work for the committee back in 1937, in addition to driving Senator Harrison, what were your responsibilities for the committee?

Nichols: I was assistant to Skeeter. I became, as I said, as an outgrowth of working on those hearings in the attic, getting those things in some kind of an order, I began to learn something about the work. Now, my job was to put down all the working papers of the committee. Skeeter would come in and say, "Jesse, we're going to have Senate Bill so and so, or House Bill so and so, tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock," and he'd go on about his business, but he had taught me what would be expected. So that morning before the hearing, I set the whole shebang up in the committee, the reports -- most of them were from the House, that some bill had passed, some tax bill. After that happened, I would take charge of anything that the senator wanted. The senators' staff stopped at the door. They couldn't come inside the committee room itself. All of the executive sessions, and I was in on all of them, I set up all of the working papers. And when we did have a conference, I would do the same thing. Take them over to the Capitol, or to the Ways and Means Committee on the House side.

But he gradually taught me what would be expected. In other words, I created that job. Because I was the first -- as far as I know -- the first black clerk in the Senate. For a long time I didn't have privileges of the [Senate] floor, until [Russell Long](#) became chairman. That was the first thing that he did when the Senate assigned him to the chairmanship, was to notify his administrative assistant that he wanted Jesse Nichols' salary to be what it should be. That's a part of the story that I would not want to put in here, because Senator George had brought Elizabeth Springer, you probably heard of her. Well, Elizabeth, I taught her. I didn't teach her the secretary part, but people would come in and ask for something, and I was sitting down. I had this library up and down stairs with documents, and she would say, "Sit down, just keep your seat. I'll get that." So she would go there and get something out and hand it to them, making it easy on me. But I knew what the story was, so when I'd clean up, I'd change the files. They used to come in and ask for something, she'd go to that other place, and they'd say, "No, no, you handed me something wrong." They'd say,

"No, Jesse, you tell her where the so-and-so is," and I'd go get it and hand it to them.

When we came over to the new [Senate Office] building, we were the first to move in the Dirksen Building. They gave us the choice of any room other than the room

they had especially for Appropriations. Appropriations had a series of subcommittees. We had no subcommittees. Before that, I had this huge library and that had to be moved. I was the last person on the staff to come over, because I had to see how all this library was packed. She said, "What we want to do -- we're not trying to get rid of you or nothing -- but I told Senator George that we want to have everything catalogued. I said fine. The Library of Congress sent an expert to come over and catalog the books. He said, "What we can do is we'll start from scratch." I had a whole section that was tariffs, one section that was taxes, and Social Security had a section. I had the reports, the hearings, and a combination of the reports and the hearings. She came in and said, "Now, what are we going to do?" We were going to get all of the books and bring them into my room and put them on the floor and then we were going to start from there. I said fine.

So they told the rest of the staff, "Don't worry, but we're going to do some physical work." So they were all standing around -- we had about eight people then. So she said, "Now, what I want you to do, Jesse, is just bring the books in." I'd go to the bookcase like this [rises, walks to the bookcase and extends arms over a long shelf of books] and get a whole bunch of them, and drop them down, and then I'd go to this bookcase, and drop them down. [Laughs] The stack got about this tall [reaches above his head]. The newspaper people used to like to come around and sit and talk and ask questions, and one reporter came in there and said, "What'cha doin'?" She said, "We're going to catalog this collection." He said, "No, that ain't what you're doing, you're trying to mess Jesse up. He's the only one that knows where this damn stuff is to start off with. See, that's what you're trying to do." So it confused the expert from the Library of Congress, who said "But you've got to know where things are." They pointed to me and said, "This man knows, why don't you let him do it?"

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So we moved over, when I got here, the truck brought this stuff and put it in the middle of the floor and there it was. I had to go get it, put it like I wanted it, put the numbers on it, and I said, "Now let me catalog it." I put it like I wanted it, and that's the way it is today. When I retired, it took two people to try to do the job that I was doing. Two people.

Ritchie: When you started, they were in the Russell Office Building, the Old Senate Office Building.

Nichols: Yes, the building they named after Senator [Russell](#). We were on the third floor, 315 in that building.

Ritchie: How many rooms did they have in those days?

Nichols: Ah, the chairman would have a reception room, his office, and maybe another office. That would be for the chairperson. He had more than an ordinary senator would have. In that building, we had the room with the back door to the Caucus Room -- that's the only other way that you could get in there. I saw many, many an event take place, coming through the Caucus Room, because they had to come back through our backroom. Most all of the [\[Joseph\] McCarthy](#) hearings were in our committee room.

Ritchie: Sort of as an escape route, I guess.

Nichols: Yes.

Ritchie: And in those days, was there a big table in the center of the committee room that they worked on? They didn't have a podium?

Nichols: No, they had a podium, we worked on the podium.

Ritchie: And then the witnesses would sit facing the committee?

Nichols: Mmm-hmmm. Now when we came to the new building, the Dirksen Building [named for [Everett Dirksen](#)], they had installed a speaker system. We didn't have that in

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the old building. So I was instructed on the use of the system. My job, besides waiting on the senators -- in other words, if we had a hearing going on, if a senator came in, I would walk over and tell him, "Senator, we're working on such-and-such a thing, the page is so-and-so," or I'd hand him a copy of the witness' statement. If a witness was testifying, I'd tell him exactly who the witness was, a little something about him. In other words, so he wouldn't be coming in there cold to start off. I learned how to use the speaker system.

We had one particular hearing when Russell Long was chairperson -- he backed you up, I mean the staff. The room was filled, and Senator [\[J. William\] Fulbright](#) was on the committee, and Long said, "Jesse, you keep the time. In this particular hearing we're going to give each senator five minutes [to question the witness] and when the five minutes is up, regardless of who it is, you stop him." We had these little pink pads around. It got to be Fulbright's time, and he was exceeding it. I let him go two minutes over, and then I went and slid a pink slip in front of him. He happened to look down, and said, "Mr. Chairman!" Senator Long looked around and said, "Senator Fulbright?" He said, "Somebody just handed me a pink slip telling me my time is up." He said, "Did Jesse tell you that, Senator?" And Long looked over at me and I bowed my head. And he said, "Senator, your time is up." [Laughs] So after the hearing, I told Senator Fulbright, "Senator, I gave you

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two minutes extra, I tried my best." He said, "I know that, I just wanted to have some fun and that was a good time for me to do it." So the newspaper fellow said, "That Jesse is something, he even tells Senator Fulbright when to shut up."

But I got to the place where I could adjust that microphone to enhance the senators, you know what I mean? My whole life was taking care of them. Then after I had done fairly well, there were different other committees that picked up the staff members from other departments in the Capitol building. But you know most of those people that they picked up had some kind of connection with the restaurants or something.

Ritchie: I wanted to go back and ask you, when you came to work for Senator Harrison, the other senator from Mississippi was [Theodore Bilbo](#).

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Nichols: No, at that time he wasn't, he came later.

Ritchie: Came shortly after that, in 1940, I guess. Did you ever have any dealings with Bilbo?

Nichols: Only once or twice. I had run into him once on the elevator, and another time in the cabinet shop. They had a cabinet shop in the old building, carpentry shop, and I was interested in cabinet making. I used to spend a lot of time down there. But that was the only time.

Ritchie: What was he like, by comparison to Harrison?

Nichols: Oh he wasn't in the same league. Senator Harrison had helped Bilbo, I think after Bilbo was governor. But they fought like cats and dogs. Harrison had all of the patronage, and Bilbo had none. Bilbo, I think strictly in his heart, he wasn't the type of person that he portrayed himself to be. But Senator Harrison represented the people of the state of Mississippi, the people who stood for something. [Stennis](#) did too, Stennis did the same thing. And Eastland, his office was right across from me. He only stopped one time to say something to me. But when Skeeter died, I had retired by then. I stayed off about six months, and I was keyed up because I was really into the job. I had attended all of the executive sessions and all conferences, so they found a little old job for me with the investment bankers. They wanted somebody like me. I wasn't really interested in it until they told me that they wanted me to set up a mailing service and they had a lot of equipment and machinery. They would pay somebody some fabulous salary to teach me how to do this. I always did like machinery, and after I found out what the thing could do, I became interested in it. So when Skeeter died, Eastland sent his chauffeur and his Cadillac to take me to that funeral. Other than that, I had no dealings with him.

Ritchie: Could you tell me briefly about Skeeter Johnston, what kind of a person he was?

Nichols: Well, Skeeter -- and I learned this after I became connected with the committee -- in my home town they had a high school and they had a

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junior college. Well, for a long time, they didn't have a high school for colored people, and my Daddy spent a fortune sending us away from there to school. I went to Greenwood one time. My grandparents were from Oklahoma, and I went to Oklahoma for the first two years in high school, and then I went from Oklahoma to Alcorn. But Skeeter could go directly from high school to junior college [in Clarksdale]. He finished there and then went on to Old Miss.

He was good. He was a good secretary. He went around with the senator on campaign trips and that kind of thing. I think he made an excellent [Secretary of the Senate](#). He knew my family, and when he went away to war [in the Second World War] he told his wife, "Anything that comes up that you've got to have in the house, you call Jesse first and talk with him. If he can't work it out then you get in touch with my brother." So when he became Secretary for the Majority and Secretary of the Senate, he helped me by looking out for me.

When my youngster, who had taken commercial art in a school up in New York City, came back from the service, he wanted a job. He had his portfolio, and Skeeter had called the Public Printer on his behalf. He made one error, he didn't tell the Public Printer that this kid was black, see. So when he went over there, the Public Printer had promised him that he'd give him a job, but he kept him over there half a day. He knew he had to sooner or later talk to Skeeter. I went back to work, and Skeeter called and said, "What happened to Nicky?" I said, "You know damn well what happened to him." He said, "The son of bitch! You tell Nicky to come on down here tomorrow. All this stuff that I've got under me, he's got a job somewhere." Well, the word got out that Jesse's son was going to come and take over the job that was under Skeeter. I told the fellow, "Cool it, I wouldn't let him have it in the first place."

My son is the art director of Food and Drug [Administration]. He got that on his own. I did help him get a job. It so happened that he found out about a job down at the Smithsonian Institution. Senator [\[Clinton\] Anderson](#) from New Mexico was on the Board of Regents. I happened to speak to the senator. He said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Jesse." But he went to the phone and called his office and told his secretary to come down. She came down and he said, "Jesse wants something, but I don't know what. Whatever he wants,

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you see that he gets it." So she called somebody down at the Smithsonian -- the senator had put him down there, I didn't know that.

So they kept my son for one year. The time came up to renew it, and they said, "If you know anybody that can speak for you, you'd better do it, because your time is going to be up." So there was an executive session, and Senator Anderson said, "Jesse, how's that boy doing?" I said, "Funny thing you asked me that, senator." He said, "Why?" I said, "I just got this call from him, and the fellow down there says his time is up." He went to the phone. See, nobody could use that phone when we had an executive session but me and the senators. I answered all the phones too. But he went to the phone and called his secretary and said come down here. She stuck her head in the door, and I went to the door. She was out there and he went on outside, and called me out there and told her, "Something is happening down there, but whatever it is, you get it straightened out." So she called down there and the guy said he didn't know what was happening. She said, "You'd better find out what was happening, the senator put you down there, blah, blah, blah." [Laughs] But they straightened it out. Then my son went on from there.

The next best friend that I had on that committee was [Bob Kerr](#) of Oklahoma. He and I were just like that [holds two fingers together]. He told his secretary, "If this man comes into the office and says he wants to see me, regardless of where I am, you let me decide whether I can see him." I went there one time, something very important was happening and he was looking for Senator Anderson, and I knew where Anderson was. He wanted that vote. I said, "He's in there on the john." I knocked on the door, and said, "Jesse's out here." "Send him in." [Laughs] So I went on in.

Ritchie: Senator Kerr was sort of like Senator Harrison, wasn't he? A big man.

Nichols: A big rich man, but a little man, a lonely man.

Ritchie: What do you mean by that?

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Nichols: His wife was an interior decorator, and the senator had bought this huge, beautiful place facing the Potomac River. But he had no home life. And this is a lonely place, after you finish the day and you don't have friends and that kind of thing. He was lonely and he would talk, and he would listen. I saw he and [Paul Douglas](#) square off when something came up. I was standing right between the two of them. But Kerr was a magnificent fellow. When I wanted to get a raise in salary -- I asked [Harry Byrd](#) once for a raise, and he just looked at me and

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grinned. You know those salaries are published, twice a year, so I got all of my statistics together and I went and talked to Senator Kerr. And he liked that. He said, "What do you want me to do about it?" He said, "When I get to be chairman, you're going to be taken care of." I said, "I'll leave it entirely to you, senator." We had this meeting and he stayed behind and the chairman stayed behind, and Elizabeth stayed in the corner, pretending she was busy. He talked. He had the figures and he showed the chairman. He did it in such a way that it didn't offend her. She didn't know where it was coming from. She came back outside and hit me on the leg and said, "They're talking about you in there." I said, "What?"

Every time the other people got a raise [Byrd], I didn't get one. Byrd would do it for him [Senator Kerr], but he wouldn't do it for me. But Byrd was not in the class with [Millikin](#), or [Wallace Bennett](#) of Utah, and naturally wasn't in the class with Paul Douglas. I used to serve them peanuts, somebody down in Georgia would send peanuts in great big boxes. I'd serve coffee and Paul Douglas used to like to take his package of peanuts and empty them into his ashtray and then he'd eat them one by one. And when he was making a point he'd look over at me and wink his eye at me, as though I knew what he was up to. I know that when Senator [Daniel Inouye](#) first came before the committee for something, they ignored him. Douglas, after everybody else had asked a question, then he beautifully told what the senator had done in the war and how he had lost his arm. That's the type of person he was.

Well, I think I'd better be going.

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Ritchie: Yes, I don't want you to get a parking ticket. Next time we'll arrange for you to park in the Senate lot. But this has been a fascinating session.

End Interview #1

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Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian,
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

Interview #2: Chairmen Harrison, George, Millikin, and Byrd

(March 31, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Nichols: I forgot the other day to mention my appointment at the RFC [Reconstruction Finance Corporation].

Ritchie: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

Nichols: That was my first government job. That was after my talk with those kids [fraternity brothers] that I was telling you about. I got the job in January of '34, and they cut the force down the next election year. I was a messenger. They took one person off of each floor, and there were eleven floors. So then, when I called Mr. Johnston, he said, "Just play it cool," because they were reducing a whole lot of departments. At that particular time the Senate used to meet three times [sessions], instead of twice. They'd take a recess when the weather got hot and they'd come back in the fall and stay a month, a month and a half, and then adjourn. So I went to the Senate that fall.

Ritchie: One other question I didn't ask you was when were you born?

Nichols: I was born on June 14, 1909. There's an interesting story there, because I have two sisters, and all three of us have the same birthday, two years apart.

Ritchie: And also, we never mentioned your mother in the first interview. I noticed that one of the tributes to you in the Congressional Record said that she was a teacher.

Nichols: No, she was a housewife. I had aunts that were teachers, on both sides, on my mother's side and on my father's side. But my father's income was enough that she didn't have to work at all, only at home.

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Ritchie: One other question I wanted to ask was: when you were in school were there any particular teachers who influenced you more than any others? Anybody who may have shaped what you decided to do later on?

Nichols: I had two. One was at Alcorn. The other was at Howard, he taught chemistry at Howard. He had taught chemistry at Southern University in Baton

Rouge. When I decided that I wanted to come to Howard, and I knew that I had to go and get those sciences, he was good. As a matter of fact, I made the highest mark on the exam in his class. Other grades were ten, and fifteen, and twenty, and he waited until the last and said, "One person did real well," and then he called my name. They had a bunch of women in there who were pursuing a degree in home economics, and they had to have chemistry. They all wanted to sit by me then, they thought that something would rub off on them.

Ritchie: Considering that you did so well in chemistry and were thinking about a career in medicine, did you ever regret later on that you hadn't had the chance to finish up in that?

Nichols: No. After I started out, as I said, Mr Johnston didn't spare anything that he thought I should know about committee work. He actually took me under his wing, see. And I became really interested in the job.

I got married in '34. No, I actually got married when I went home to ask my father about getting a recommendation. I married her in September of '33. But my wife and I didn't live together as husband and wife until '34. She went back to school. My two sisters were going to Tennessee State, and she went back with my eldest sister. And she stayed until January or February and then she came up [to Washington].

Ritchie: Was she from Clarksdale also?

Nichols: She was originally from Meridian, Mississippi. Her mother -- they had what they called home demonstrators in the counties, and he was the home demonstrator for Coahoma County. She became the assistant for the

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whole state, and then she became the chief agent over the whole state. My wife had a sister and a brother. Her brother played in "Amos and Andy," the television series, do you remember that?

Ritchie: Oh, yeah, I used to watch that when I was a kid.

Nichols: Her brother was Amos. Well, anything else?

Ritchie: You mentioned the other day that when you first came to the Finance Committee there were only three staff members on the committee. What did they do, those three people?

Nichols: Skeeter was the clerk, and Miss Pauline Smith was the secretary. When it was required to write certain letters, most of that was her particular job. Once Skeeter broke me in, we'd have a session, and hearings, and I had to receive all the mimeographed copies of statements and that kind of thing and put them in such an orderly fashion that I could distribute them to the members. Then when I would finish with the members, I would give so many to the press, then I would distribute the rest of them to the audience. I had a real nice thing going on with the press, because I would pull out a number of copies that I could afford to let them have in advance. I followed the members of the committee in everything, I mean in executive sessions the clerk and I were the only staff permitted in that executive room.

Ritchie: Could you describe what an executive session was like in those days?

Nichols: Yes, take for example we would have a tax bill that came over from the House of Representatives. When the hearings were concluded, the Finance Committee met in executive session with the staff of the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue and Taxation and the Treasury people, which I guess that was one reason why they could have functioned with the three of us as easily we did, because they did the technical work. They would present the views, and say if a senator had an amendment, all of the amendments were printed. You didn't come in and take an envelope out of your pocket and say

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I've got an amendment to so and so. He'd have those amendments, and he'd call for those amendments, and it was my job to see that that amendment was placed in front of the committee. Then a vote was called for, the clerk was the one who called the roll. "Mr. So and So," and so forth. In calling the roll, the clerk called the ranking member first, proceeding according to seniority, which was strictly followed at all times. Then he called the minority members and the chairman last. After tallying the votes -- he then would pass the slip to me, and I would give it to the chairman. Records were kept, but never read, unless a vote was questioned.

We had two phone booths in the room where the executive sessions were held. When the phone rang, I always answered the phone and took the message for whoever it was for, and then I'd alert the senator. Then I'd get back to the session. You had to follow it, and it would change pretty swiftly. I guess in reading the *Congressional Record*, you noticed that it was Senator [John Williams](#) who initiated it. He was a Republican. They had put him once off of the committee, and then he came back on, and I befriended Senator Williams. In fact, his suite was right next to the back end of the Finance Committee.

It was an interesting thing, Mr. Ritchie, you had two senators whose son later came into the picture. One I want to mention is [Al Gore's](#) Daddy. Senator [Gore](#)

was on the committee, and he and Senator [Kerr](#) had a thing going. I mentioned the other day about the closeness I had working with Senator Kerr. Especially during executive sessions I would serve them coffee when they came in. I knew what this one wanted and that one wanted. Senator Gore used to come in and out of the clear sky he would say, "Jesse, bring me a Coca Cola." Different members would put some money in what they called the kitty so that I could buy all that stuff. I served this White Rock water and sparkling water and that kind of thing. Senator Gore would ask time after time for a Coca Cola. So one time, Senator Kerr and I were in the room together, and I told him, "Senator, he asks for a Coca Cola as if I'm a daggumbed servant, and he hasn't put nothing in the kitty!" The senator reached into his pocket and he pulled out a roll of bills that would choke a horse. He pulled out forty dollars and handed it to me, and said, "Put that in your kitty, and don't you *ever* ask him for

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nothing." So I learned one strong lesson: you do not go to one senator and talk about another one.

Over in that room where we were the other day, the [Mansfield](#) Room, on the second floor, they had some paintings on the walls. I don't know which one it was, but Senator Kerr and Gore would shoot backwards and forwards at each other. We had an executive session going on in one of the Capitol rooms. I think it was down on the first floor below the Secretary's office. Senator Gore was late getting in there and he said, "Bob, I passed the statue of [Benjamin Franklin](#), and even he was smiling at you, and I wanted to tell you that I noticed he was smiling at you." Senator Kerr thought a while and he said, "Albert, you go back and take another look at that statue and you will see that he wasn't smiling at me, he was laughing at you." [laughs] They would carry on like that.

I remember before we moved to the new building, Senator [Millikin](#) was the chairperson. He had a very brilliant mind. We were working on the trade agreements and GATT and that kind of thing. And if you ever wanted to go to sleep, that subject will really put you to sleep! At that particular time, Elizabeth Springer was the clerk. Senator Millikin called a meeting and asked Mrs. Springer to leave the room. I knew that whenever he did that he had a joke to tell. I'd look off, because that would infuriate her, you know, that she couldn't stay in there. And he'd tell that joke, and somebody else would tell a joke, and even Senator Taft, [Bob Taft](#), he never laughed at a joke, but he would smile. Then after it was over with, then she would come back and they would get right down to business again.

In other words, I had something going that I didn't regret going on back [to medical school]. Sometimes I thought that I should have gone and pursued a degree in law. But I still have no regret that I didn't do that.

Ritchie: Well, you got to meet a lot of interesting people.

Nichols: Oh, yes. The other person I wanted to talk about was [President Bush's Daddy](#).

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Ritchie: [Prescott Bush](#).

Nichols: Prescott Bush. He was on that committee. He was a banker I think. He made a remark that the only man that he ever did hate lay buried in Hyde Park. And that story got out, and he didn't come back. I don't know whether that had something to do with that or not.

But I had a friend whose brother worked in the White House. His job was to turn the beds down and take the president and first lady up on the elevator. His name was Woodrow Willoughby -- everybody called him Woody. He died almost at the end of President Bush's term. They had this funeral, and he belonged to this big Baptist Church. At the last minute the president sent word that he wanted to pay his respects to Woody. He came. The family was sitting on one side, and I sat near the front but we were on the right side. I happened to look up before the services started and I saw these guys, I knew they were Secret Service, come in. They came in the back entrance. Right behind them, the president came in. He bowed, and he came and walked up to the casket and spent a moment or two, and then he turned around to say something to some of the people gathered. He came up, and he said, "Did you know Woody?" I said, "I knew the whole family, Mr. President." I said, "As a matter of fact, I knew your father." He looked at me like [widens eyes], and I said, "Senator Prescott Bush." He went all around to these other people and then when he got ready to go, don't you know he came back to us, and he said, "You knew my Daddy?" I told him I was connected with the Finance Committee, and he shook my hand real vigorously, and away he went.

Ritchie: Well, when you were talking about those executive sessions where they would tell jokes, was the atmosphere more relaxed in an executive session?

Nichols: Yes, that was the whole purpose of doing that. See, Senator Millikin jumped over the Senator from Nebraska.

Ritchie: Butler?

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Nichols: [Hugh Butler](#). Butler was in line of seniority and he should have had the chairmanship. Senator Butler came up with some disease that he had to get around in a wheelchair. He told me one morning, when I got him in there and got him to his seat, he said, "Jesse, I only made one mistake. I agreed to let Millikin pass over me for chairman." Those kind of things happened.

But, Mr. Ritchie, I have found it true when I was here that you have a politician and then you have a statesman. Most of them that I handled were statesmen. Bob Taft and [Lyndon Johnson](#) were on the committee -- but he had a heart attack and I didn't get to know him personally like I knew the rest of them. But that's what I found, you had statesmen and then you had politicians.

Ritchie: Well, did you think that they acted differently in an executive session than they did in a public session?

Nichols: Yes.

Ritchie: Let their hair down?

Nichols: Yes. They would tell stories and get you laughing, that kind of thing. [Pat Harrison](#) was famous for that, and I mentioned this commissioner, George Allen, he made a fortune off of being able to tell a good joke.

Ritchie: Well, would they, for instance, take their jackets off when they came into an executive session?

Nichols: They did when they were working on a bill. There were only two staff people in an executive session. Like Bob Best, if they needed him for a particular session, then they would call him in. Bob Best would come in and explain this kind of thing and then he went back out again.

But I never, even during the summertime before they retreated because of the weather, when they were installing the air conditioning, I always worked in a coat. The only time I ever put my coat off was when I had to get some

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hearings mailed out or something and I really had to get down to it. But I was always in a coat.

Ritchie: How about cigars, did they smoke in the executive sessions?

Nichols: Oh, yes. **Ritchie:** I have an image of a hazy room full of smoke.

Nichols: Yes. Senator Harrison always smoked his cigar. I think Senator [George](#) smoked a cigarette. That was another thing I had going for me, Mr. Ritchie, Senator George's wife -- all the people called her Miss Lucy -- a very highly polished woman, she liked to tell a smutty joke. In '41 when he took over the committee, I had picked up a taxicab for transportation. The Georges lived in the Mayflower [Hotel], and I would go and get the senator, or I'd take him home, rather, he'd usually get a cab in the morning coming to the office. He had a secretary that started out under Senator George. She was the postmistress in that little post office right outside the Foreign Relations Committee. I don't know if it's still here.

Ritchie: Not anymore, but I've heard of it.

Nichols: It was almost as big as this room here [10 by 15 feet]. Her name was Christie Bell Kennedy. When the senator became chairman, the first thing that she wanted was to become clerk of the Finance Committee. He brought Kennedy from this little post office and overnight she became in charge of his whole office, which created quite a stir. Anyway, that's when I found out exactly what Skeeter's salary was, it was \$3600. And of course the chairperson's, all the senators', was \$10,000. And members of the House was \$10,000. She tried to get her salary boosted up to what Mr. Johnston was getting, and she couldn't do it, because the Senate had voted that increase for Mr. Johnston itself.

Every once in a while I would have a run-in with Christie Bell. I decided one time I just would quit. I'm ahead of myself, but Mrs. George got in that cab,

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she had called for me to take her somewhere, because I had a pretty good knowledge of the buildings all up and down Constitution Avenue. She would have these ladies come in from Georgia, and rather than have a limo -- they didn't have a limo -- she would call and I would take her. She would have me rolling with her stories and then I would tell her a funny joke. I'd be sure it would be suitable to tell her, but her's would be smutty sometimes [laughs].

This particular time when I decided to quit, she got in the cab and I didn't say anything. She said, "What's the matter with you?" I said, "Nothing, Miss Lucy." She said, "Yes there is, something is wrong." I said, "I'm getting to the place where I'm getting ready to hand the senator my resignation." She said "What?" And right out of the clear blue sky she said, "Are you having problems with Christie Bell?" She said, "Don't you ever worry. You make me a promise, if you ever decide to leave, you call and talk to me, because Mr. George" -- she always called him Mr. George, and that was a habit true of Southern belles, or Southern women, to call their husbands Mr. Something. She said, "He thinks the world of

you." And she told me what the senator himself had told me, that he promised Senator Harrison that I would keep that job.

That night she must have given the senator holy hell, because the next day I could tell something was wrong with this other woman. A couple of days later Christie Bell called me because she wanted to talk to me. I went around and she said, "Let's go into the senator's office." Things were so bad, Mr. Ritchie, that when she'd go into the senator's room to make a phone call, somebody would buzz the staff people next to that room and they'd eavesdrop on what she was saying. Anyway, she went into this room and she called me in and she said, "Senator George wants to give you a raise." I said, "What?" "yes, he's going to give you a raise." I looked at her, and she looked at me, and I said, "What's the strings attached to it?" She said, "Oh, yeah, there's some string." I said, "I knew that." She wouldn't come out and say "You're to refrain from talking to Mrs. George," [laughs] but I told her, "It's the principle of the thing, Miss Kennedy." She wanted me to drive her in her car -- see, the senator didn't have a car -- at her whim, whenever she wanted to go somewhere. She'd just call and say "Come on." I told her, "I'm a clerk on the committee and my time's on that committee." She said, "Well, we'll work it out."

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But I did get the raise, and Mrs. George made me promise, "Don't you ever leave that committee without first talking to me." I could tell you a whole lot of stories, Mr. Ritchie, about these little rooms that are unmarked all up and down the Capitol, but that wasn't my business. At one time I started to try to write a book myself. My wife was a very good secretary. She was secretary to three deans up at Howard. And then an opening came in Senator [\[Hubert\] Humphrey's](#) office, and she accepted it. She was one of the few secretaries that he had that if she typed papers for the senator he accepted it as typed. She said, "No, don't write a book." And I noticed that quite a few books have been written, one by a cook or something.

Ritchie: There was Robert Parker's book [*Capitol Hill in Black and White*]. Have you seen that one?

Nichols: No, I didn't read it. But I knew the maitre d' of the Senate was Paul Johnson. Every body and his brother, all the senators, thought the world of Paul Johnson. I happen to know his grandson, who is a member of my church. Paul the third, I think he's called, is going to take charge of the mayor of the District's campaign for reelection.

Ritchie: Paul Johnson was maitre d' for years in the Senate restaurant.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: Did you know him well? What kind of a person was he?

Nichols: He was a very dignified fellow. He was immaculate at all times. He always wore a red rose in his lapel. This woman senator from Maine.

Ritchie: [Margaret Chase Smith](#).

Nichols: Margaret Chase Smith, she did also, she wore a red rose. Every once in a while those senators who were on different committees would borrow the Finance Committee's room for something, and my office was right

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at the entrance. So if I wasn't doing something, and I was interested in the subject that was going on, I would walk in there and listen. That's where I really learned to love [Bob Kennedy](#). He wasn't on the [Finance] committee, but they used the committee room. I just liked his style, the way he went about handling things. He'd invite you to a party at his house over in Georgetown. He knew when he invited you that he wasn't going to be there. He'd be off somewhere to another party. That was his type.

Ritchie: That was back when he was with the Rackets Committee, I guess?

Nichols: Yes. And as I said the other day, I heard most of the MacArthur hearings. Even when they moved into the Caucus Room, if I wanted to hear something in there, I'd go into the Caucus Room.

Ritchie: What was your impression of [McCarthy](#)?

Nichols: MacArthur? I liked him. I thought he was smart. At that particular time I didn't realize that he was trying to usurp the president. And he just happened to have the right type of president to let him know what the story was. But I liked the man.

Ritchie: What was it about him that you liked?

Nichols: I just liked his mannerism, the way he went about things. He knew what he was doing, from a military standpoint. And that interested me.

Ritchie: Douglas MacArthur, you said, or Joe McCarthy?

Nichols: General MacArthur.

Ritchie: I was confusing MacArthur and McCarthy.

Nichols: I was talking about General MacArthur, and you're talking about Joe McCarthy.

Ritchie: Because they were both the subject of big hearings about that time.

Nichols: Yes. I didn't particular like Joe McCarthy at all, to be frank with you, because he would beat the witnesses, and they were scared to death of him. I didn't care too much for him.

Ritchie: You must have gotten to see quite a bit of him, when they were holding the McCarthy hearings next door.

Nichols: That's right. I have on my wall at home -- we had a Secretary of the Treasury Humphrey, I think.

Ritchie: George Humphrey, right.

Nichols: And we had another character from the west, a senator who was on the committee. He came from Nevada.

Ritchie: [Molly Malone?](#)

Nichols: Malone, yes. Malone always carried a big stack of heavy silver dollars. This was when we were in the Russell Building. It was in a hearing, we were just beginning a tax bill, and the Secretary was appearing. Then it came Malone's time to question the Secretary. He went through this tirade of being from the west where they believed in solid money, and blah, blah, blah. He pulled out a silver dollar and said, "I always carry a big armful of these things." And the Secretary said, "I always carry a wagon wheel myself, senator. As a matter of fact, it's got my birth date, the year I was born." Malone said, "I'll match you," and he flipped his dollar across the table. He was doing it to get a big rise out of the audience, you know. When he flipped his dollar, the Secretary flipped his dollar. Malone won the toss. So he got down and got both of them and handed them up to the senator.

Now, Senator Malone always wore these cowboy boots and big hats and things. He started out the room -- they all had to come through my office -- and he turned around and said, "Jesse, here, keep this so you will always have money in your pocket." And he gave me the dollar that he won from the Secretary. So I went home for lunch, and when the Secretary got back to the Treasury he reached

into his pocket and he missed that dollar, and it dawned on him that he had given away his prize dollar. So he called Malone's office, and finally got to the senator and told him what had happened. Malone's office called me, and I had the dollar. So I listened. They said, "We'll exchange it, and we'll give you a brand-new dollar." I said, "No, I don't want that. I'll tell you what," I said I knew by law that there was only one person who was supposed to write on a dollar bill, and that was the Secretary of the Treasury. I said, "If you have the Secretary autograph a dollar bill to Jesse Nichols, he can have his dollar back." I have that home right on my wall.

Ritchie: [Laughs] That's great! That raises another question. You said that you went home for lunch. Did you live near the Capitol at that time?

Nichols: I lived where I'm living now. I'm been there since '46.

Ritchie: Is that near the Capitol?

Nichols: Do you know where Soldiers' Home is?

Ritchie: Oh, sure.

Nichols: I live right across from Soldiers' Home, where they have gardens along there.

Ritchie: Is that Brookland?

Nichols: No, it would be on this side [of North Capitol Street]. Brookland would be on the Northeast side, and this is on Northwest. Park Place is actually 5th Street. It starts near the entrance to the main building of Soldiers' Home and it follows that wrought-iron fence all the way around to near

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Howard University, where they have that reservoir. Then it becomes 5th Street again.

Ritchie: So, would you go home regularly for lunch in those days?

Nichols: Yes. I had an hour off, and it was a break just to get off.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask about that, because I wondered about the restaurants in those days. Were the restaurants segregated in the Capitol?

Nichols: They were. I had that problem. They had one restaurant in the Russell Office Building. Up until the time when they built the new building, which is the Dirksen Building, they had restaurants there. They were breaking down the segregation. When they had something for the staff -- I remember when [Russell Long](#) came in [as chairman in 1965], the whole staff we went anywhere over the Capitol, to the restaurant.

And they had a barbershop in the Russell Building. There used to be a lot of restrictions on going in there, even though you had a black barber. I remember an incident when a Supreme Court justice would go on Saturdays to get his hair trimmed. At one time, he had been the head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Douglas was his name, William Douglas. I went in there and there was a lot of noise and he was sitting in the corner quietly. I walked over to the head barber, and I said, "Do you know who that is you've got sitting over there waiting?" He said, "No, I thought it was Congressman or something." I said, "You've got Associate Justice Douglas." Then you could drop pins and needles all over the place. I stayed around. I got my hair cut and he got into the chair, and he noticed that things got so quiet, nobody was saying nothing. So, when I left, he said, "Who is that young man?" And they told him who I was, and the next time I went in there, I ran into him. He spoke to me, and I told him, "You appeared before our committee on certain things at some time." I have a pretty good memory. Once something like that happened, I always remembered it.

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For instance, the first billionaire that I ever met was from South Carolina, Bernie Baruch. It was on a Sunday. He had visited with Senator Harrison. I drove Mr. Baruch back to Union Station, and he tipped me five dollars. I didn't know who he was. When I got back and was putting the car up for the senator, he said, "Jesse, do you know who that was that you carried back?" "No." He said, "That's Mr. Bernie Baruch." It didn't ring no bell for me. I didn't know who he was. But Bernard Baruch was a very good friend of [Jimmy Byrnes](#)'s of South Carolina. He had to be a smart man to get that kind of money. Right down through my life I have met some outstanding men.

Ritchie: Sometime or another, they all come to the Capitol.

Nichols: Yes, they sure do.

Ritchie: I wanted to follow up on one thing. You mentioned the restaurant in the Russell Building that was segregated. Was there any place where you could eat in the Capitol or the Russell Building?

Nichols: No. Well, in the Capitol itself they had one of those little snackbars down in the basement. But in the Supreme Court Building they had a beautiful

restaurant there, and the Methodist Building [next to the Supreme Court and across 1st Street from the Capitol], I ate there.

Ritchie: And Union Station had an integrated restaurant in those days?

Nichols: Oh, they had something down there, but it's nothing like what they have now.

Ritchie: You mentioned Paul Johnson before. Did you get to know many of the other black staff members in the Capitol?

Nichols: Well, most of what you had, especially on the Senate side, I knew most of the chauffeurs. They drove the [Secretary of the Senate](#), he had a car. The [President Pro Tempore](#) had a car, and somebody else.

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Ritchie: The Vice President?

Nichols: The Vice President had a car.

Ritchie: I've heard of Norman Edwards.

Nichols: Yes. Norman was driving the Vice President. I knew Norman real well. As a matter of fact, when President [Kennedy](#) was assassinated, Norman drove the car to the airport [Andrews Air Force Base] to meet the President. President [Johnson](#) said, "All right, Norman, let's go on home." The Secret Service said, "Uh-uh, Mr. President, he can't drive you." He said, "What are you talking about he can't drive me? This man's been driving me for years!" "No, sir." I understand that the only way that he could drive was to be Secret Service, so they made Norman temporarily a Secret Service agent. After that, he drove Mrs. Johnson, not the President. But I knew the chauffeur who drove Mr. Biffle. And then do you know Birtie?

Ritchie: Oh, Birtie Bowman.

Nichols: Yes. Birtie worked in the restaurant or something over there, and then he became connected with the Foreign Relations Committee. The Banking and Currency Committee had a black fellow who was there, but he didn't perform the type of work that I did.

Ritchie: Birtie is retired now, and he has a limousine service that he runs.

Nichols: I understand that. They used to have a get-together every once in a while, former members of the staff of the Senate. He would have them in his place.

Ritchie: I was thinking about some of the people over in the Capitol also. Herman Scott worked in the Senate Library, did you have any dealings with him?

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Nichols: Yes, Herman was real good. I had a lot to do with Herman because he played golf and I played golf. In fact, I used to play in a tournament down in East Potomac Park. I had a good rapport going on with the Senate Document Room. Mr. [Theron W.] Marshall, I think, was in charge of that. I did all the ordering for the committee's publications. I knew what bill we would have a big request for copies of, and I so ordered it. Mr. Marshall, all I had to do was pick up the phone and say, "Mr. Marshall, I need so and so," and he knew what I wanted. When I would go over to Mr. [Guy E.] Ives, who was on the staff in the printing office, he did all of the ordering of what you needed, and I got what I wanted.

Ritchie: So you found that most of the staff were helpful. Or did you have any problems with any of the staff?

Nichols: The members of my staff?

Ritchie: The Senate staff in general.

Nichols: No, no. I had no problems. I remember President [Nixon](#), I remember when he was a Congressman, and I remember when he was the Vice President. The Vice President had an office right around the corner from my office -- my office was 310 in the Russell Office Building. One particular morning, you meet all types of people, and this lady was going down the steps, close to the noon hour. She was wringing her hands, and she had just come out of the Vice President's office. She said that she had a message from the Lord. He told her don't give it to nobody but the Vice President. I looked at her, [chuckles] and I said, "Well, if the Lord gave you a message to give to the Vice President, I want you to be sure to give it to him." I said, "If you stand there, at the end of this corridor here by the steps, sooner or later he's going to open that door and come right out past here, going over to open the Senate." She said, "Thank you, young man, thank you." Sure enough, the door opened, out stepped the Secret Service and in the middle of them was Mr. Nixon. She went hollering and screaming and going up toward him, and they pinned that woman to the wall! And Nixon never stopped, he kept walking with the other Secret Service agents.

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Did you ever wonder why they have the subway cars in the basement go on a curve? Going from the Russell Building over to the Capitol. Because somebody took a shot at one of the senators. I don't know if that was Taft.

Ritchie: Senator [\[John\] Bricker](#) of Ohio, wasn't it?

Nichols: Bricker of Ohio, yes. So they decided when they built the new subway, they were going to make them crooked so there would be no chance of hitting none of them. They have some real strict security here. I had some keys in my pocket and had to take those keys out.

Ritchie: Coming in today?

Nichols: The other day.

Ritchie: I'd like to go back and talk about some of the senators. We mentioned Senator George from time to time, because he took over the committee after Senator Harrison died, and he was chairman for many years off and on. Was it different working for Walter George than it had been working for Pat Harrison.

Nichols: In this regard, Mr. Ritchie. When I worked for Senator Harrison it got to be a thing between Jesse and Senator Harrison. Nobody, I mean nobody got in between us. If I said I'm going to do so and so, they left it because I rode with him at night and I rode with him in the morning. If he wanted to discuss anything, I left it up to him to do that. A lot of time he would tell me about this kind of thing that happened, and that kind of thing. We had something going between us.

Now, George was different. He was a little bit cooler. There wasn't any comparison between George and Harrison when it came to warmth. But I would put Senator George up with any of them. He gets in that class I called statesmen. But I had more fun telling jokes with Mrs. George! I couldn't tell them to Senator George. But that was strange and funny because he gave me that opportunity to go with him to Foreign Relations [when he became chairman

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in 1955]. I said, "Well, my roots are here. I know the work, and I don't want no part of Foreign Relations."

Ritchie: And he wasn't there for very long, just two years as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and then he retired.

Nichols: Didn't [\[Tom\] Connally](#) follow him?

Ritchie: Connally had been before him. Connally retired and then George moved over, but George only stayed two years as chair of Foreign Relations. Now, in 1946, the Republicans won the majority for the first time in years, and that's when Senator Millikin became chairman.

Nichols: In the 80th Congress.

Ritchie: Did you worry a little bit when the Republicans came in that it would jeopardize your position?

Nichols: No, because as I said, Mr. Biffle came up and told me, "Don't ever worry about your job. If they don't keep you, I'll always see that you have something." As a matter of fact, the first meeting that they had when they skipped over Senator Taft and Millikin became the chairman, that's the only meeting from 1937 through 1971 that I didn't sit in the executive session. I purposely stayed out -- after I set it up, you know. The first order of business, Millikin said, "We want to keep our librarian and document clerk, Jesse Nichols. All in favor?" They said aye. He came out himself and told me, "The first order of business was electing you to be here." See, I was under Millikin twice, because the Republicans lost [in 1948] and the Democrats came right back, and I went back under George. I was under George twice and Millikin twice. And then there was Senator [\[Harry\] Byrd](#).

I had some awfully good friends in Senator Byrd's office. [M.J.] Menefee -- Peaches Menefee -- the senator's secretary, he was an awfully good friend of Skeeter Johnston.

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Ritchie: That was another question I was going to ask you, what is the relationship between the staff of a committee and the personal staff of the chairman of the committee? Did you see much of the personal staff of Senator Harrison, Senator George, Senator Millikin?

Nichols: Yes. I'll hit on Senator Millikin. Senator Millikin had an A.A. [Administrative Assistant] who was Dorothy McRae, a very brilliant woman. When Millikin became chairman, she let it be known that everything that has to come through Senator Millikin had to come through her. And she did, she would throw her rank around with Elizabeth [Springer]. We had a clerk, they didn't have executive directors and that type of thing, you became the clerk of the committee and everybody else was under the clerk. She had the power of placing and appointing people. They always let the minority side of the committee appoint a staff member, and then the rest of it was appointed by the party that was in power. Millikin had a staff member called Serge Benson, he was from Utah. His field was tariffs. As I said, we had the Joint Committee that took care of the revenue bills.

While Senator George was chairman of the committee he put on a place on the staff Ralph Frederick. Ralph Frederick was in charge of Coca Cola in Brussels, and he got out ahead of Hitler, when Hitler took over Brussels. He got out of the country and came home. His sister married a physician who was Senator George's personal doctor, and that's how Frederick got that job. Frederick became a staff member of the committee, placed on there by Christie Bell Kennedy. They were playing politics. Somebody down in Georgia wanted that job, and they appointed Frederick in order to keep that person from Georgia from coming up and getting it [chuckles]. But Frederick knew as much about running that committee as he did laying brick. The funny thing about that, when I got a greetings from Uncle Sam to come and serve in the army, I brought the notice and gave it to Mr. Frederick. As I said, his first two or three sessions before the committee, he'd be perspiring just like somebody threw a bucket of water on him, and he knew that he was just out of place, he just didn't know what it was.

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Under Millikin you didn't have that kind of thing. Millikin appointed a clerk to that committee by the name of Sherwood Stanley. Stanley had served in a big position in W.R. Grace. He had the training. He decided -- I imagine everybody will do that when they get that position -- he wanted to make certain changes. We had our first executive session, and I had placed the stuff out for the members. He watched that, and the next day when they had an executive session he went and changed it, and put it like he wanted. And they frowned, and there were a lot of things that they were looking for that they didn't find. And on the third day that we had an executive session, he decided that instead of calling a representative from the joint committee to come up, he let them sit back in the room on the press table, while he explained things. He went all out of his way to explain that, and when he got through, Senator Taft said, "That's just as clear as mud." [laughs] So after that, he never would do anything like that again. He learned how to manipulate. But all the people that Millikin brought over there, they were well-trained to handle the job. But I had no conflict whatsoever with the people that the chairpersons put on the staff.

Ritchie: You say that you got a draft notice during the Second World War? And you took it to the chairman?

Nichols: No, I took it to Mr. Frederick, who was the clerk. He went around to the senator's office to talk to the senator about it, and as he would he ran into Christie Bell [Senator George's personal secretary], and she said, "What you want to see the senator about, Ralph?" He told her. She said, "Well, Jesse ain't no better than nobody else. He should serve his country just like the rest." In other words, she took it upon herself to get rid of him. She mentioned it to the chairman, and the chairman and several others had this idea that they would not ask for no deferment for anybody on the Hill, because it would be expected. So

when I got this second greetings, I gave it to Mr. Frederick, and he jumped up and flew right over there and got to Senator George. Senator George said, "I'd better call a meeting of the committee and let them decide." And he told the chairman, he said, "I don't know what's going on on this committee, Mr. Chairman, that's the man that's running this committee, Jesse." Senator George said, "Let's talk to the members of the committee."

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The person who would meet me in the halls -- the only one that was ever on that committee that would meet me in the halls and never say nothing to me, just walk on by, that was Bob Taft. He told them, "Mr. Chairman, why don't you have the clerk write a letter to General [Lewis] Hershey" -- General Hershey was over all this drafting -- "and tell him that Jesse's more important to us on the Finance Committee, to help raise the money to pay for this war, than being in a damn foxhole." Anyway, they wrote the letter, and the committee got a call from General Hershey. He said, "Let Jesse go and take the physical exam." What he didn't know, and none of them knew that I had had a stricture for years. The doctor on the examining board over at Fort Myer had been my personal doctor. He said, "No, no, we can't have this man." He told this naval officer what my problem was. So I got off 4-F. But I didn't tell Senator George's staff what it was. I just left it that way. But it just went to show that people don't have to say nothing to you in order to be a good friend of yours, or a spokesman, that's what happened with Bob Taft. I think Senator [\[Bob\] Dole](#) is in the pattern of Bob Taft, because Taft was "Mr. Republican."

Ritchie: A tough partisan.

Nichols: Yes. I had been promised -- I mentioned about Senator Kerr -- I had been promised by Senator Kerr when he got to be chairperson that as far as Jesse Nichols was concerned he was going to see that moneywise I got everything that I deserved to have. I have no regrets moneywise. I've traveled widely. I went to Europe for twenty days. I've been to Hawaii. I've been to those provinces off of Maine, Halifax and those places. I've been all around there.

What I have done, Mr. Ritchie, I bought a saxophone. I've been taking music lessons. When the rain and snow comes around and people are crawling the walls, I have no problem. My instructor has really thrown the book at me and I've really learned what it's all about, musicwise. I have played about twelve times solos at my church, and they're very critical of that kind of thing.

Ritchie: You mentioned that while you were in school you used to play in the orchestra.

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Nichols: I did.

b>**Ritchie:** What did you play then?

Nichols: Saxophone. But I played alto, and I bought a Selma. I always wanted one, but I couldn't afford it. But I bought a Selma, that's the type of tenor saxophone someone gave [President Clinton](#) when he first played on the night of his inaugural.

Ritchie: So you've come back to your first love of music.

Nichols: I've come back. My wife was an excellent concert pianist. On Sunday evenings, after you came back from church, we used to have an old fellow who used to have about fifteen people, a kind of a symphony orchestra. But when I was playing all up and down from Natchez and Vicksburg, I played for a lot of dances. I had the ability to hear a piece and I could play it. That's fine, if you can read the music. You have got to know how to read music, then you can play. But I had my fun all over that state I played for dances.

Ritchie: That's great, maybe this would be a good place for us to take a break today. I'd like to do another interview, perhaps sometime next week. We'll get you a parking pass.

Nichols: I used to have a parking place in the Dirksen Building. I had one of those cones in the back of your car that you leave to save your place. I parked there one day, and went home or went downtown, and came back and someone had moved the cone and put another car there. It turned out to be one of the policemen [laughs]. I called over there to Inspector [Leonard] Ballard and talked to him, and he said, "Don't touch it, don't bother." But he jumped in the car and went over there and put a ticket on this guy's car. He said, "No, indeed, don't you ever take that man's place." Because I had a good thing going with the police. They said, "No, that's his place." So after that I had no more trouble.

End of Interview #2

Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian,
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

Interview #3: The Senate was a Club

(April 5, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Ritchie: I had a question about the last interview, when you mentioned that Senator [Millikin](#) got the chairmanship of the Finance Committee over Senator [Butler](#). Did you mean Butler or [Robert Taft](#)?

Nichols: Butler. Taft didn't want it, so that meant that the next person after Taft was Hugh Butler, and Millikin was on the left of Butler [in seniority].

Ritchie: I wasn't sure, because I knew that Senator Taft also had seniority over Senator Millikin.

Nichols: Taft was in the same status as [Bob Dole](#). What I mean was nobody had to guess who was the majority leader. They knew who he was. At that particular time, Senator Taft had a brother. I don't remember who.

Ritchie: Was that Charles Taft, from Cincinnati?

Nichols: They were from Cincinnati. It could have been Charles. But something came up and they were going to have a confrontation between Taft and his brother. But they were smart enough, the senator didn't show at all and let his brother come on and give the testimony.

But Taft was a dry type of a person, very, very dry. They had one black fellow who worked on the labor force whose name was Mays. Mays' father had some kind of connections down at the White House. I don't know whether he was the doorkeeper or something. But as far as I know, Mays was the only person that Taft would stop in the hall and chat with. Everybody else he would just go on about his business.

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Ritchie: He must have remembered him from the days when his father was president.

Nichols: I think that's what it was.

Ritchie: All that sounds like what I've heard from other people, that Taft wouldn't say good morning to you in the halls.

Nichols: Uh-uh. See, I whispered in all of the members' ear. If they got a message I didn't go and blab out something. If I didn't write it on the pad I'd go in there and whisper it to him. That's all, he wouldn't say anything back. [Bobby Kennedy](#) was in that same category, even though he had been a staff person, before his brother became president. But most all the other senators were very jovial types, especially when we were in executive sessions. Different parts of the country had different produce and gimmicks and that type of thing. I think I mentioned that Georgia furnished peanuts and that kind of thing. And then when Senator [Byrd](#) became chairman, he always supplied each member of the Senate at Christmas time with a crate of apples. He also included me with a crate of apples. I received them up until he passed and his son was appointed [chuckles]. The son cut those apples off.

Ritchie: When you mentioned that about Bobby Kennedy, did you mean that he was very aloof when he was on the committee?

Nichols: He wasn't on the committee.

Ritchie: But as a senator?

Nichols: Yes, different committees used our committee room. When they did so, I was responsible for that room. So if it was interesting I'd stay and listen. If it wasn't, I'd just go about my business. But at this particular time I did receive an invitation -- I mentioned it the other day -- about a party. He was living in Georgetown. You went over to his house, and he was gone to another party. He never did get back before the party was over with!

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Ritchie: Was he a senator then?

Nichols: Yes, he was a senator. He never was flamboyant with automobiles. He had an old beat-up Cadillac, I believe it was a touring car. He had the big dogs in it.

Ritchie: Well, today I wanted to ask you about two Secretaries of the Senate, Les Biffle and Felton Johnston. We've talked about them, but I'd like to focus a little more on them, about who they were, and about your relations with the Secretary's office when they were Secretaries of the Senate. How about Leslie Biffle -- could you tell me a little about him?

Nichols: Leslie Biffle was from Arkansas and he was with Senator [Robinson](#). He campaigned for the senator, and he worked diligently when they had conventions. A very, very quiet man who had the highest respect of all of the senators, on both sides of the aisle. He was a very close friend to Skeeter, and I think that inspired Skeeter to pursue that office. You know that Skeeter Johnston went into the service, and when he came back he went downtown. I think he went to the State Department.

Ritchie: I think it was the State Department.

Nichols: One of the departments, and then he came back to accept the job as Secretary for the Majority.

Ritchie: He ran for that. Because Biffle became Secretary of the Senate and the job was open.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: And he actually campaigned for the job, there were two or three other candidates who ran against him.

Nichols: Okay, Skeeter won out then, let's put it that way. I thought he did a pretty good job, because you have got to know the senators and know

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something about their personalities, because you could rub them the wrong way and you'd be in for a lot of trouble. When Senator [Harrison](#) died, they -- when I said they: Mrs. Blanton, and Skeeter and someone else, I don't know whether Mrs. Harrison or not -- but they wanted me to sit with the family [on the Senate floor during the funeral] and they wouldn't allow that in the Senate. They had a service in the Senate for Senator Harrison, and I sat in the balcony.

In the Secretary of the Senate's office, they had at least four, maybe five or six black fellows who worked there. You've probably heard the story on Vernon Talbert. Vernon had been with the Senate for some fifty years before he passed. When you went over to the Secretary's office, you had to clear yourself with Vernon. If you got past Vernon then you might be able to get into the room where Miss [Dorothe] Scott was.

Ritchie: Now, what kind of a person was Vernon Talbert?

Nichols: Vernon was a very deep person, and he should have been because he had experiences in meeting a lot of statesmen all down through the years. He

knew how to apply himself and impress people. They would go directly -- it was a club. The senators would come off of the floor and go on into the Secretary's office to relax and have a drink. My first run-in with Vernon was when I was with Senator Harrison, but before I knew him. I was on the staff and the senator had gone over to the Capitol, and he was lollygagging with Vice President [Garner](#), and then he went to the Secretary's office and called the office and told them to have Jesse bring his hat and coat over there. At that time, I hadn't met the senator. So they called me and I got his hat and coat and carried them over there. And Vernon stopped me at the door. I was sitting out there for quite some time. The senator called back to the office and said, "Where is Jesse?" They said, "He should have been there, senator." Then he said something to Mr. Biffle, and they opened the door, and I'm sitting out there. He told Vernon, "When I call for that man there, don't you ever stop him anymore!" [laughs]

Then when Skeeter became Secretary, Skeeter would call and I would go in. Vernon learned his lesson, he didn't stop me either. I'd go on in there and

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spend several hours, lollygagging around, talking about what was happening. Between the two, I would think that Mr. Biffle had more experience with the type of work that he was doing. As I said, he smoothed things out. Even during the conventions, if a senator was having problems, he knew how to step in and pick up the reins and smooth things out. He was very quiet, very quiet. When he came over to the Finance Committee, that was the first and only time I ever saw him over there, and his purpose was to tell me, "Take it easy, be quiet and cool," because if Senator George didn't keep me, that I would always have something to do with him.

Another little interesting story, Mr. Ritchie, that actually happened, was that when Skeeter moved up to be Secretary of the Senate then Bobby Baker came on the scene. Bobby had a little pull in with Senator [Kerr](#). He didn't have much trouble in getting the job -- what was he?

Ritchie: He was Secretary of the Majority.

Nichols: Secretary of the Majority. Anyway, Bobby was sitting across the desk from the two of us one Saturday morning. We both were drinking, and Skeeter said, "Bobby, you see that man sitting across there." Bobby had never met me. He said, "Yes." Skeeter said, "The only reason that you've got your job is because he is black and you are white," or something of that sort. So I had a good thing going with Bobby. That's where I met Joe [Stewart], when he was in that particular office. But out of the two Secretaries, I would think that Mr. Biffle had more clout than Skeeter did. Skeeter was hard working -- both of them were hard working -- but in my estimation, Mr. Biffle was a natural for that position.

Ritchie: Skeeter would call you up on Saturday mornings to come over to his office?

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Nichols: Not every Saturday, but when he felt like he wanted to talk. I'd say, "Man, you know my position." He'd say, "To hell with that! You come on over. You've got nothing to worry about" with that particular person -- I don't think I should be calling them by name. I'd go over sometimes around 9:30 and stay there until 12 or 1 o'clock.

Ritchie: So you liked to swap stories about the old days or what?

Nichols: I don't know what we would talk about. He knew my family personally and he would ask a whole lot of questions about my son and the family. Or he heard something from his mother down in Clarksdale, and he'd tell me about what had happened to his brother. I met his brother only here, I didn't know him in Clarksdale.

Ritchie: The Secretary of the Senate traditionally kept the well, the bar for the senators to come and have a drink. So would he invite you to come and have a drink with him?

Nichols: That's right. I went in and he would say, "all right, yo know where the bourbon is." On either side the bookcases were stacked high with scotch and bourbon. As a matter of fact, Skeeter starting drinking a little bit too much, and President Johnson, who was majority leader then, threatened to fire him if he didn't pull himself up and straighten out. I only remember one time that Senator Harrison offered me a drink. They had something going on, I don't know what it was. What's that club that the newspaper fellows have?

Ritchie: Oh, the Gridiron?

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Nichols: The Gridiron, yes. They had that down, I think it was at the Washington Hotel. I dropped the senator off and he said "pick me up about twelve o'clock." So I went on home and watched the clock. It started snowing. I mean, it really came down. At that particular time, the automobiles didn't have defrosters on them. From time to time when I picked the senator up, I would have to get out and clean that windshield. Sometimes I'd have to stand on the running board. Once I got out of the heavy traffic -- see, he had moved from Connecticut and Cathedral Avenue out beyond American University, out around 46th or 47th Street, out beyond Ward Circle -- there weren't any cars traveling

out there that particular morning. So when I got him to the house, he said, "You come on in and have a drink," and he gave me a bottle of Old Granddad, and that was my favorite bourbon for a long time!

Ritchie: Do you know whether Skeeter Johnston was very close to [Lyndon Johnson](#), when he was majority leader?

Nichols: I think he was. President Johnson was a member of the Finance Committee, but he had a light heart attack a little after he was first appointed, and after that he pulled off of the Finance Committee.

Ritchie: Did you see much of him in the halls?

Nichols: Lyndon Johnson?

Ritchie: Yeah.

Nichols: Most of the time I saw him was over in the Capitol. See, we'd have those conferences, and sometimes we'd have hearings over there. The

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'54 [tax] code, most of that code was written over there. It was under the Republican [Millikin](#) as chairperson.

Ritchie: What was your impression of Lyndon Johnson when you did see him?

Nichols: I thought he was shrewd, an awfully shrewd man. I noticed how he had worked over on the House side before he came over to the Senate side. I didn't know Vice President Garner, but Speaker [Rayburn](#) would stop and talk to us. There were several of us, he had his chauffeur, and we'd be standing around in the hall there past his office, and he's stop and talk to us. Especially he did one time I remember when [Adam Clayton Powell](#) was having that trouble up in New York. He had told Powell what he could do to straighten himself out and everything would be smooth. But Powell couldn't see it that way. He was awfully haughty. It got to the place where Powell had to sneak back to New York every Sunday, he couldn't go back on the weekdays or Saturday, because they had an outstanding warrant to arrest him. But you know, in my estimate Powell and Congressman [\[William\] Dawson](#) placed on the statute books more legislation than any blacks I have seen. Powell did wonders when he was on the Labor Committee.

Rayburn was a down-to-earth type of person. [Wilbur Mills](#) was the same way. I could talk to Congressman Mills just like I'm talking to you. As a matter of fact,

the last time I saw him, or talked to him, was when Wilbur Cohen was there as Secretary of HEW. The senators paid tribute to Wilbur Cohen the same day that they spoke on me in the Senate [in 1967], if you look in the *Congressional Record* you'll see that somebody was paying tribute to him. But he had always worked with the Committee in the capacity of pushing legislation through, before he worked up to being secretary.

Ritchie: So you saw Wilbur Mills at what, a ceremony for Wilbur Cohen?

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Nichols: No, we were working on a conference, and a vote came up and all the senators had to leave. And while they were gone, Wilbur Mills was there, and Wilbur Cohen, and I was there, because I had to put out the papers for my members. We sat there almost half an hour chewing the rag. But he was down to earth. Cooper, I don't know whether Mr. Cooper was related to the Congressman [\[Jim\] Cooper](#) that we have now. They were both from Tennessee.

Ritchie: [John Sherman Cooper](#).

Nichols: No, he was from Kentucky.

Ritchie: Oh, Congressman [\[Jere\] Cooper](#) [chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation].

Nichols: Congressman Cooper, he followed Mr. [\[Robert\] Doughton](#) as head of the Ways and Means Committee, then Mr. Mills. In my estimation, that man [Wilbur Mills] was the most brilliant tax lawyer in town. He didn't require any of the experts to prompt him.

I'd like to mention another thing, Mr. Ritchie, we were talking about Senator Harrison. He was a brilliant manipulator, in this regard: we'd have these long, drawn-out hearings, and you would be testifying, and if you lost your page, or you stopped for a few minutes, he'd say, "Thank you, Mr. Ritchie." And you wouldn't have the heart to say "Well, I wasn't through yet." [laughs] You'd gather up your papers and go on about your business. He was a master in that type of thing. Also in maneuvering in the conference. See, the average person in the public has the idea that you presented your views before the Congress and they would have a whole lot of weight. It has no more weight than filling up the wastebasket when they go to decide, especially in the conference -- that's where the law is really written, in the conference. Kerr was good in switching votes in conference, but Harrison was a master at it.

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Ritchie: Did you ever sit in on the conferences?

Nichols: Every one of them! I sat in on every conference from the Revenue Code of '39 -- see I came in November '37, and they only had a short session and quit before Christmas and went home. Then the big session started in January. That's where I go back to Skeeter, he saw that I knew what was required and what was expected of me, and he had all of his documents to take over. But I had the weight of it, because I was providing for the whole committee. I sat in every conference.

Ritchie: Did those conferences get pretty heated?

Nichols: Yes, very heated. The House side would move out and go into a closet or something, and the Senate would do the same thing.

Ritchie: They would caucus and then come back to negotiate?

Nichols: Yes. You see, before the '39 code, all your revenue bills were separate. Then they codified all the tax bills. That was in effect up until the '54 code. I don't know what the situation is now.

Ritchie: One famous story was in 1944, when President Roosevelt vetoed a revenue bill, the first time a president ever did. Senator [Barkley](#) got so upset that he resigned as majority leader.

Nichols: And was reelected, yes. I remember that. Barkley and Senator [\[Henry\] Cabot Lodge](#) were the only two senators to serve on that

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committee twice. Lodge did it because he went into the service. Barkley did it after he had served his term as vice president.

Ritchie: He was pretty old by then.

Nichols: Yes, but they put him at the foot of the seniority list.

Ritchie: Barkley had been the nemesis of Senator Harrison in that campaign back in 1937 to become majority leader.

Nichols: Yes, Harrison lost by one vote. That's where Roosevelt and Senator Harrison parted ways. The president let it be known that he preferred Barkley.

Ritchie: Well, what was your impression on the committee.

Nichols: I think [laughs] of all the storytellers on the committee, Barkley was outstanding. He could tell some weird stories! One I remember, he said that he went back home and said "I've done this for this constituent and that for that family" in some little town in Kentucky, and somebody got the word to him, they said: "Senator, you'd better go down and see that family, because things don't look good for you." He said, "No, no, you must have the wrong information because I got this one a job, and I got that one a job." The man said, "I'm telling you, you'd better go back down there." So he went back down and asked this person, "Didn't I get you a job?" Yes." "Didn't I get your brother a job?" "Yes." Well, he said, "What's this I hear about you people going to vote for the other side?" He said, "Well, senator you haven't done anything for us lately." [laughs] He used to tell that to the other senators and they'd sit up there and laugh. It was, in my estimation, a real club.

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Ritchie: I get the impression from the way you've described various senators that you liked a lot of the southern senators maybe better than the others. Was it the fact that you came from Mississippi and you liked the old boy storytellers better?

Nichols: Mr. Ritchie, this is what I found out: when I was going to Howard and people leaving, going back home to the South because they knew that they could find something to do, or some way to live, everybody that I would run into was headed back home. They said, "What you found out, friend, was if a southern man told you 'I'm going to do so and so for you,' you can go home and go to sleep on it, because he didn't have to lie to you." I think that applied in the Senate, too. If you go back and look at the history of the Finance Committee, you'll find that most of the chairmen were southerners. If they said, "I'm going to do something," that was it. I might have had that in mind. That's the kind of treatment that I got from Senator Harrison's staff, and the senator himself, and Senator George and Mrs. George, and the senator's son.

Senator George had two sons. Hood he made his administrative assistant, and Hood took after his mother. In other words, he didn't pursue any higher education goals or that type of thing. He was just a plain old Georgia farmer. Mrs. George, who was in my estimation every bit a lady, she could tell some powerful stories. Both of them would talk with me. The son assured me that I would have no trouble, when a certain party or the staff was trying to get after me. He said, "Jesse, you don't have to worry, Poppa's going to take care of you." And he did.

I didn't find that warmth in Senator [\[Harry\] Byrd](#). I could understand that, because the senator had a thing about colored people. But he did tell his staff -- some woman wanted a job to teach school in Virginia. She had high credentials and a degree, and I mentioned that to Mr. Menefee, who was his A.A., and he told

the senator that I had manifested interest in this person. A couple of days after the senator said, "Menefee" -- Peaches, they called him -- he said, "Peaches, you look into that matter that Jesse is interested in, and

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whatever it is, do it." Then I found out that man [Senator Byrd] had the whole state of Virginia in the palm of his hands, right down to ordinary school teachers. But he had this thing about colored people. He was the one that offered to put up \$50,000 for bail for the governor of Mississippi when the president and [Bobby Kennedy](#) were going to put him in jail. Ross Barnett was the governor. Byrd put in a call from the committee's conference room to Ross Barnett to let him know that he would put up whatever the bail was. Then he told them one day that his operation down in Virginia was so huge that they could back a full freight car in his factory and in a half an hour fill it to the top with nothing but products that he manufactured. And yet he had an eighth-grade education.

Ritchie: Did you find him a difficult person to talk to, in comparison to the other chairmen?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. I could talk with [George](#), and of course I talked with Senator [Harrison](#), and Senator [Long](#) I could talk with him. But I found, when I wanted to talk to Byrd, I would get someone to talk to him for me.

Ritchie: In the 1950s, when Byrd became chairman, it was also the time when there was a lot of civil rights legislation on the floor.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: Did that spill over into the committee. Did you get a sense of his involvement there?

Nichols: No.

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Ritchie: He kept his Finance Committee work pretty separate from that?

Nichols: Separate, yes. It was only Millikin, when Millikin became chairperson he moved his suite of offices closer to the Finance Committee. George didn't. George was on the third floor but he was all the way around the other side, facing Union Station. Byrd's suite of offices were down next to Pat Harrison's. Pat Harrison's was the first suite on the first floor. You made me think of a story. You know after Reconstruction, the Republicans still had patronage in the South. In

Mississippi, there was a black fellow named Perry Howard. He was the Republican National Committeeman, I believe, in Mississippi. He and Senator Harrison were just like that [holds two fingers together]. When the Republicans were in power, the senator could work through and talk to Perry Howard. When the Democrats were in, Perry Howard could do the same thing with Pat Harrison. As a matter of fact, I think Perry got into some trouble selling jobs. I think he sold some post office jobs, and the senator got him out of it.

One particular thing, something happened, and I knew about it. I was talking to a classmate up at Howard who was taking law, and I mentioned this thing about Pat Harrison and Perry Howard. Usually this fellow would sit around the house and talk for two or three hours in the evening, but in less than five minutes he was out of there. The minute that I had mentioned it, I knew I had done the wrong thing. I told him, "Davidson, don't you go and mention that to Perry Howard, because I could lose my job." He couldn't get out of there fast enough [laughs]. He got on the phone and called and relayed what had happened to Perry Howard.

The first thing the next morning, when I brought the senator down, I looked down the corridor and I saw Perry walking. When he looked around and saw us -- I was walking about ten feet behind the senator with his hat and coat -- and he had a little hideaway (that's why I said I knew about these hideaways). Perry turned his face and was walking, and when he looked back he didn't see anybody walking but me. There he was struck. The senator went on into his

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hideaway, and I went on down to the office. When I walked in, Mrs. Blanton knew that the senator was in his hideaway. I hung his hat and coat up.

So Perry was caught in the middle. There wasn't anything he could do but go into the main office. He went in, and he prepared himself. He figured if he couldn't get a chance to see the senator, he wrote this letter saying that he had made this speech down in Mississippi, and the secretary or somebody who had typed the thing instead of saying "Senator Bilbo," they said "Senator Harrison" when he meant to say [Bilbo](#). All right, he wrote this letter and left it with Mrs. Blanton. Mrs. Blanton called me in my office and said -- there was a Negro paper in Washington called the *Afro* -- she said, "Go out and buy a copy of the *Afro* for such and such a day, or week." I went out and bought the *Afro*, and the whole speech was printed in the *Afro*.

What had happened was that Mrs. Harrison had a maid that was very limited in education, but not so much that she looked in the *Afro* and saw this story, and she was working for Mrs. Harrison, so she mentioned something about Perry Howard. The minute that she mentioned Perry Howard, Mrs. Harrison's ears

flopped up, and in a few minutes she called down and told Mrs. Blanton what was happening. So Mrs. Blanton called me to get the paper.

We were riding home that evening, and the senator said, "I just wonder how old Perry got that knowledge." That shows you how shrewd the man was. What he was doing he was telling me that he knew that came from me, see. Perry Howard told this friend of mine, "Don't worry about no job, I can get him a job in the post office." But when the senator said that to me, the next day I went in the files and I got this letter from Perry Howard addressed to the senator, in which he was explaining all this. He actually had a whole lot to lose, because he had pulled a boo-boo. I put the letter in my pocket and went home, and sure enough this fellow came by that night, as usual. I said, "Davidson, do you remember the other night I was telling you about Perry Howard and the senator." He said, "Yeah." "And I asked you not to mention that to him." He said, "Yeah." I pulled the letter out of my pocket, and I said, "Well, how do you explain this?" He said, "Why that son of a bitch," he promised me to do this, and to do that for you." I said, "But he didn't tell you that he's got two sons that

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he's been trying to get jobs for each one of them, and hasn't been successful in doing that." When the whole things came up, I said, "You lost a very valuable friend in me by doing that." Don't you know, Senator Harrison never mentioned it again. That was all he ever said about that. I learned then to keep my nose out of other people's business.

Another interesting little story that happened, and then I'll let it go, Senator Harrison had this big old Chrysler Imperial, and that was the one he had the accident with. Then he bought a smaller Chrysler. There was only one person that I knew of that he would let ride in his car, and that was this Commissioner George Allen that I mentioned earlier. Sometimes he and George Allen would ride together when we headed out to Burning Tree. But there was a caddy out at Burning Tree that the senator thought the world of. And that caddy hadn't had a bath in two years, at the most -- I know it! I would be driving on River Road, and we were flying. About two miles out from Burning Tree, we saw this old fellow. I don't know what that fellow's name was. The senator was chewing on his cigar and he said, "Jesse, wasn't that so and so?" I said, "Yes, senator, that was him." He said, "Well, back up and get him." I had to stop and then back that car way back up. The caddy got in the front seat and turned around and the senator said, "Well how are you?" He said, "Senator, I'm all right. How are you, you old S.O.B." [laughs] He called the senator that! They would laugh at each other and talk. He made me do that three times, every time I would pass him. Nobody else. He'd say, "You take the car and go on home, I'll hitch a ride home myself." But when he saw that fellow out of the corner of his eye, he'd make me stop and get him." But that's just the type of character that man was.

Ritchie: He had a big personality.

Nichols: Yes, a real big personality.

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Ritchie: You mentioned about the *Afro* and that raised a question about newspaper reporters. You mentioned that the newspaper reporter used to come to the Finance Committee, and I wondered if you got to meet any of the black newspaper reporters in those days?

Nichols: No, I didn't. That was one thing that amused me. We had a Cabinet member, a black Cabinet member. He was Housing Secretary.

Ritchie: Oh, yes, I know who you mean.

Nichols: He was Secretary of Housing, and he appeared before a committee -- not the Finance Committee -- that was holding hearings on him. Weaver was his name, Robert Weaver. That was the first time that I knew how sharp and penetrating Bobby Kennedy's mind was. All of the rest of the members of the committee asked questions, and Weaver had a whole series of fifteen staff people with him. They'd ask the question and then he'd turn to this one and that one, if that one didn't know he'd ask the next and go on down. Bobby Kennedy came on and asked his questions, and he just picked Weaver clean as a goose. He wasn't trying to embarrass him, but he was letting Weaver know that when you come before the Senate you ought to be prepared so that you can answer their questions.

That's where you found out what a person was thinking. For instance, you had [Ralph Flanders](#). Senator Flanders was an outstanding engineer before he became a senator, he had a brilliant mind. You could listen to the type of questions he asked and you could get some inkling of how the person who was asking the questions thought. I would think this, Mr. Ritchie, that between myself and the stenographer who was taking down the report on the hearings and the meetings, I got a chance to hear more than Skeeter did or any other clerk, because Skeeter and the rest of them could leave and go about their business. But I stayed there from the time that the hearings opened until they were concluded. I would hear so much of that stuff that it would go in one ear

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and right out the other. Other times there would be something interesting going on that you could learn a whole lot by just listening.

Ritchie: You mentioned that a lot of reporters used to come down to the committee. Did they ever ask you about what was going on, sort of pump you for information?

Nichols: Yes. But they soon stopped doing that. We had a couple of outstanding reporters. They weren't of the caliber of Walter Cronkite, but they were brilliant tacticians. One or two of them would walk down the hall -- have you been over to that committee room? -- that back room next to the senator's office was the entrance where the senators came in. Sometimes I'd walk from there down toward the front of the office, my office was the first room to the north of the committee room. Some of the younger or newer reporters would rush up to ask me a question, but they soon wouldn't have dared to ask me anything. And they knew that I knew what was going o

When we moved over to the new building, and Senator Long became chairman, the reporters got to Long, especially the fellows who were over in the Senate Press Gallery. They wanted to make some new arrangements in the press tables. I told them, "No, leave the press tables just like I've got them" So they went to Senator Long, and he told them okay. As a matter of fact, just before the hearing was supposed to start, he got down himself and helped them arrange the press tables like they wanted. [chuckles] It created so much confusion that after that he told them, "Hell, don't bother with those press tables. If Jesse wants to stack them on top of each other, leave them like that! He knows what's going on."

Ritchie: Well, how would you arrange the press tables?

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Nichols: Sometimes I'd have a "T." It depended on how large the hearings were going to be. I mean, the interest was always great for big tax bills and that kind of thing, and some tariffs, especially if it had something to do with the Japanese trades. The Japanese, I don't know how they would get the message so fast, but they'd fill that room up.

Ritchie: Would you have a lot of problems between the newspaper people and the magazine people and the broadcast people?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: You'd have to set aside so much space for each?

Nichols: Yes. Usually, if we were going to have a big hearing, the day before the statements and reports would be delivered to the committee and then they would be delivered to my office. I would take out enough for the various newspaper services. They had this one fellow who would come over, and he would receive

what I'd put out, and it would be his job to distribute the documents to the press people. But you'd have a tax bill, and they'd come over for the committee print, because they couldn't get a copy of it other than through us. I'd do a lot of favors, there were people that I'd take care of.

Ritchie: So you had favorite reporters?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: Because they came around regularly?

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Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: Did you get others who would complain because they'd get there too late and couldn't get the papers?

Nichols: No, that was their problem. I didn't have anything to do with the seating of anybody, other than the members of the committee -- and they had their seats assigned by seniority. If you really want to hear some sour grapes, you let somebody sit in another one's place. They highly regarded their seniority and they would sit according to their seniority.

Ritchie: So it was wise for a junior senator to leave some empty seats and not to move up to sit in a senior senator's seat if he was absent.

Nichols: That's right. [\[John\] Williams](#) did that once. He was bumped and they put him off, and he got back on the committee. I used to make sure that he got a lot of information, and I guess that's one reason why he thought so much of me.

Ritchie: But among the reporters you didn't get to meet people like Louis Lautier, and Alice Dunnigan, and Ethel Payne, who were the first black reporters who covered Capitol Hill back in the '40s and the '50s?

Nichols: No.

Ritchie: I guess they didn't cover tax issues.

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Nichols: No, they wouldn't cover tax issues. Mr. Ritchie, we had conference during the Washington riots in 1968. This thing lasted until 12:30 or a quarter to one. Most all of the conferences were over on the House side. When Harrison was

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chairman of Finance, they had to go fifty-fifty: half would be over on the Senate side, and half on the House side.

You know, Mr. Ritchie, another interesting thing occurred, for what it is worth. Senator Harrison, when he didn't get to be majority leader, he became President Pro Tempore. He would ask me, "What's up on the floor?" And that started me to reading the *Congressional Record*. I'd read that *Record* the first thing in the morning, when I'd come in. I'd glance through it hurriedly to see if there was anything that I had to have on Finance, because if there was, I'd order it.

I read this story in the *Record* one day about this black preacher down in Alabama, and his name was Martin Luther King. At that particular time, they had put him in jail. The white clergymen tried to persuade him not to go through with his demonstrations, but he went ahead with the rest of the people that they arrested. Senator [Paul Douglas](#) put this story in the *Congressional Record*, and I saw it and I sent a copy of the *Record* to my brother-in-law, who had his Masters' and Doctorate from Harvard University. He's a minister. But that was the type of person Douglas was. He would step into something like that. He did the same thing when Senator [Inouye](#) appeared before the committee and nobody knew who he was. Then when it came Douglas' turn to question, he beautifully told the story of the contributions that the senator had made, losing an arm in the service. Douglas would do those kind of things.

Ritchie: Well, you had some real giants on the committee at that time. I was just looking at the list in the 1950s and '60s. In addition to Kerr and Long, you had [Clinton Anderson](#), Paul Douglas, [Albert Gore](#), [Eugene McCarthy](#), and [George Smathers](#), and the Republicans had [Wallace Bennett](#), [Norris Cotton](#), and [Frank Carlson](#), so it was an eminent committee.

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Nichols: Carlson was across the hall from the committee in the old Russell Building. I thought he was a brilliant man too.

Ritchie: I assume there must have been some tensions inside the committee, between people like Douglas and Gore, the liberals on the committee, and some of the conservatives on the committee. Did that develop at all?

Nichols: You might catch a little smattering of it when they would be pursuing a line of questioning that would irritate the liberals or the conservatives. They'd break in on each other. That's where you would get that kind of tension.

Ritchie: Since your committee dealt with taxes, and oil and gas issues and things like that, did you get a lot of lobbyists coming around your office, looking for documents and information?

Nichols: Oh, yes.

Ritchie: Were there some who came regularly?

Nichols: Yes. And we'd get some of those defeated Congressmen who would come over as lobbyists. One in particular [chuckles] came over to gather up documents, statements, and what not. He'd come regularly when the hearings began and I'd hand him copies of the statements. Then he wanted a franked envelope large enough to put five or six statements into. Then he would seal it and address it and throw it down the chute. He didn't pay any postage. One morning he came in, and Miss Springer came around for something, and he said to me, "Now, George, I notice that you smoke a pipe. Here's something to get yourself some tobacco." And she jumped on him with hands and feet. She

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told him, "His name is not George, his name is Jesse Nichols, and if you can't call him that, don't call him anything at all." And she said, "Don't insult him by offering him a dollar to buy tobacco." I just looked at him, and I said, "Well, Congressman so and so, if I get to the place where I can't buy my own tobacco, I'll stop smoking altogether."

But we had all types of people lobbying, coming in and asking for this or that. Once person in particular was Alvoid of the law firm of Alvoid and Alvoid. In my estimation he had the most brilliant mind of anyone I knew besides Wilbur Mills on taxes. He would come up with his statement, and I'd put them around. Then he would stand -- he never would sit down while he was testifying. He would stand before the committee and you could just read that statement and he was going right down it word for word. He had a beautiful memory.

They would all take care of you during Christmas time [chuckles]. It got to the place that you soon learned that people aren't going to give you something for nothing. They expected something in return. That got out of hand and you had to cut it out.

Ritchie: They were always looking for favors in return, in other words?

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: You mentioned former Congressmen as lobbyists. Did you get any former senators coming around as lobbyists?

Nichols: I don't remember a single senator coming back -- oh, yes I do, [Scott Lucas](#). He used to come around. Smathers didn't. He never came back around.

Ritchie: What was your impression of [George Smathers](#)? He was on the committee for a long time.

Nichols: I loved Senator Smathers. He was sincere, a real handsome man. He was a playboy and he'd watch the ladies. He'd come into the hearings and say, "Jesse, who's that sitting down there in the third row?" He'd have me go down and find out who this particular woman was and report back to him. But it was a delight to see him preside over the committee. In the evening when we'd only have one senator, we could only get one senator to come in for a few minutes to preside, and somebody else would come in, could pick it up and go on. You could tell the people who were

Ritchie: Did you see much of [John Kennedy](#) when he was a U.S. senator?

Nichols: No, he was on a different committee. I saw him after he had been nominated, you know that period between being nominated and winning the election. He stopped over the House side where we had a conference going on. I got a chance to shake his hand. I saw more of his brother than I did him.

Ritchie: Senator Kerr became a problem for the Kennedy administration when he took after Medicare and beat them. That was a big issue in your committee at that time.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. Oh, I'd like to tell you a little story about Senator [Kerr](#). His methods could be aggravating, the way he would pursue his point. We were over in the old building, that's the Russell building, and we had somebody appear before the committee who decided that he would present his testimony in the form of a religious sermon. I don't know whether it was Moses

that he was talking about, but he started out quoting the Bible, and Kerr stopped him. Kerr wasn't presiding, but Kerr stopped him and said, "Mr. Chairman, let him hold that point right there." And just as if he was talking to the full room, he said, "Jesse, get me a Bible." We had one young lady who was a Christian Scientist, and she had a Bible, so I brought that out there. He said, "Wait just a minute," and he made that man wait until he had read the verses in the Bible on that particular issue, because this guy had been giving them quotes. Several times he did that, and a newspaper reporter got out a story about Kerr requesting Jesse get this Bible. Another time, Senator Gore came in and he liked to use a lot of big words. He used one word, and Kerr said, "Wait a minute, Albert, what did you say?" [laughs] Gore repeated it, and Kerr said, "Jesse, get me a dictionary!" He

made Gore stop and wait right there until he looked up that word and satisfied himself about it.

Out of all the members we had on that committee, the two of them, Gore and Kerr, were after each other. Kerr at that particular time had the best breed of Black angus cattle in the country and Gore developed an interest in cattle. He'd be sitting up there in a hearing while somebody else was busy with the committee work and he'd be reading this catalog on these cattle. He bought one bull from Kerr for \$50,000, just one bull. I think he bought Senator Kerr's cattle after the senator passed.

I got a call from Senator Kerr two days before he died. I didn't realize his condition at that time. He wanted to speak to Serge Benson. I answered the phone, and he said, "I'd like to speak to Serge Benson." I tried to make an excuse, because Benson wasn't there. He said, "Jesse, this is Senator Kerr." I said, "Yes, senator, I recognized your voice." He said, "Well, all right." But he was demanding, you didn't pussyfoot around with him.

Ritchie: He wasn't the chairman of the committee, but he really was a big power on it?

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Nichols: He was a big power. [Byrd](#) had told him that he was going to retire, and then Byrd went back on his word. Kerr told me that.

Ritchie: And Byrd wasn't in very good health during his last term, was he?

Nichols: I don't know. Byrd lived in the Wardman Park Apartments, and he used to take his constitution early in the morning. He'd dress like a tramp. In fact the Park Police picked him up one morning. They had to get somebody to come and identify him [laughs]. They thought he was a tramp. Even when he was in Virginia, there was some mountain called "Old Rag," and that's where he spent his weekends, tramping around that mountain. He'd have outstanding statesmen like [Winston] Churchill spend the night at his plantation. And he had this little old dog, the same breed as Roosevelt's dog, Fala, you remember that story? And that dog would follow the senator in when he came in the morning and stay in that office all day long. They'd put out food for him, till the senator got ready to go home. The other person who had a dog was Kerr. He had one of that great big dogs, tall as that table.

Ritchie: The other day when you talked about Kerr, you said you thought he was essentially a very lonely man. I was wondering about that. He was gregarious when he was around the Senate, wasn't he? Didn't he have friends in the Senate?

Nichols: Yes, of course, most of his life was spent in the Senate. He would do things like this: he'd find out that some staff person, or some woman on the Senate payroll, needed something, and he would take care of it. He would do it in a hushed manner. He taught Sunday School back in Oklahoma every Sunday morning. He had his own airplane and staff standing by to take him home on the weekends and bring him back on Monday mornings.

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Ritchie: But you think he was lonely outside of the Senate?

Nichols: I thought he was. A lot of the senators would go to these receptions and dinners, and he didn't participate in that kind of thing. Even a bunch of the staff could go to these things. His wife just didn't like Washington. He didn't have a big huge mansion back in Oklahoma City. As a matter of fact, he bought a motel adjoining his property. Whenever his friends would go to visit him in Oklahoma, they each had their own motel room. [chuckles]

He told a story about when they were driving through some small town, and his daughter was making eyes at the gas station attendant. Kerr thought that she was giving him a whole lot of attention. So when he got the chance, he called up the attendant and asked him about himself. He asked him about his education, and he said, "It looks like my daughter is interested in you." He said, "If you want to go to school, I'll see that you go to school, but if you think you're going to marry my daughter, you've got another thought coming!" [laughs]

Ritchie: You said you thought Kerr was particularly close to Bobby Baker in those days?

Nichols: Yes, he was close to Bobby. See, Bobby was handling the money that came in as contributions to the Democratic campaign committee. I think that's what he went to prison for, misappropriating funds. But he was real close to Kerr.

Ritchie: Would you see him often around the committee?

Nichols: Bobby? No, sir.

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Ritchie: But over in the Capitol?

Nichols: In the Capitol, yes.

Ritchie: He was another southerner. He was from South Carolina. Quite a few of Senate staff were southerners.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. Senator [Byrnes](#), I mentioned earlier that had been close to Senator Harrison. He was appointed to the Supreme Court, I think by [Truman](#).

Ritchie: By [Roosevelt](#); Truman made him Secretary of State.

Nichols: Yes, because when Roosevelt died, Byrnes was at home, and he came flying up from South Carolina. Truman told him. "Go on back and take your rest, if I have need for you I'll call and tell you when to come back." I knew President Truman when he chaired that Truman Committee [Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program]. He had come up kind of a hard way. At that time, the Democratic party had those machines. Truman was a member of the machine in Missouri. Tennessee had an awfully strong machine, in that the mayor of Memphis [Ed Crump] was the big shot who ran the whole state of Tennessee. You had a machine in New Jersey. And the other was the Byrd Machine in Virginia.

Ritchie: But Truman had to live down that reputation.

Nichols: He did have to live that down.

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Ritchie: His committee met right around the corner from yours.

Nichols: Yes, in the Caucus Room.

Ritchie: During the Second World War.

Nichols: I saw [Charles] Lindbergh testify in there. There was an American flying ace....

Ritchie: Jimmy Doolittle?

Nichols: No, not Doolittle, this was a World War I ace. He organized an airline.

Ritchie: Oh, Eddie Rickenbacker.

Nichols: Eddie Rickenbacker. He went somewhere and his plane went into the ocean. He was in the ocean for several days. I have a copy of the *Life* magazine where he's on the cover. Eddie Rickenbacker was from Georgia, and this Christie Bell Kennedy, this young lady that I was telling you about who was with Senator

George, she knew Mrs. Rickenbacker. As a matter of fact, Christie Bell Kennedy, myself, and Mrs. Rickenbacker met the plane after the rescue, the first time that her husband came back to the country.

Ritchie: Well, it's a real parade of prominent people that you've had a chance to meet.

End of Interview #3

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Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian,
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

Interview #4: Russell Long and Retirement

(April 12, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Nichols: I was at an award ceremony recently -- I had been assistant treasurer of my church, and the treasurer, Thomkins Ricks, received the first award. Ricks and I both served the same length of time. I'm a member of the Asbury Methodist Church at 11th and K. The pastor had asked me if I would serve as treasurer. I said, no, I didn't want to get involved in that. He kept the position open for almost a year, and then Ricks accepted it. So he said, "I'm not going to let you off the hook. I want you to be his assistant."

When I first left the Senate, I served as treasurer for a health station at 14th and Irving Street. It was under HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] and Medicare. I served on the board of directors. And the turnover was awfully swift. Finally, they found out that they needed a treasurer, and HEW and Medicare people were interested in me getting it because of my connections with the Finance Committee.

Ritchie: Did you stay there long?

Nichols: I served about two and a half years after I left here.

Ritchie: Well, today I wanted to ask you about the years when [Russell Long](#) was chairman of the committee. He came on in 1965 after [Harry Byrd](#) left the Senate. Did the committee change much under Russell Long?

Nichols: The staff did. The staff increased almost two-fold under Russell Long. He had been around, and he saw the maneuvering and policy-making that Senator [Kerr](#) did. Senator Kerr was the floor manager on the major bills from Finance, also Senator Long, before he became chairman, handled several major floor bills for Senator Byrd.



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Ritchie: Why was that? Was Senator Byrd in ill-health, or just not as able as they were?

Nichols: I don't think he was skilled in doing that, even though he had been governor. His managing and legislating were more or less on the state level. Russell Long had come out of law school and he was young and eager. In my estimation, he was trying to change the picture that his father had created.

His father, [Huey Long](#), was a very colorful gentleman. Huey Long had been in the Senate before I got here. At the time that Huey Long was assassinated [in 1935], I was down at the RFC. But I'm sure that you have read some history on the senator's father. As I said, he was very colorful. If I'm not mistaken he holds a record for filibustering longer than anyone else. His favorite subject in filibustering was "potlikker." I don't know whether you're very familiar with "potlikker," but I'm from the South and I know exactly what he was talking about.

Senator Russell Long got the biggest kick out of telling stories on his Daddy and his Uncle Earl -- his Uncle Earl more so than his father. His father at one time was a medicine man. He went all over the state of Louisiana, before he became a senator. He sold an extract medicine that was supposed to cure all ills, regardless of what it was. He would get this extract from the bark of a tree down in Louisiana called Popalarum. It was a mild sickness, he would get the upper part of the tree bark and call it "Upper Popalarum." But the same medicine going from the middle of the tree down toward the root was called "Lower Popalarum."

[laughs] Anyway, he created quite a name for himself. He was very colorful and it helped him politically when he started running for office. He became governor and he had things going. Then when he left Louisiana and came to the Senate, he created quite a stir among the leadership in the Senate because he advocated a type of economics that would take from the rich. In other words, he was a modern Robin Hood. That disturbed quite a few of the people in the leadership. He came on the scene real strong during Roosevelt's administration.

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I don't think there was too much love between Senator Long's father and Senator [Harrison](#). For that particular reason, to have Senator Russell Long become chairman, and one of the first things that he did was to call his administrative assistant and say, "Go over to the disbursing office and give Jesse Nichols the salary that he's supposed to get. Give him the highest grade that they have." Naturally, that put me very much in love with the man!

Things moved very swiftly. I recall that was in December [1965], yes it was near the end of the year, and then the first thing that he did do when he became chairman, starting off the new year, was to have a luncheon for the staff over in the Capitol. During the whole time that I was on the committee, that had never happened. So he started right off with the staff. And I think he was making marks and points at the beginning. I would give him flying colors as the chairperson. A lot of the way you could weigh a chairman was how he handled himself in conference, because some of those Congressmen are very shrewd, and they do their homework. In fact, I could tell on the Senate, on my committee, which member was doing his homework. There was a history put out by the Finance Committee, the year I think before I retired, it must have been in '70. Did you see that?

Ritchie: Yes.

Nichols: He set out a goal for himself, and I think he stuck pretty close to that goal.

Ritchie: What was his goal?

Nichols: His goal was to have the government work smoothly with the people in charge of implementing the laws. When I say the laws I'm talking about specifically Social Security. I don't remember whether he was what you would call a free trader or not, but we had a lot of trade legislation going on at one time in the Finance Committee. We were in charge of sugar. Senator Long, coming from a sugar cane section of the country was at odds with the sugar beet people out in the West. He was very concerned about keeping the Finance Committee at the stature that he found it when he came.

Ritchie: You mentioned that he increased the size of the staff, did that complicate your work at all?

Nichols: No, because we had specialists in Social Security -- Jay Constantine handled that. Mike Stern worked right along with Jay. Then we had a staff of experts in taxation. Tom Vail had worked on the staff of the Joint Committee of Internal Revenue Taxation. And Larry -- I can't remember his last name -- but the two of them were like twins, Tom and Larry. They would follow the proceedings in the House, beginning with the subcommittee on up to the full committee and then all the way through the House on the floor. They were assigned -- this was before Tom came on the Finance Committee -- to work with the Senate Finance Committee.

Senator Long added other staff members, and we increased the size of the committee. Office space was provided in the lower part of the building for the staff members. I think he was very pleased with the input of the staff members.

Ritchie: Did you ever get a staff assistant? Or did you continue to do the job by yourself?

Nichols: No, I did it by myself. When I retired -- I retired at one of those periods where if you retired by midnight on Memorial Day, you would get an eight percent increase in salary. I had a little store room and store places all over the Dirksen Building, and the Russell Building. I had places up in the attic and elsewhere.

There was a Betty Thompson. Betty had asked Senator Long to promote her to assistant clerk, to give her the same position that Evelyn R. Thompson had had. Some of the staff people approached me and told me what was going on. They said, "We want you to have that position, Jesse, because of your seniority." They said, "Why don't you ask for it?" I didn't respond immediately, but I thought it over. Then I approached Tom and we talked it over, and he was telling me about the prejudices of the senators from the South. I told him he wasn't telling me anything, I knew about that. [laughs] I lived with it. But

anyway, we didn't reach a conclusion. As far as he was concerned, he wanted me to soft peddle it or wait. I thought I had waited long enough.

I called home and told my wife to look over our bills and see if I could afford to retire. The two of us worked on living together, and she did the book work. She

called me in a couple of hours and told me: "Retire whenever you want to. You can afford to." So that evening, before I left, Tom said, "Have you thought about that again?" I said, "Yeah, I've thought about it Tom. I'm going to retire." He said, "You're kidding." I said, "No, I'm not kidding." He said, "Well, I'll look for you here on Tuesday. Because Tuesday followed the Memorial Day holiday on Monday. That Tuesday I came in, but I came late, and started to clean out my desk, because before I had left, I went over to the Disbursing Office and signed all the necessary papers required for retirement.

I tried to get Tom to let me give instructions to a young black fellow in Long's office, but I couldn't pin Tom down. Anyway, they had to get two people to half-way try to do what I had been doing. They were fortunate because they didn't have any hearings going on that time. But I never thought that things could not go on, or work without me. I had seen that happen in several instances.

Ritchie: People who thought they were indispensable?

Nichols: Yes. I never thought that. But I was blessed with a very good memory. You may have noticed that while I've been talking to you I haven't had a note on it. They were just things that I remembered. But in my line of work a good memory came in very, very handy. I could take you right now to the committee's library, and you could take the committee calendar and I could tell you where each book is, and what it contains, because I put it together and had it bound, and put it up on the shelf.

Ritchie: And when they needed to know that information, they needed it right away.

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Nichols: Right away! As I was telling you the other day, when that fellow came in and started giving his testimony like a Biblical sermon, Senator Kerr stopped the proceeding. He said, "Wait a minute, where did you say that was?" Then he said, "Jesse, get me a Bible." I wound up getting him a Bible that belonged to a Christian Scientist. Senator Long was something like Senator Kerr. Senator Kerr, if you didn't know something, he would just cut you down into ribbons. But Long didn't do that.

Ritchie: Well, what kind of a person was Russell Long?

Nichols: He was an easy person to talk with. He was a person that would support his staff members one hundred percent. If he asked you something, he could tell in a minute if he believed what you were saying, or knew what you were saying. He was easy to associate with. He was a down-to-earth person, even though he had been exposed to some money, and his father and mother had been

senators. The whole family lived real well. I think that on the night that they spoke about me in the Senate, he gave me a gift of a sterling silver fruit basket. And the night that I retired, they sent for me to come back down to the committee to deliver some papers, which was a hoax. I knew that something was going on. Tom had cut the lights out in the committee room, and when he brought me in they turned the lights on and there were about ten members of the committee, and the chairman, and his wife Caroline -- who I had known for a long time. I had a good friend in the chairman, and if I didn't have any other person, I had a friend in his wife.

He was down to earth. And he had good staff members. He got the president to appoint one of his staff members to the Tariff Commission. Another one left after serving three or four years to go back to Louisiana to run for office. He would come up and visit and bring big plastic bags of those crawfish. We'd all eat them back in the executive conference room. But the senator was right down to earth with the rest of the staff. And he looked liked he enjoyed his work.

Ritchie: At one point you mentioned that he got you privileges of the floor of the Senate when he became chairman.

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Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: What advantage was that for you?

Nichols: If the staff, Tom Vail and the others, needed something from the office, heretofore they'd call for me to bring such and such a thing over, all I could do was take it to the door and get a page to take it on in. Senator Long didn't like that. He said, "Jesse is a staff member, and when he brings something over here I want him to have the privilege to the floor." Now, when Miss Springer was over there, I'd bring things over. She could time me to see just when I'd get there, and she'd meet me and take it on in. Then she would go in and sit down on the couches in the chamber. That's the only thing that I wasn't in on. As I said, I sat in on every executive session but the one they held when the Republicans came in in the 80th Congress, and I purposely walked out of that one till they could get through. I knew they were talking about me. Then the chairperson, Senator [Millikin](#) came out, and told me what had happened, then I went back in. Other than that, I never missed a session, executive or otherwise. Even when they said a "strict executive," that meant clerks and everybody get out of there. I'd get out until they called me in because they wanted something.

Ritchie: The fact that you got floor privileges in the mid-1960s, under Senator Russell Long, do you think that the atmosphere in general was changing around

the Capitol in the 1960s? Civil rights legislation was being passed and there seemed to be more black staff members.

Nichols: I believe so. I know the Banking and Currency Committee, which was down on this end of the Russell Building, that was before we moved. We moved first, and then the other committees started to move [to the Dirksen Building]. But Banking and Currency installed a black person on their staff. And there were several senators who had black staff members. [\[Stuart\] Symington](#) was one. He had Chris McCrae as his secretary when he was Secretary of . . .

Ritchie: The Air Force.

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Nichols: Yes. When he came he brought Chris. There were several black staff members. Foreign Relations had Bertie [Bowman] and a woman, what was her name? I ran into her about three years ago on Christmas eve. Thomasine Scott. She was the daughter-in-law of Emmett J. Scott. [Laughs] That's the first and only time I tried to play a little politics. Her husband was Emory Scott, and he was a lawyer down in the Veterans Bureau. He decided that he wanted to put his name in for a federal judgeship. So I talked with Walter Little. Have you heard of Walter Little?

Ritchie: No.

Nichols: He was over on the House side. Walter Little was the right-hand man of [Wilbur Mills](#), and of the other chairmen prior to Wilbur Mills. Walter and I hooked up together. Walter was to work on Mr. Mills, and I was to work on some member of my committee who we thought could really swing the thing. I told Senator Dirksen. We almost succeeded. Walter was such a person that sometimes Mr. Mills would take him inside to see the president and talk to him. That's when [Lyndon Johnson](#) was there. Lyndon Johnson had asked one of his staff members, I think his name was Lightfoot.

Ritchie: That sounds familiar.

Nichols: But anyway, I submitted the name to Senator [Dirksen](#), and I received a beautiful letter from him. "Jesse," it said, "I'm pleased that you asked me and I'm going to look into it." And he brought it up to the president, and Walter got Mr. Mills to bring it up. But it turned out that the person who became the judge was the staff member in the White House. He decided he wanted the job himself, so he became the judge. Walter knew President Johnson better than I did, because he knew him when he had been over on the House side.

Walter came to be Mr. Mills' right-hand man. The chairperson of the Ways and Means Committee at that time was more powerful than the Speaker, because all assignments were made through him.

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Ritchie: Committee assignments?

Nichols: Yes. And this black Congresswoman from New York, [Shirley Chisholm](#), came to the Congress and was walking down the hall past the Ways and Means Committee. I know you've passed that room many, many a time, right off the House floor. Walter sat out in the front room. In the olden days, the Congressmen would come up and hand their hats and coats to the staff person, and they would take care of them, open the door for them and that kind of thing.

Shirley Chisholm was passing through the hall, and Walter followed her and approached her and said, "Mrs. Chisholm?" "Yes?" He said, "I'm Walter Little, if there's anything I can do to help you make your term pleasant, all you have to do is ask. Feel free to do that." [laughs] And Mrs. Chisholm squared off from him and said, "I'm Shirley Chisholm, and I represent such and such a district in Brooklyn, New York, and I'm in a position for you to come up to me and ask me if there's anything I can do for you." He said, "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Chisholm, I was just trying to be helpful." She said, "I don't need you to be helpful!" All right, Mrs. Chisholm didn't know who the hell Walter was. He went back into the office, and Mr. Mills had a desk there and he said, "What's the matter with you, Walter?" He told him the experience he had just had with Mrs. Chisholm. Mr. Mills laughed, and he said, "As a matter of fact, here's her request for committee assignments. She wants to be on this committee and on that committee." Walter smiled to himself, and he said, "Well, I think an assignment on Agriculture would be good for her." [laughs] Now, if you think I'm lying, Mr. Ritchie, you can go find her committee assignments, and her first one was on Agriculture. She said, "Hell, there's nothing growing in Brooklyn, not even a tree!" [laughs]

But Walter was just like that. He had some clout with Mr. Mills, and we almost pulled that thing off. I didn't try another one. But I have no idea how many people I have helped -- my color. They would come up and I would speak to the right person for them. I'd help whites too. We had a senator on the committee from Indiana, [Vance Hartke](#). I spoke to the senator about a young fellow who was a brother to one staff member on the committee, and he pushed

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his chair back and said, "You go on and call my A.A. and tell him that whatever you want done, do it." Then he said, "No, I don't want you to do it. I'll go tell him

myself." So he went and called and had his administrative assistant come over to the committee. He knocked on the door and I went to the door, and he said, "The senator just called me." This youngster wanted to be on the Capitol police force. He said, "All right, he's got it." They put him right on.

We had another senator who was very colorful, that was Big [Ed Johnson](#) of Colorado. He was a Democrat when Millikin was the Republican senator from Colorado. I could speak to him if I wanted something.

Another story, going back to the era of Senator Long, we had this huge hearing going on, and the president of General Electric was in the committee room with his staff. He was interested in something, and when we broke at noon, the lunch hour, somebody knocked on the back door. See, nobody but the senators were allowed to go in and out of that door. There was this president of General Electric and three or four of his staff members. A fellow said, "What's your name?" I said, "My name is Nichols." He said, "Mr. so and so wants to meet you." I said, "Yeah?" He came up and said, "I'm Mr. so and so, president of General Electric." He said, "I was just telling my staff members, if they wanted to see somebody who really ran that committee, and the staff of that committee, it was you. And I just wanted to say hello and shake your hand." And he did, he shook my hand and introduced me to his staff. I thought that was pretty good. [chuckles]

Several of the members you could talk to. [Herman Talmadge](#), I could talk to him. I don't know. There was just something, when they were put on the Finance Committee if they didn't have that character, or that impulse to be a statesman, they soon tried to develop it.

Ritchie: Were there any that you felt didn't measure up?

Nichols: Oh, yes, quite a few. Being around them, like on the Revenue Code of '54, that was a huge thing. And all those trade agreements, and the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade]. You would be put in

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association with men who really knew what they were doing. If you had something, it would come out.

I spoke about the youngsters at the door over on the House side. When I first became a member of the staff of the committee, when it was just Skeeter and I and Miss Smith, we had an executive session. Senator [\[Tom\] Connally](#) came in. He was a big tall Texan with flowing hair and bow ties. He just dropped his coat on the chair. Skeeter said, "Jesse, pick up the senator's coat and hang it on the rack." Senator Harrison came in right behind him, and he heard him. He called

Skeeter over and said, "Don't you ask Jesse any more." [laughs] He said, "If he's too damn lazy to hang up his own coat, don't you bother him."

Ritchie: One other event in the '60s. I think we touched on it just briefly last time, was the riots in Washington in 1968. Did you say that the committee was meeting the day of the riots?

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: What was the impact on the Capitol?

Nichols: Well, we had had this morning session. Executive sessions were usually from ten to noon. And at lunchtime I went home -- no, I didn't, I went to the bank. I drove my car. I had a place where I used to park on the street that faces the Senate side of the Capitol, I had a place there to park my car. I went downtown to 15th and Pennsylvania Avenue, it was right across from the Treasury, where the Old Ebbitt Grill is located. I used to go there quite often. I happened to look toward Howard University in that direction, and I saw all that smoke coming up. I went back to the office and I had my radio on in the car to hear what was going on. When I got back to the office, I told Tom, I said, "Tom, you'd better let these young girls go home, because all hell's breaking loose out there." He said, "You can't be serious." I said, "I am serious." So he hurriedly got them all together and let them go home.

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But I was fortunate. My home, as I said the other day, is across from Soldiers' Home. The president had ordered in troops, I think they must have been from Kentucky. Their helicopters and all landed in that area in front of my house. I was glad that they did, because my property was secured.

Ritchie: Did it disrupt work around the Capitol for a while?

Nichols: No.

Ritchie: I remember the pictures of the soldiers standing on the steps of the Capitol for a while.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. We've been awfully fortunate to have the separate [Capitol Police](#) force. But after that, they started to increase security around certain entrances to the Capitol. They started to put barricades up. Before that, you could go all over the Capitol, anywhere you wanted, any time of the day or night.

Ritchie: Well, your service here stretched a long time, from 1937 to 1971. How different was the Senate by 1971, when you were getting ready to leave than it was when you first came in 1937? You mentioned security as one of the things, but how did it change over time?

Nichols: It changed with the increase in personnel. Enlarging the staff. If you go back and review the history of the Finance Committee, you will find that at one time they had one standing subcommittee, and that was on veterans' affairs. It was up to the chairmen from time to time to appoint different subcommittees. The minority side would be permitted to have a staff member, maybe a secretary for him or for her -- in this case it always was a he. And a subcommittee might be created as needed. But if you go back in the history of the committee you will find no subcommittees. The change started about the time I left, under Russell Long they were creating subcommittees on this and subcommittees on the other thing. That was a good way to increase the personnel on the staff.

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For instance, I passed this office this morning, just before I turned the corner to come to your office. I saw Finance on the glass. I pushed open the door and asked to speak to a friend of mine who still works for the committee, Bruce. But I don't know where Bruce is located. See, everything when I was here was located either in the committee room, or in the section downstairs. I guess another good reason why the staff used to be so small was that the staff from the top floor of the Russell Building, the Legislative Counsel always provided staff people to sit with that committee, even in executive session. And as I said, we had some pretty smart tax lawyers.

It came up that Mr. Stam's office -- [Colin F.] Stam was chief of staff of the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation. Before Stam, the man ahead of him was a fellow named L.H. Parker. He was a brilliant lawyer and he was a very close friend of Harrison's. Then Stam's office started increasing. So I would say that the expansion of the staff, of subcommittees, and that type of thing brought about a tremendous change.

Ritchie: Any other changes that you noticed over time?

Nichols: No, I can't say. I've only been back here twice, Mr. Ritchie, since I retired -- when I came to the reception for Senator [Mansfield](#) the other day, and once before when they had a retirement party for Senator Russell Long.

Ritchie: How is it that you stayed away so much?

Nichols: Well, when I first retired, I stayed home I'd say three to four months. Tom was trying to place me somewhere downtown where some of the lobbying

people that bothered us were located, to give me something to do where I would be doing something light. I had wanted to go into my business but I promised my wife that I wouldn't do that.

Ritchie: What kind of business?

Nichols: I was in the cabinet-making and decorating business. I built about fifty recreation rooms all over this town. I had electric power tools, and

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I finished cabinet-making in high school. I was the foreman of the cabinet shop. When I came on the staff of the committee, we used to have those real long periods of time when the Congress was not in session. Sometimes I'd be on two days a week, or one day a week. All of the rest of it I had the time off. So I utilized it, I put it to use.

When I went to the Investment Bankers, they wanted somebody to take over the new mail room that they had installed. Tom succeeded in getting the director of the Investment Bankers to give me an interview, and he was impressed. He wanted me, and they called this mailing company that put out the mailing machines, each post office has them. I can't recall the company name now, but all of the postal scales and addressographs were put out by those people. The Investment Bankers were on 13th and Pennsylvania Avenue. We were on the top floor. They called this instructor to come down and he started telling me about running the addressograph. He asked me if I had any questions, and I looked at it and said no. They had this machine that would take a ream of paper and it would fold it, stuff it in the envelope, seal it, and stamp it, all at the same time.

He asked me this question and that question and he saw that I was saying yes when I actually didn't know what the heck he was talking about. [laughs] So he said, "Now, I've been here four days and I'm not supposed to leave until I have taught you how to run these machines." He said, "These people want to keep you. Now, you start asking some questions." I had the manual, and at night I took the manual home and I read, and read, and read, until finally I understood the principle of the thing. I stayed with them for about two and a half years, until they left to move their office to New York. They dabbled in municipal bonds and that type of stuff. They'd come in and program the machine, they'd write a work order and that kind of thing, and go on about their business. They might want several sub offices in this particular state to be skipped, and that kind of thing. You had red pens that you used to program the machine, and that's the result that you got.

When I was getting ready to leave there, one of the suppliers came around. He would go all up and down K Street. He spoke to the head man at

the National Council for Senior Citizens. So I went down and worked for them for about two years.

Ritchie: What did you do there?

Nichols: The same thing, running the mailing machines. That was my connection with the AFL-CIO -- they gave me that history of the Congress when I retired -- because they had people on the staff there.

Ritchie: Of course, the Finance Committee spent a lot of time on Social Security issues.

Nichols: Yes, this fellow had testified several times before the Finance Committee on Social Security. The same thing brought me to that health organization that I told you about. Because of my connections with Social Security, they wanted me act as treasurer. I was signing notes for \$40,000 and \$50,000 as health plans.

Ritchie: What kind of health organization was that?

Nichols: For the whole community. The Social Security people would give them grants and things for indigent people.

Ritchie: Here in the District of Columbia?

Nichols: Yes, at 14th and Irving Street, N.W., it's still in existence right now.

Ritchie: What's the name of it?

Nichols: I think its called the Cardoza Health Center. I believe that's what it's called. When I first agreed to go, I was on the board for one meeting a month. Then when I agreed to serve as treasurer, then my phone would start to ring at 7:30 in the morning, and I would have to go by that office and sign some emergency check for this, that and the other thing.

Ritchie: Now was that connected with your church, or was that separate?

Nichols: A person in the church was on the executive staff, and she knew that I had retired. She was the one that put my name in. And there was no compensation at all for doing what I was doing.

Ritchie: So you've had a very varied retirement since you left the Senate.

Nichols: Yes. I wouldn't have had any problem, but I had promised my wife that we would live in our means, and would take on what came along.

Ritchie: But she didn't want you go into the cabinet business?

Nichols: No.

Ritchie: She thought that would take too much of your time?

Nichols: It did. Then when I started playing golf, I was playing golf on Saturdays and Sundays. My wife died in '77. I haven't played a game of golf but once since then. I played in my son's tournament on Sunday. If I realized then how ill she was, I never would have done that. But I do think that certain people, if they've been real active, and keyed up -- sometimes I was very tense -- that they do need something to let themselves unwind. I really believe that healthwise, that was very beneficial to me. When I would leave the office I would be doing something entirely different from what I had been doing. I've had a very rich life. See, I've been retired twenty-three years. The average person is retired for three to five years, if they can make it that far.

Ritchie: Well you've had a fascinating life and some wonderful opportunities. And you have a remarkably good memories of that period, and the people that you worked with.

Nichols: Thank you very much, sir.

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Ritchie: I've enjoyed enormously hearing your stories, and this is going to be a very good contribution to our oral history collection.

Nichols: You think so?

Ritchie: Oh, I think so, definitely. What's interesting is that so many people tell different portions of the same story. I had heard about some of the things that you talked about from other perspectives, but what you've said helps to make more sense out of some of the stories that I knew just a little bit about before. That's the reason for collecting so many stories, because everybody gives their own piece of the puzzle. You've provided a lot of clues about how this institution works.

Nichols: Well, I was not one to reveal things. I thought that when you worked as closely with the members of the Finance Committee as I did, that you don't go off and try to commercialize or capitalize on it.

Ritchie: But you've made a contribution here. You've certainly left a good record now for historians in the future who will be interested in how the Senate operated during the time you were here.

Nichols: Tell me this, Mr. Ritchie, how did you come to touch me on the shoulder the other day at that reception for Senator [Mansfield](#) [to present him the [Paul Douglas](#) Ethics in Government award]?

Ritchie: Well, when you turned around and spoke to Mr. Bookbinder -- I was sitting next to Hyman Bookbinder -- you introduced yourself to him and said that you worked on the staff of the Finance Committee from 1937 to 1971. Of course, there aren't that many people that I get to meet anymore who can say that they started to work for the Senate in the 1930s. We've been doing interviews with people for almost twenty years now, and leaving these as a record. And I knew as soon as you introduced yourself that you were someone we would want to include in this collection. Nowadays, the current staff members don't stay here very long. They're here for two or three years and they're onto something else. But you're in a generation of people who made a

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career out of working on Capitol Hill, and that's become a rare commodity. So it was a wonderful coincidence that we both were invited to the same reception and wound up sitting near each other.

Nichols: I was curious, because when they were establishing the Paul Douglas Foundation, they had a luncheon at one of the hotels downtown, on 14th Street, near Pennsylvania Avenue. That was my first time in there. Howard Shuman had contacted me, and I went. I met Senator [\[Paul\] Simon](#) and quite a few people who knew me, but I didn't know them.

Ritchie: I had done an interview with Howard Shuman, that's one of the other interviews in our collection, and he invited me to come to that reception, because of the acquaintance we had struck up, and just by chance I happened to be sitting there when you reintroduced yourself to Mr. Bookbinder.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. Well, I met Senator Mansfield as I came in the door. I looked around as I came in, and I didn't see many people I knew. I did see Howard over in the corner. I had seen Senator Mansfield any number of times when he came before the committee, so I just reintroduced myself. And the president of the University of Illinois was standing there. I told him, "I'm Jesse

Nichols," and he said, "I'm president of the university." But that's one thing, if I received nothing else, Mr. Ritchie, I got a chance to see how extremely wealthy people would respond, how they treat people, and that kind of thing. That's been a pleasure to me.

I'm going to be taking an advanced music lesson this Friday, and I'm going to be playing at my alumni -- Alcorn's alumni charter program on the 24th. They were supposed to have another person, but that person can't be present, so she said, "Be sure that you prepare for two selections." I'm going to play of some of Duke Ellington's stuff.

Ritchie: We were planning to send a copy of your interview to Howard University -- I know the oral historian up there, they have a very good oral history collection at the Moorland-Spingarn Library -- and we'll be glad to send a copy to Alcorn too.

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Nichols: I'd appreciate that.

Ritchie: Also I have a good friend, Alferdteen Harrison, who teaches at Jackson State in Mississippi, and does oral history in Mississippi. We'll send her a copy of the interview.

Nichols: That would be fine, because most of my cousins went to Tougaloo. Tougaloo is about ten to twelve miles out of Jackson. That's where my father wanted my sisters and I to go. But we pulled a switcheroo on him and we went to Alcorn because most of the kids in Clarksdale were going to Alcorn. But that will be fine. I was out Saturday to a meeting of the Alcorn alumni, and I mentioned that this was in progress and that I might have something for them.

Ritchie: Well, good, we'll be glad to make copies for them.

Nichols: Okay, Mr. Ritchie, I appreciate it.

End of Interview #4

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