

Henry Bellmon

From the farm, to the war, to the Governor's mansion. Then finally back to the farm.

Chapter 1 - 1:05

Introduction

John Erling: Henry Louis Bellmon was a member of the Oklahoma Legislature. He was the 18th and 23rd Governor of Oklahoma, the first Republican to hold that office, and a two-term United States Senator. As a Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, he was a tank platoon leader in the Pacific Theater in World War II. For his service, he was awarded the Legion of Merit and a Silver Star. Henry Bellmon was known for taking moderate positions and this put him at odds with the largely conservative Oklahoma Republican Party. In this interview, you will hear his comments on his stands on the Panama Canal, forced busing in Oklahoma and his support of House Bill 1017. Henry Bellmon retired from political life and returned to his cattle and wheat farm in 1991 near Billings, Oklahoma, which is where we conducted this interview on April 14th, 2009. He was 88 years old when he died September 29th, 2009. The Founding Sponsors of this oral history website are pleased to present Henry Bellmon's story on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 - 5:35

Dugout Living

John Erling: Today's date is April 14th, 2009.

Henry Bellmon: My name is Henry Bellmon. I was born September 3rd, 1921, so that makes me 87 years old. I will be 88 in September.

JE: Where were you born?

HB: I was born on a farm east of Tonkawa but my family always lived here. My mother went there to be with her sister-in-law when I was born.

JE: Where is our conversation taking place?

HB: We are on our home place, which is seven miles east and one mile south from Billings. It's

10 miles directly south of Tonkawa, 16 miles north and due west of Perry.

JE: This is the family farm and then you were actually born...

HB: I was born on land my father owned up by Tonkawa, which is 10 miles north of here.

JE: So I guess they say you were born in Tonkawa, right?

HB: Yes.

JE: Let's talk about your father. I think your father was born in 1874 and was a native of Kansas, is that true?

HB: That's true.

JE: Can you talk a little bit about how it was that he came to Oklahoma?

HB: Yes. He came in a roundabout way. His family lived near Pittsburgh, Kansas where his dad mined coal in a strip mine with horses. My dad was a teenager, or still in grade school when his father moved to what was then known as no-man's land. It is not known as Beaver County, Oklahoma. They lived out there I think for five years in a dugout on the bank of the Beaver River. And my dad and his dad made a living by working for the local ranchers and by hauling buffalo bones that they picked up on the prairie to deliver them and sell them and bring merchandise back to the local storekeepers. After about five years, my father's father became tired of pioneering so they went back to Kansas. In 1893, when the Cherokee Strip opened, my father was too young to make the run, but he came down in 1897 and bought another man's rights to his claim and lived on the plain, which is across the road from where we are sitting today.

JE: This dugout that you talk about, do you know much about it?

HB: It was in the bank of the river in the ground.

JE: And they lived there the year-round?

HB: They lived there the year-round. They had no other materials to make a house from. There are no trees out there.

JE: And to survive in the cold and the below-freezing temperatures...

HB: My dad talked about driving a team and hauling bones to deliver them in the winter and the wind blew out of the north. He said it was so cold that the only way they could stay alive was to get in behind the horses and walk behind the horses in the doubletree with what little protection the horses gave in the wind. It was hard to believe. I think there were three kids and their parents, so there were five people living in a dugout for five years.

JE: And they survived. There were no deaths from that?

HB: No deaths. My dad talked about doing other things that were pretty deadly. The prairie rattlesnakes lived with the prairie dogs. My dad and his partner made a game of going into prairie dog towns about sundown and the rattlesnakes were coiled up outside their dens. They would take their lariat ropes and loop them over and make it into a kind of a

club. And they killed as many rattlesnakes as they could before the snakes got wise and went down the holes. If they would have made a mistake and gotten bitten, they wouldn't have had any way of getting treated.

JE: Is there a covered wagon experience to all of this?

HB: They went from Pittsburgh, Kansas to no man's land or Beaver County with a covered wagon and a herd of cattle with them. A small herd, I don't know how many went but they went right down the main street in Wichita with a herd of cattle. Wichita was hardly more than a village at the time.

JE: Talk about your mother Edith.

HB: She was from Iowa. Her family worked as farmers up by Clarinda, Iowa. They came here in 1907. I have the accounts from other members of the family telling about the trip, which I think took about three weeks. They came in two covered wagons and they shipped their farming machinery down by train, so it came later. They didn't haul the machinery with them. But they made it into kind of a picnic. They came when the weather was nice. They had to forge some rivers and when they did they would go fishing and swimming and they made it into a pleasant experience. My mother who was one of the older children and I think she walked a lot of the distance from Iowa down to here. She walked alongside the wagon.

JE: Was she educated?

HB: She had a teacher's certificate that allowed her to teach in the country schools. She taught for 20 years in the one-room school here in this neighborhood.

JE: About your father, what type of man was he? What do you remember about your dad?

HB: Well, I remember lots of things but he was a very hard-working man. He was not an educated man. When his family went from Kansas to no man's land I think he was in the fifth grade. They didn't have any schools out in the panhandle. When they went back to Kansas he said he was a head taller than the other kids of his age in his class but he felt out of his element and he didn't go back to school. Even though he wasn't educated, he had a great interest in education and insisted that my family go to school and get as much education as we could. He had 13 children. Nine children, seven girls and two boys by his first wife and then she died. Two years later he and my mother were married and I was born in 1921. JE: So then you had?

HB: Three brothers, there were four of us in the second family.

JE: And have we said, your father's name was?

HB: George Delbert Bellmon. He helped all of his kids get an education. I don't know how many of my half-sisters were schoolteachers, but I think there were four who had college training or at least enough education to be teachers. And my brothers went to one brother is still living has a degree from OSU. There wasn't easy for my folks to help us

with education because during the Depression money was very tight. In fact, except for some lucky breaks, my dad would have had to give up the land and move off. An oil company came here and dug a well and gave my dad enough of the royalties that at least that let him stay on the land.

Chapter 3 - 5:46

Henry/Farm Boy

John Erling: Isn't there a story about an insurance salesman that wanted your father.

Henry Bellmon: Yes.

JE: Can you tell us that story?

HB: At that time and I'm not sure what year this would have been, probably 1905 or so, the insurance went into effect when it was paid for. My dad was doing his normal farming in the spring, and an insurance salesman came to see him. And the insurance salesman was very insistent and he talked and talked and he argues with my dad that he should buy insurance. They talked for a couple of hours and finally my dad got tired of it and invited him to stay for lunch. They went in and had lunch and then they argued some more about insurance and when he came out, it was toward the middle of the afternoon. He looked up and there was a huge black cloud coming in and so my dad told this insurance man, "I'll believe I'll buy that insurance after all." He did, and according to my dad's version of the story, it was within 2 hours they had a hailstorm and everything was wiped out. So he got paid from the insurance and he was able to put out another crop on the same land.

JE: So as a young boy you did chores and you milked cows?

HB: I did all kinds of farming work. I shocked wheat and scooped wheat and hauled bundles. I drove the horses on the plow. My main job during the school months was to keep the wood box full. We cooked with wood and heated the house with wood and it was a pretty major job to chop enough wood into logs and then I came in the house and stacked them in the wood box so my mother would have wood for the stove.

JE: Where you are talking about, is that right here?

HB: It's across the road.

JE: It was across the road at Centennial Farm?

HB: Yes. That house was built about 1898. This house was built in 1961 or 1962.

JE: So that young people know about milking cows, that was a tough job because I think even the calves were suckling...

HB: My sister and my dad used I'm not sure what was common practice, but he didn't wean the calves he let him nurse the mothers. And the deal was the calves got two tits and the

milker got two tits and the calf would butt up against you with its lower teeth, it didn't have upper teeth, but its lower teeth would cut your knuckles. And the milk was a little salty and it made those sores hurt. It was a miserable job to milk cows and I've never liked milk since. But we were able to raise the calves as well as have half the milk.

JE: So you would have been doing this when you were 12, 13 or 14 years old?

HB: I was doing it when I was in high school. I suppose I was doing it until I was at least 14. We also raised pigs. We would take the milk into the house and we would use what was called a separator. It was a machine that you turned with a crank. One person turned the crank and the other poured the milk up into the bowl. You separated it into cream and skim milk and the skim milk was fed to the pigs. It was a good source of protein. That was a good source of income. Usually when the pigs were big enough to sell we would have a little money from them. Also, my dad butchered by himself. He would kill the hogs and then bleed them and then put them in a barrel of hot water with a fire under it and he would pull them out and my dad would eviscerate them and cut them into hams and shoulders and loins. My mother would fry up the odds and ends and pieces and sausage and put them in a big crock and put in a layer of lard, and a layer of sausage, and a layer of lard, and a layer of sausage until she had the crock full. We'd eat it in the wintertime when we had breakfast. She made soap out of some of the fat. We didn't butcher beef so we had no way to preserve the beef because we didn't have any refrigeration. We could preserve the pork with salt. It was a subsistence kind of living, but it was a good living.

JE: Lots of hard work. As you went on in life and you thought about your father, what did you learn from him and your mother? What did you take from them?

HB: My mother was probably my greatest idol. She was one of the kindest women I have ever known. She was talented in lots of ways and among other things she was a great cook. She played the piano and sang. She put up with all of those children. Some of them were my dad's when they got married, and some were older and gone, but some were young enough to be around her family. She was a great nurse. We had access to medical care. Doctors would come to the house if you called them at that time, but we had no way to pay them so we didn't call doctors very often. She coaxed us into getting an education and she was even more determined than my dad was that we would go to school. My dad wanted me to go to law school and my mother didn't care as long as you got enough education to understand the issues.

JE: And then your father, what did you take from him?

HB: Well, maybe this is a bad choice of words but I think you'd call it stubbornness. A streak of ... if you think you understand the issue and know what the proper course is, you stay the proper course until you succeed. He used to have saying, which he used frequently, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." It was one of his standard rules. He had a

lot of sayings. My dad became an oil field contractor when they found oil over here on the neighboring farm. He hired muleskinners and owned horses and mules. I think probably as many as 50 head and had as many as 10 different drivers. The drivers used the horses to haul the rigs and the lumber to make the rigs and the wheels and the boilers. They dug the pits and the cellars with horses. My dad supervised the whole operation and he also did the same work himself. It doesn't sound like a big deal in these days of bulldozers and trackhoes and 18-wheelers, but back then hauling a boiler which probably weighed a couple of tons... loading it from a railroad car to a wagon and hauling it across country roads and rickety bridges through mud and getting it where you needed it into order to drill oil was really a very major accomplishment.

Chapter 4 - 5:51

War

John Erling: Your education then, did you go to elementary school here?

Henry Bellmon: A little elementary school that you probably saw as you drove in. I went there for seven years. I skipped the second grade. When I started there the oil boom was at its height and we had 40 kids in that one-room school with one teacher. They gradually moved away and by the time I graduated we had only three in my eighth grade class. I went through grade school in that one-room school.

JE: Which was kind of standard back then wasn't it?

HB: Rural kids all went to one-room schools.

JE: Yes. You went on to high school from there.

HB: When I went to high school I went to Moreland because Moreland had school buses and Billings didn't have buses. Moreland was 12 miles away. Billing was 8 miles away. We were in the Moreland District so I went to Moreland School for three years and then Billings got buses so I changed and went to Billing for my senior year and graduated from Billings.

JE: And after you graduated from Billings, did you go right on to Oklahoma A&M?

HB: Yes, in the fall.

JE: Was that a four-year experience?

HB: Three and a half. I went there for seven semesters. My folks weren't able to help me with expenses so I had to get a job. I didn't have any social life to speak of, so I spent my time either working or studying. I carried up to 22 hours per semester. I transferred my coursework in the January after Pearl Harbor happened in December. So I didn't go for my eighth semester.

JE: But you completed the degree?

HB: Yes.

JE: In?

HB: Agriculture was my major.

JE: So then, service to your country, you joined the Marine Corps?

HB: Yes, I finished my coursework in January and joined the Marines in March, April or May.

JE: You distinctly remember when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

HB: Yes I certainly do. I was living at the boarding house where I had a job making the beds and cleaning up the rooms for the 15 or so boys that lived there. It was a Sunday morning and I was doing my housekeeping. I was listening to the radio and I heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I was working at The Daily O'Collegian the college newspaper. I went to the O'Collegian office and went in where we had the AP wire. The reports were coming in over the ticker as fast as they had the information. So I probably spent three hours that afternoon reading the ticker. Then the next day, which was a Monday, Henry Bennett called up a campus-wide meeting in the Field House where we heard Franklin D. Roosevelt make the declaration of war against the Japanese and Germans. It seemed to me like the attitude on campus changed from daylight to dark almost overnight. Because we all knew that we were the prime age to be drafted and then you didn't have any idea whether you'd be coming back or not.

JE: Eighteen, 19 and 20 year olds at that time. Why did you join the Marine Corps at that time?

HB: Well, if there was going to be a war, I wanted to be where there was going to be some action. I had two friends who joined the Marines at the same time. Anyway, the three of us weren't necessarily pals particularly, but we were good friends and we had similar notions about being where there was some action.

JE: You were assigned to what as a Marine?

HB: I joined in the spring of 1942 and they put me in Officer Candidate School because I was a college graduate. They didn't have an opening in the Officer Candidate Class until November, so I was assigned to Quantico Officer Candidate School and reported for duty in November 1942. The school lasted 10 weeks and then I graduated from Officer Candidates Class and became a reserve officer. I was there for another 10 weeks. Then I was sent to Camp Elliott, California. I had five days in-between, so I was home for five days. I went to Camp Elliott where I selected to be trained for tank duty. The tank training took place at Jack's Farm. I stayed there until, I am not sure the dates exactly, but a little less than a year and then I was transferred up to Camp Pendleton where I was assigned to the 4th division, which was being formed.

JE: And you were in charge of?

HB: A tank platoon was generally about five tanks and about 30 men.

JE: Where did you begin to serve?

HB: As far as being on active duty, I first served in Quantico, Virginia in the Officer Candidates Class and that was in November of 1942.

JE: Let's bring you to Maui. That was kind of a defining moment and time for you there. You were camped in Maui, tell us why and what that was about.

HB: Back to California first, the 4th Division formed up in Camp Pendleton. After we got equipment and got our men trained we were put on a ship at San Diego and sent to the Marshall Islands and captured a few islands that we wanted. Then we went from the Marshall Islands back to Maui and established our base camp on Maui. Then we were there for probably six months before we got replacements for equipment that we lost. Then we got on a ship and we went to Saipan in the Marianas. We captured Saipan, made the landing there and took the island. Then we got in small boats and went across the channel to Tinian, which is about 15 miles across the water. We captured Tinian and then we were put on a ship and brought back to Maui again for retraining and regrouping. Then we were put on a ship and went to Iwo Jima. We captured Iwo Jima and got on a ship and went back to Maui. We had our base camp on Maui and we always stayed there all the time. We were being trained to make the landing on the island of Kyushu near the Japanese homeland when Harry Truman dropped the bomb and the war was over. And God bless him for that.

JE: So all of these, did you or your men sustain injuries?

HB: We had five tanks with five crew members in each one of them, and I lost 12 men. I mean 12 dead, besides the injured.

JE: You didn't sustain any injuries at all?

HB: None at all.

Chapter 5 - 3:00

Near Death/Injury

John Erling: When you were on Maui, you were fighting the Japanese but the Japanese were there. Tell us about what you learned then.

Henry Bellmon: They have this saying, "The missionaries came to the Hawaiian Islands to do good, and stayed and did well." They took the land from the Hawaiian natives and converted it into pineapple and sugar cane plantations. They needed field workers to handle these crops and so they brought in people from Portugal to work in the field, and people from the Philippines and people from China and people from Japan. Over the

years they found that the best workers were the Japanese, so by the time the Marines got to Maui in WWII, most of the people who lived on Maui were Japanese people. The people that the Marines got to know were practically all Japanese because they were the ones we associated with. There were Japanese doctors and they (Japanese) ran the little restaurant where we used to go for hamburgers, and there were Japanese waitresses there. There were just all kinds of Japanese people that we rubbed shoulders with daily that we had a fine relationship with. It was kind of strange to get on a ship and sail off across the water for two weeks and get off on another island and try to kill all the Japanese. It was pretty plain to me that there wasn't a big problem between the Japanese people it was between the governments. I decided if I ever had a chance to do it, I would get into government when I got back and see if I could make a difference.

JE: For all of your service, you received a Silver Star. You were in danger, but never harmed. That's amazing.

HB: Well, one of the things that happened to me was I was sitting in the tank commander's seat, the gunner sits between the tank commander and the cannon, and the tank shell came through and cut him in two and I didn't get a scratch. It blew the leg off a loader over here (motioning). We had to drag him out of there and get him calmed down so he didn't bleed to death.

JE: So you were in inches of also either losing your life or being injured?

HB: Oh yes. It was a matter of just being a foot back.

JE: Did you ask yourself why?

HB: You didn't stop to think, you just tried to do your job. There was another time that I didn't know anything had happened. When we made the landing at Iwo Jima, the tank I was in had hit a mine. The Japanese had developed a system of burying a 250-pound bomb, which is a very big bomb in the ground. And then they would put a yardstick mine across it as a detonator. A yardstick mine was a smaller mine about a meter long, and it was filled with explosives. And if you ran over one of those it would blow your track off, but it wouldn't hurt the tank. But when they would use them as detonators, the yardstick might blow up itself, a 250-pound bomb and it would blow a tank clear apart. We hit one of those on the beach and luckily there were enough ashes situated down around the bomb to cushion the impact from the yardstick mine and the bomb didn't explode. So we sat there all afternoon. Right in front of us the Japanese had their machine guns and their snipers. We were able to hold them under control and let the people who were on the beach get through without being shot. But we weren't hurt and even though they were firing at us, they were shooting high explosives and they didn't penetrate our armor. It would make your head ring a little bit but it didn't so any permanent damage to the tank.

Chapter 6 - 5:50
Two-Party Tea Party

John Erling: Let's fast forward. You're back in Oklahoma and your first elected office is to the House of Representatives in 1946 from Noble County. You were about 25 years old.

Henry Bellmon: Yes.

JE: The reason you ran is because of what you committed yourself to back there on Maui?

HB: Yes. I had a friend named Bob McCovens who was in the state legislature. Bob was a law student and when he finished law school there was a vacancy in the county attorney's office here in Noble County. So Bob resigned his seat in the Legislature and took the job as county attorney. Then he asked if I would be interested in running for the legislature. Of course I was and I did and I won, and then I lost when I ran for reelection.

JE: Two years later, why do you think you lost?

HB: Well, I was married and we had a baby by then, and I had started a bulldozing business and we were in debt trying to make a success out of our business. I didn't bother to campaign. I thought I had done my job and that people would want to send me back. But, they thought if I didn't think enough of the job to campaign for it, that I didn't want it very bad so they sent somebody else down there.

JE: So I guess that was a lesson learned that you obviously took with you for the rest of your political life because you were never defeated again.

HB: I certainly did. Well, I learned it hurts to be beat. You feel like you're rejected.

JE: But then you stayed out of politics for a number of years and you farmed?

HB: And I ran the bulldozing business. I stayed active in county politics. I was county chairman and precinct chairman. My wife Shirley was on the state committee and she was an active republican.

JE: So then, how did you decide to run for Governor?

HB: I was county chairman and John Tyler from Bartlesville was the republican state chairman. John came to Noble County to some of our events and he thought that I was doing a good job as county chairman. So he decided that he wanted to get out of the state chairman job and become a republican national committeeman. So he came to me and asked me if I would run for state chairman if he resigned and ran for a national committeeman. I didn't think I was up to that, but he convinced me that I could handle it all right. It was one of the toughest decisions I have ever had to make, to decide to give up the security and the peace I guess I would say, of life with Shirley and our daughters, to run for an office that was going to keep me away from home for a year a lot of the time. But I did run, and I was elected. We worked hard to put the party together and when it was time to have a candidate for governor we didn't have a candidate. So I

offered myself as a sacrificial lamb.

JE: I guess you say sacrificial because you were obviously a declared republican and the state had never elected a republican governor.

HB: The registration was five times as democrats as there were republicans. It looked like a hopeless situation.

JE: So I guess you thought well, somebody has got to run so it may as well be me?

HB: Yes, and I thought something else. When you looked at the previous governor's races, there were at least two times when republicans came within less than 20,000 votes of winning. I felt like if we would put on a good campaign and used the organization that I helped build, we'd only have to make a 10,000 vote difference to win a race that was decided by 20,000.

JE: But you hadn't really been used to campaigning at that level, even to the point of making speeches.

HB: No, I wasn't a speechmaker and I never became one. What I did was what we called two-party tea parties. Through the republican organization and my work I had made friends in every county in this state. I was able to, in most towns get someone new to open up their home to host an afternoon coffee and we called them two-party tea parties. They would invite their friends to come in and meet me. I would make a short talk and answer questions. Shirley would get their names on a mailing list and we would mail them letters and keep in touch with them. The rule we followed was, if you get someone that you had actually met and kept in touch with, and then you asked him or her to do things, they would be inclined to want to talk about you when they go to the beauty shop or the Rotary Club. They might say, "Well I had a letter from Henry today and he's doing this or that." They would tell what we had done and they were insiders. It was a very good technique.

JE: Didn't you say that you took speech lessons?

HB: Yes, I took speech lessons from a woman named Thompson.

JE: Was one of your first speeches at a governor's candidate gathering when Senator Mike Monroney was there?

HB: Oh yes. It was a democrat gathering an FFA banquet. It had been a democratic political event for quite a long while. The man was from Seminole and he used to call himself the Mayor of (inaudible). He was an MC and a very clever, humorous kid of guy. He used to love to harass politicians. He would invite all of these candidates for office to the FFA banquet. We were each allowed 3-5 minutes to make a talk. We were introduced and he would tell the worst things he knew about us, rather than the best things. I was the first republican ever invited there as far as I know. I didn't know what I was getting into, but as I saw this going on, and I wondered how I was going to survive these 3-5 minutes. I finally

decided that the best thing I could do was to tell the story about how when we were forming the 4th tank battalion, we tried to identify the young Marines who had been in the FFA or 4H, because we knew we would be getting country kids who knew something about equipment and we felt they would make good Marines. So we used try to do that to some extent. I told about that and how great these guys turned out to be, and how many became officers, and how many were decorated for their bravery. The crowd began to cheer and to applaud and Mike Monroney was introduced next and he talked about what I'd said. I realized that I was going to compete with him.

JE: Because I guess he was known as a public speaker and had more experience at it?

HB: Well, he had been in the Congress for 30 years. He had kind of lost touch with Oklahoma. He had become a major player on the Washington scene and was much more comfortable there than he was here in places like an FFA banquet.

Chapter 7 - 4:28

Dwight Eisenhower

John Erling: So then you became the first republican governor in Oklahoma and I believe you had some fences to mend because you had been critical of some democrats?

Henry Bellmon: Yes.

JE: So we had a senior senator from Oklahoma by the name of Bob Kerr.

HB: Yes. Bob was certainly the most powerful politician in Oklahoma at that time and maybe the most powerful ever. I had been elected governor and I knew it would be in the state's interest if I worked with Bob. I had been the state chairman and had been critical of Bob before. I didn't have a first-name relationship with him at all. So I asked Page Belcher who was a congressman from the eighth district in the Tulsa area to set up a meeting with he and me and Bob, so I can get acquainted with him.

JE: Where was that meeting?

HB: It was at The Mayo Hotel. We went into this suite where Bob was sitting and Bob shook hands with us and Page and I sat down and Page begin telling me what a great guy Bob was. He went on for quite a while and then he started telling Bob about what a great guy I was. And Bob kind of went "hmmphhh." And then Bob began talking. He talked quite a little bit about how I was in the same position that he had been in back when he was first elected governor. He had been an unknown, except he'd been with the American Legion. He said he ran for governor and had a lot of help and was elected and then he went around thank the people that helped him. He said one place he went was to see the editor of the Guthrie newspaper. This old editor listened to Bob make his pitch and Bob

thanked him for his help. And then he said, "Bob, let me talk for a minute, I want to tell you a few things." Basically, he told him that he had lived longer than Bob had and he had seen a lot of things happen that Bob probably wouldn't understand or know about. But he said, "There is one thing I want you to know. I have lived long enough to recognize that political talent is the rarest gift of God. If you will use it to help the state, I will help you." And Bob says to me, "I'm telling you the same thing now. If you'll use your talent, I don't know if you've got any talent or not, but if you've got it and you use it for the state, I'll be on your side." And he died six weeks later.

JE: Wow. What kind of a person was he? Was he very outgoing?

HB: From what I saw mostly from the outside, he was a very gregarious kind of man. He liked the limelight. He was a power player. He invited President Kennedy to come down to Big Cedar and he entertained him in his home. And I'm sure lots of benefits came to the state from those activities. He was also a powerbroker inside the Senate. I'm not sure how he did it but he was able to work with Lyndon Johnson and other powerful figures that ran the show in Washington.

JE: Well, you had a very powerful figure visit the state to speak on your behalf during the campaign and that was President Dwight Eisenhower.

HB: Yes, I sure did. He came to the Oklahoma City airport and made a nice talk and never mentioned my name. And then he sat down and somebody tipped him off and he had to stand back up and say that he came down here to support my candidacy.

JE: Do you remember when he had talked about if he hadn't talked about you?

HB: It was a normal political pep talk. He also mentioned Hayden Crawford when he stood back up because he had come to help him too. Hayden was running for the Senate.

JE: How would you describe the demeanor of President Eisenhower when you were around him?

HB: Well, let me tell you about the few times that I was around him. I went up to his farm in Gettysburg and we talked about his Black Angus cattle. And I went to see him and took my wife when we were county chairmen. We went to see him when he was in the Oval Office. There were about 25 or 30 states represented and we represented Oklahoma. And once I went to see him at Gettysburg after he was president, so I didn't have a lot of contact with him but I had enough to feel for the man. When I think of a term for him, I think of "grandfatherly". He was warm and did not have a military type of demeanor at all. You were very comfortable with Eisenhower. The story about Eisenhower that I liked best, was when I went to see him to try to get him to support Dick Nixon, it was about 1968. I was with a guy named Bob Ellsworth who was a former congressman from Kansas and he was director of Nixon's campaign. Bob and I had asked Eisenhower to support Nixon and he didn't give us an answer. He pulled out the center drawer of his desk in his

office and he took out an 8 x 10 photograph. It was a picture of David Eisenhower and the Nixon girl, Julie. There was Nixon and his wife, and Eisenhower and his wife, and David and Julie were peeking around looking at each other. It turned out that they had announced their engagement just the night before. He said, "Those two have had their eyes on each other for years." He was very pleased about that.

Chapter 8 - 2:27

Turning Point

John Erling: But when you ran for governor you are up against Bill Atkinson who is a very wealthy man.

Henry Bellmon: Yes, and Bill was a very fine opponent. He was the ideal opponent for me because I ran well in cities because the city that tended to be more republican. Since he was a city fellow, and a rich one at that, he didn't do well in Bryan County and Cole County and the southern counties, which were strongly democrat. But because of Bill's cultural difference, I did well in those southern counties. Not well enough to carry them, but well enough to keep him from winning.

JE: Did to his wealth and the fact that you were able to position him as a very wealthy man, did that play in to this?

HB: I used to kid him about his wealth a lot. I remember coming to Ponca City to a political rally put on by University women's group. As I drove up, I noticed that Bill had put up billboards. They were beautiful billboards with full-color, ours were black and white. When I was introduced, I said I was glad to see Bill and glad to see that he had his billboards up, and that he looked to me like a million dollars. Which is innocent enough, but it offended Bill. He charged into me and explained that he didn't spend any million dollars. Once we had a meeting in Tulsa, and by the way, that was the turning point in the election as far as I'm concerned. The Tulsa World and a local TV station sponsored a candidates' debate in Tulsa during the runoff between Bill Atkinson and Raymond Gary and they invited me to be there. I was the republican nominee. I sat at the table with Bill in Raymond and the Tulsa World political reporter asked him questions and he asked Atkinson he said, "Now Bill, you are running on the platform that the state is out of money and we can't provide the services the state needs without raising the sales tax 50%. The present governor, Howard Edmondson has proposed to raise the sales tax, the legislature has refused to go along and give him what he wants. You say you are out of money, what will you do if the legislature refuses to raise the sales tax as you propose?" Bill sat there for a minute and tried to be very profound. And he said, "Well, if the

legislature refuses to go along and raise the taxes as I propose, then we'll get rid of the waste and the corruption and run the state with the money we've got." I told that story 100 times. I said Bill is the candidate that wants to raise taxes so he can pay for the waste and corruption. My proposal is to get rid of the corruption first and you will need to raise taxes.

JE: So that you felt was the turning point?

HB: I think it was.

Chapter 9 - 6:26

Racial Barriers

John Erling: As you became governor you had some issues, there was racial unrest in the state?

Henry Bellmon: Well there was racial unrest everywhere.

JE: And you took on busing?

HB: Well, integration, it was the 1964 Civil Rights Act. I realized that we had to live with the act the date it was signed. I took Dale Cook with my legal counsel and I called down to Idabel and had Virgil Jumper inviting all of the hotel and restaurant owners in Idabel and in the county that they could get to come into his bank for a meeting. Dale and I flew down there and Dale brought along a copy of the 1964 Voting Rights Act and he explained to the group that this was the law and that I was the chief magistrate and it was my duty to enforce the law and I intended to do that. But I told them that I felt certain that if they took down their colored barriers immediately, and if all of them acted at the same time, without any holdouts, that none of them would be hurt financially, their business would continue, and it would avoid any possible violence. They all agreed to do that. We went the next morning over to Hugo and Al Cherry invited the restaurant owners and hotel owners to his house for breakfast. We made the same proposition and they all agreed to take down the barriers except one guy who was named John Bircher and he was a wicked talking man. He wouldn't go along, but the rest of them did.

JE: When you say barriers you mean the signs that said "Blacks will not be served" and "No blacks here."

HB: Yes. When I got back to Oklahoma City, I called the head of the human rights commission and another man and asked them to go down to Idabel and Hugo and go in and check-in to motels and try to buy their meals and then come back and report how they had been received. And I also invited Melvin Porter who was a senator, and Melvin refused to go. But the other two went down and spent a couple of days checking out the reception and

came back and reported that everything had been opened to them and we never had any trouble.

JE: So the state accepted the 1964 Voting Rights Act?

HB: Yes. They never accepted the court-ordered busing though.

JE: That's later on isn't it that we deal with that? I think that is when you were senator?

HB: Yes.

JE: But as governor you focused on education and funding education in Oklahoma?

HB: Yes.

JE: You emphasized new road construction?

HB: Right.

JE: You came up with many road projects?

HB: Well, they were not my projects. I took the position that the road construction ought to be nonpartisan and ought to be out of the hands of the politicians and it ought to be left up to the professionals in the business. I appointed a bipartisan highway commission. By that, I mean they were strong democrats and I told them to watch each other. And I told them if anyone was trying to dictate projects for political gain that I wanted to know about it, and we would stop it. I put really strong democrats on the commission along with republicans. It worked really well. All of the time I was there we didn't build roads to nowhere. We built roads for the traffic. A count would justify it. We built turnpikes I guess more turnpikes than any other administration.

JE: The Turner Turnpike was built then on your term?

HB: No that was built when Roy Turner was governor.

JE: Okay.

HB: The Will Rogers Turnpike was built at the same time. The turnpikes we built... we built the Indian Nations Turnpike in the Muskogee Turnpike. We had about \$18 million laid aside to build the Cimarron but we didn't sell the bonds by the time I left office. And then we built the Cherokee and the Creek and the Kilpatrick. The legislature forced us to build the (inaudible) that was a waste of money.

JE: Did it ever get used?

HB: It's used but we tried to give it to the highway department and they wouldn't take it. I've never been on it. So I don't know what's there now.

JE: Then you worked to develop the first retirement system for state employees?

HB: Yes, there were some things we did that didn't get a lot of attention. One thing is the chairs at universities, the University Chairs. The story there is that when I was elected, Robert Henry was elected attorney general. We found that the state was in a lawsuit with the insurance companies over the taxing of the foreign insurance companies more than was taxed to domestic companies. The foreign companies were paying their taxes under

protest. They had built up about \$125 million in this fund that couldn't be used until the foreign companies were satisfied that they were getting fair treatment. We got Father Mike, head of the school in Shawnee to be the head of the study group and they came up with a plan to satisfy the foreign insurance companies and they released the money. We decided that we had this money the one time and it wouldn't be there the next year and we couldn't use it for ongoing expenses. So we put it into some one-time investments that would do good things for the state. One thing we decided on was to put \$25 million into a matching program where a private donor could establish a million-dollar Chair at a university by giving a half a million dollars and the state would match it with a half million. And it would be to support outstanding professors that we wanted to keep or that we wanted to attract to the state. That program has grown. I'm not sure how many we have now, but there has been more private money given than the state has available to match. Another one, I went to Ada to the banquet for the science fair where these high school juniors and seniors bring their science projects in and have them judged. I had to make a talk and when I made my talk I asked the people there, there were a couple hundred of them. I asked them, "How many of you intend to go to college?" Of course every hand in the room went up. I said, "Well, how many of you intend to go to college here in Oklahoma?" And it was fewer than half. And I said, "How many of you plan to come here to Oklahoma and live and be productive and have careers?" And it was down to 20 or 30 percent. It was obvious to me that we were having a brain drain because these were the bright kids and they were going to be the future leaders. So when I got back to Oklahoma City we worked up a plan. I think it may have been changed, but it was based on the merit system. These kids that take the merit exams and who are merit scholars, we would grant them a full four-year scholarship to Oklahoma state universities and colleges. That's been used pretty successfully I think to keep bright kids here. It's also been abused, because I think it's been used to attract kids from out of state to come here and they don't often stay, they go back where they came from. We also funded the School of Science and Math. We didn't start the whole process, but we made it operational. I also want to mention that we established the Vo-tech system, that was approved by the people in 1966 and it's been I think a very successful way to go.

Chapter 10 - 5:23

Richard Nixon

John Erling: You met Richard Nixon along about 1958?

Henry Bellmon: Yes, he came to Oklahoma City when we had the republican national

committee meeting there.

JE: Can you talk about are and what you thought about him 1958? He was vice president at the time wasn't he?

HB: Yes he was. My first impression of Dick Nixon was that he was not a very strong individual either intellectually or orally or any way you measure politicians. He seemed to be, I don't want to badmouth the man because I came to like him a lot, but he seemed like he was a little shallow, kind of giddy. He didn't impress me as a strong leader.

JE: Somewhere along the line, you did become his national campaign chairman?

HB: Yes. There was a fellow named Peter Flanagan who is a friend of Nixon's. Nixon appointed him to be head of the Democrats for Nixon national campaign. Pete came here when I was state chairman, this would've been in 1960. Pete came here and tried to establish an organization made up of democrats. I more or less chased him out of the state. I told him we were building our republican organization and it would be lasting, it wouldn't be for just one campaign and we were going to carry the state for Nixon and we didn't need the Democrats for Nixon. So he didn't set it up. He called me different times and he threatened me and said we were going to lose the state and finally he set up his organization in spite of my opposition. We used it as kind of a dumping ground for these oddballs who would come into the office and want to be appointed to something. Anyway, we built a republican organization and ran the campaign through it. When it was over with, Pete called me and congratulated me. He said, "You carried that state with the highest percentage of republican votes except for Nebraska and maybe Kansas." We were second or third highest. Pete thought that was a pretty impressive record for a state that was 5 to 1 democrat. Well, Pete and I came to be good friends, and you remember Nixon lost in '60. He made a run for governor in '62 and lost again. He made that famous comment to reporters where he said, "You will have me to kick around anymore." Well in 1966, Nixon had established himself as kind of an outstanding international lawyer. He was in a big law firm and he had gained his self-confidence and he had become really kind of a different person. When I met him I was impressed by what I took to be the changes in him. And after that, in 1967, when I left the governor's office it turned out that Peter Flanagan and the people in the Nixon law firm and some others around all over the country had formed up this committee to elect Nixon. They asked me to join them, so I did. I met with them three or four times in New York and then I took the family for a little vacation out in New Mexico and while I was out there I got a call from Flanagan but the line was so bad I couldn't understand him. I called him back and he told me that Nixon wanted me to become his campaign chairman. And I told Pete, I said, "Man I'm going to run for senate against an incumbent and we've already started our campaign and we've got some meetings set that I'm going to go to when I get back to

Oklahoma.” Flanagan was insistent and I was insistent, and so I thought that was the end of it. I went to a meeting down in Wetumka and when I was standing up making my little talk, our waitress came and said I had a phone call. I said, “Give me the number,” and they said, “No, you better take this phone call.” I went to the phone and it was Dick Nixon and he said he wanted me to be his chairman. Of course I didn’t argue with him. (Chuckle)

JE: The famous Kennedy Nixon debate tell us about that. You watched it on television.

HB: Well, I was the republican state chairman and I didn’t have any expense account. I was used to staying in two-dollar hotels with one bathtub on the floor down at the end of the hall. One of those was the old Hudson Hotel in Oklahoma City. I was there on the night of the debate and I went down to the lobby to watch the debate on television and observe the reaction of the people who were staying in a hotel, because they were pretty much common folks if you could imagine. I was surprised at how strongly they reacted in favor of Kennedy and how negatively they were toward Nixon and I realized we were in a fight for our lives. Nixon seemed to be weak and he was suffering from some kind of infection, and his voice wasn’t good. Whoever did his makeup, didn’t do him any favors. It just seemed to me like he had taken too much for granted, and he didn’t seize the opportunity the way he should have. In fact he booted it away and he never recovered.

JE: Then jumping ahead, when he was going to run in 1968 you didn’t think he should run?

HB: No I didn’t, until I met with him and saw what I thought to be a major change in him. He’d become more self-confident and—Nixon had a problem that was probably his undoing and that is, he didn’t like the details, he liked to focus on the big picture and let others work with the minutia. He was careless in whom he delegated authority to. But when I met with him at the end of my term when I was governor the first time, I got a different impression of the man than I had when I first met him.

JE: Do you think that he paid attention though when he was finally in the White House that he did select good people?

HB: I think he selected people that were not senior enough. They were young in years and young experience and they were not serious-minded. They tended to be, I almost want to say frivolous, and Nixon didn’t call a halt to it the way he should have.

Chapter 11 - 4:20

Early Bird Club

John Erling: When he was planning to resign, he called this meeting the gathering of...

Henry Bellmon: The Early Birds Club.

JE: Because you had been an early bird on to his campaign?

HB: His definition of early bird was the republican officials who supported him before the New Hampshire primary. He won the New Hampshire primary.

JE: So where is this gathering?

HB: The White House. The first one was about three weeks after he was inaugurated. Rosemary Wood who was his secretary called and invited me down for dinner at the White House. When I got there I found out there were about 25 of us there, all Nixon supporters before the New Hampshire primary. Nixon came in and shook hands with us all and talked to us and slapped us on the back and we had a very pleasant and jovial evening. He told us that this was the Early Birds Club and that he was going to be in touch with us because we helped him get the nomination when nobody else would. Everything was fine. Well, the next meeting of the Early Birds Club was before he resigned. That afternoon, before he resigned, Rosemary Wood called up, and he hadn't announced he was going to resign yet. She invited me down to dinner at the White House again. I went down and it was the same group. We hadn't met for six years. This time we met in the cabinet room where there was this long table with chairs and there's one high-back chair where the president sits. We didn't know that he was going to resign, but we had a premonition that he would. There was no conviviality. It was awkward. Nixon came in with his head down and he never spoke to anybody or patted anybody on the back or ask anybody, "How's your wife?" There were no exchanges of any kind. He went right around the table and sat down this tall black chair, and when he did that we all scrambled around to get a seat at this big table. Nixon looked up and he welcomed us and then he started to talk. He talked about what he had tried to do and where he thought he had succeeded and where things hadn't gone right. He thought he had done some things that he may be remembered favorably for. Words just poured out of him for probably 45 minutes, then he stopped talking and he looked down. Then he raised his head up and looked around and said, "I hope I haven't let you down." And then he started to cry. And when he did he jumped up from his chair and more or less hurried up to the end of the table and then down the hall. He had scheduled an appearance on all three major channels I think for eight o'clock that evening. And we were worried that he wouldn't be able to get his composure, but he did. He made the announcement that he would be resigning at 11 o'clock the next day.

JE: What do you think went wrong with Richard Nixon?

HB: Well, let me go back one step. When I was his national chairman, Bob Ellsworth who was the campaign director and I, and John Sears who was kind of the political guru, used to keep track of some issues that we needed guidance in. Picking your speeches and picking your press secretary, we needed advice on where to hold fundraisers. We would go up to New York to this apartment on Park Avenue. He (Sears) had a Cuban couple

that lived with him and they would cook you a nice dinner. We'd have dinner and would bring up our issues and talk another and ask him for his conclusions. We never got any conclusions. He just didn't want to focus on the minutia. He had his mind on the Cold War and opening the door to China. I don't know that there were any domestic issues that he ever focused on really, and I think that was his undoing. He left it up to Alderman and others to really do the presidential things and they weren't up to it. They didn't have the experience or the mantle that the president wears. I don't think the president knew about Watergate before it happened. I think it was the people around him that may have known about it and probably did know about it. But Nixon didn't want to sacrifice any of his faithful staff that he depended on and he got himself involved and there was no place for him to turn loose.

JE: He had this paranoia that developed did it astound you? I mean you knew the man and you knew these stories about him that there was a mental-

HB: Yes. I was astounded at those tapes. In fact I was astounded at the tapes that were not destroyed. I don't know why he kept the tapes. I think Nixon distrusted the media. He thought they were out to destroy him and I think he wanted a private record of what went on for historians to use in evaluating his presidency. I don't know that that's a fact, but that's the only reason that I can come to, for why he kept the tapes and didn't destroy them.

Chapter 12 - 3:45

Busing

John Erling: In 1968 you ran for Senate against the incumbent Mike Monroney, which you were faced with another situation here of an uphill battle.

Henry Bellmon: It wasn't as much of an uphill battle as the previous one because I had been governor for four years and I was known. Before I had been totally unknown in this state, but Mike Monroney was a strong contender.

JE: How was it that you won that race against Mike? Maybe you referred to it earlier, was he not as in touch with the people?

HB: He had allowed himself to become a figure in Washington but he neglected or lost his contacts with his own constituency.

JE: Then as you became senator you faced the issue of busing to accomplish the school integration.

HB: The senator from South Carolina Jesse Helms had an amendment that he always offered to be attached to the appropriations bill. The amendment said in effect that none of

these funds can be used to transport students past the nearest schoolhouse and we voted on that every year on every appropriations bill. Every time I voted on it, I got another bad editorial on it from The Daily Oklahoman. It was not of any consequence because the courts had ruled on integration and left it up to the local authorities to decide how to accomplish it but there was no question that they intended to see the racial barriers dropped in education.

JE: There was much opposition on it.

HB: Oh yes, there was violent, almost violent opposition to the busing. It was understandable why people didn't want their kids hauled all over town to different neighborhoods when they had schools closer to where they lived. It's an issue that still hasn't been resolved and I don't know that there is any resolution to it that's possible. What's happening is that the cities are becoming segregated on a dwelling basis. The minorities lived in the cities and the whites lived in the suburbs and I don't think there's anything the government can do to change that.

JE: But while you were supporting busing, you felt your state was not supporting you in that stand?

HB: Yes. I don't think there was any question that the state was opposed to busing. It paid lip service to integration, but when you asked, "How do you integrate if you don't transport your kids?" They said,

"That's not my problem, don't bus." And yet a curious thing happened. Ed Edmondson ran for Senate.

JE: That was in your next campaign in 1974?

HB: Yes. Ed used what I think was a racial slur. He accused me of being a "pet coon" which identified him I think with the anti-busing crowd, yet I defeated him. And what was surprised me was that Oklahoma City was my most vociferous opponent of integration and they had The Daily Oklahoman feeding the fire all of the time. But I carried Oklahoma City with more votes and I think I am right about this now, but with a higher percentage of votes than I'd received when I'd run for governor. I think maybe the voters saw through Ed's hypocrisy, or they differed with me, but they still approved of the way I would face the issue and take a stand. Someone ought to study that question I don't know the answer.

JE: But that was a tough campaign and a close vote.

HB: Yes. I think the vote was many 25,000, the majority.

JE: You just knew in your heart though to accomplish integration you needed busing. You could have listened to your state.

HB: Well, I don't think you can do it if you aren't convinced in your own mind that the position you are taking is the proper one. I don't believe in this theory that you take a poll and

decide an issue, I think you should get the facts and decide the issue. The facts were that a segregated school system was not an equal opportunity for the minority students. They got the crummy buildings and they got the most inept teachers and they got a minimum amount of support.

JE: You could have thought that this is going to affect my next campaign. I don't know if you thought that or not.

HB: No, I didn't think that.

Chapter 13 - 3:43

Vote Contested

John Erling: Okay, so the vote came and you had won?

Henry Bellmon: Yes.

JE: And then Edmondson wanted to take it to the court?

HB: Edmondson filed a protest of the outcome based on, let's see the first charge was that the Tulsa County election machine had been rigged against him. Because the state law requires that you be able to vote a straight party ticket, and that year there were three parties. The American party had a candidate named Reuel Little from Madill who was running as a third party candidate and the Tulsa County voting machines were set up to count two parties. So, in order to vote a straight party, you had to vote five times. Edmondson contended that the Election Board had rigged that to give me the advantage because, and this is the truth, it won't sound like it, because the republican voters are more intelligent than the democrats and they could figure this out and the democrats couldn't. So he filed a protest and the Election Board, I assume it was the Election Board appointed a retired district judge from Shawnee to hear the case. We had the case in Tulsa. Edmondson brought in his witnesses and we brought in witnesses and the judge heard the arguments and retired to his chambers and after some time he came back. I never will forget how long it took him to come to his conclusion but he explained everything but he never got around to saying "but" until right at the end when he said, "But after having all of the evidence I am convinced that there was no irregularity and that Bellmon won." Well, then Edmondson filed a protest with the Senate because the Constitution provides that the Senate is a judge of its own membership. So we went for 16 months, so when I was seated I was only half-seated. I was asked to step aside and I wasn't sworn in the same the way the rest of them where which I thought was a dirty damn deal. But they had two protests, one was I think, Vermont, which was a republican governor and a democratic legislature and the legislature gave the democrat

the certificate of election and the governor gave the certificate to the republican, so they had two certificates. They got very partisan over that and I had to stand up at the back of the room until they settled that. Then they came around to my case. This Senator Cannon from Nevada was the head of the committee that was in charge of that and he just didn't bring it to a conclusion. We finally decided to force the issue so we had a resolution or an amendment drawn up. And I can't recall just how it was done, but it was in such a way that if the vote came out in my favor I was seated, and if it came out against me I had another day in court. It took nine democrats to vote in my favor to win and I had worked with several democrats including Hubert Humphrey and Ed Muskie and some others and I can count on my fingers and toes enough votes to win if they all voted the way I thought they would. I didn't count on Lloyd Bentsen from Texas. I didn't know him. He had just come to the Senate a year and a half before. And I didn't count on James Randolph of West Virginia, but I did count on Muskie and I counted on Humphrey. When the votes were cast, Humphrey voted against me and Ed Muskie didn't vote, he was out of town. That left me a vote short, but Lloyd Bentsen voted for me and I couldn't figure that out. When I got to know Lloyd better, I asked him why he voted as he did. He told me the story. He said that he had started a campaign for president and he had come to Tulsa and he had tried to get Ed Edmondson to try and support him. He said Ed had refused to give him his support. He said that night he was in his hotel room undressing to go to bed, and he had the news on and they were interviewing Bellmon. And they asked Bellmon who he thought would be the best Democrat candidate for president, and he said, "You said Lloyd Bentsen." He said, "I paid you back."

JE: Wow. What a great story that is.

Chapter 14 - 4:47

Right Wing

John Erling: I was just thinking when you were talking about civil rights and all, did you ever think in your lifetime that you would ever see a black president of the United States?

Henry Bellmon: No, I guess I never did. I don't know that I ever thought about it. But I wasn't in favor of Obama because his resume, I guess you could call it, is pretty shallow. He had one term in the U.S. Senate and a couple terms in the legislature but he's had no experience in the private sector at all. I'm afraid he's going to make some decisions based on superficial knowledge and it won't turn out so well. And yet I'll certainly support him in what he did in connection with this hijacking (recently). To me that's kind of out of character for him at least how I understood his motivations.

JE: Did you ever have a connection with John McCain at all?

HB: Yes, I had kind of an unusual connection with John McCain. He was the Navy liaison officer for the Senate. He was assigned as the guide for the congressional delegation that I was a member of. We spent three weeks in Prussia, Scandinavia and Germany and John arranged all of the hotel reservations and the meetings and luggage handling and he was in charge of the whole thing and we got to be good friends. Then both of us, we were honored by the Marine Corps Friday Night Parade. We had dinner at The Commandant's House and they honored me because of my Marine service and they honored John because of his experiences in Vietnam. So we've had a good relationship for quite a long while and I voted for him for president. But he didn't distinguish himself very well as a candidate.

JE: You know, he had an independency about him that you had.

HB: But he sublimated it to the party requirements or demands.

JE: So probably the far right conservatives of the party...but isn't it true that when you are running you have to have that base to be with you?

HB: Well, no I don't think so. I don't think you've got to have Rush Limbaugh to be elected as a republican. He's just a symbol of the hard, right-wingers. As you probably know I've fought against the hard right-wingers of the party all the way through my career and I've been punished for that sometimes. Do you remember a guy named Freckles Little?

JE: Yes.

HB: He ran for governor against me as an independent and there was a guy named Barney Brown who ran as an independent and drew votes that I would logically have gotten in the race with Monroney and Edmondson. They were not serious contenders, but they were spoilers. To me, they showed how small of a minority the hard right really is.

JE: And then they have become even more powerful since you were there.

HB: I don't think they are more powerful, I think they are more vociferous. I can't imagine anybody paying serious attention to Rush Limbaugh, maybe as an entertainer, but as a thinker he has no credibility.

JE: Well now, it seems in the state particularly if you are a republican you have to listen to the conservative right wing because if you step out from that crowd you are really on your own. A Henry Bellmon today may have more difficulty with them.

HB: Well, I don't know that I differ with you. It's different than it was when I was up there. But just go back for a moment to busing in Oklahoma County, you would have thought from listening to the arguments and reading the newspaper that there was no way I would have carried Oklahoma County after supporting busing, but I did. I not only carried it, but I carried it by more than I had before, a bigger percentage. To me, that says that conservative radicals make more noise than they produce in votes.

JE: Now then, the young George Bush, I don't know if you ever met him or not.

HB: Oh yes.

JE: You did? Ed Gaylord invited Shirley and me to go to a Ranger baseball game with him. Ed owned a third interest in the Rangers and George owned I think a half or a third. We went down to Dallas and sat in the owner's box and George came up and sat with us and stayed for three or four innings of the game. When he decided to run for governor, he called me and he had trouble finding a campaign manager to run his campaign and someone had recommended Joe Allbaugh. He George called to ask me if I would recommend he hire Joe Allbaugh as his campaign manager and I did and he did and of course he was elected. And Joe stayed on and I think he ran his first presidential campaign. But I don't remember having any other dealings with him. George the first came here to Oklahoma and introduced me when I was inducted into the Hall of Fame. He was the republican national chairman at the time and I asked him to come and do that and he did. I went down to Texas and campaigned for him when he ran unsuccessfully for governor I think, or the Senate. I went down to campaign with him for a couple of days. I didn't campaign for the second, I can't say I knew him very well but just casually he was a nice enough man.

JE: As you viewed his presidency?

HB: Well, I think George was hard up for ideas. He didn't bring much to the table as far as I could tell. I'm sorry that I don't have any better courses to propose but I thought his reaction to 9/11 was hip shooting. He shot from the hip. As I said, I don't know that I had any better solutions, but he oversimplified the problem and his reaction was off the mark.

Chapter 15 - 6:32

Panama Canal

John Erling: Just quickly, Hubert Humphrey, how would you describe him?

Henry Bellmon: I would describe him as a small businessman, a very energetic guy, a delightful human being, but not very strong. He loved to be loved. He didn't like to stand out and take the slings and arrows of fate.

JE: Edmund Muskie?

HB: He was probably my favorite senator or one of my favorites anyway. He was a powerful orator and a strong-willed man, yet a totally fair man. I was a republican ranking member on a committee he chaired and we had an agreement that we would fight our battles in the committee (meetings) but we would stand together when the issues came to the floor and we did. He never balked. If the committee was stacked and in such a way that it was

against him, he'd still fight his position in the committee meetings and if he lost he's switch his position and be for the committee position on the floor. He was a good friend and really a great man.

JE: The Panama Canal, when the subject first came for the canal to be turned over to Panama and the treaty to be ratified, were you interested in that at all?

HB: No, not at all. I didn't seem to me like the issue was worthy of our time. We built it and we own it, let's keep it.

JE: So it wasn't an issue for you, but it did become an issue for you?

HB: Yes. I'm not sure this is the whole reason it happened, but one of the reasons that I changed my mind was because of a book that David (inaudible) gave me. It's called *The Path Between The Seas*, it's written by David McCullough. It's the story of the canal from its inception and formation of Panama until the conclusion of the canal in 1914. It doesn't deal with the treaties at all. It makes you realize that it was not Americans alone that sacrificed to build it, but local people who caught malaria and yellow fever and paid a high price to have it built. And also, it made you realize what an important revenue source this was for Panama and the Panamanian government. I had a chance to talk to General Parfitt who was the head of the Corps of Engineers, which maintains and operates the Canal. I asked Parfitt if he thought General Torrijos would start a civil war if we didn't approve the treaties. And he said there was no doubt he would. He said he would run his campaign on that issue and dedicate his government to the approval of the treaties. He said General Torrijos won't have any choice but to resist our presence don't there. Well, I said, "The next question is, if you start the civil unrest, can you handle it?" And he said, "Well that's not a military question." He said, "If you'll give me the men I need and the equipment I need, certainly I can handle it." But he said, "The question is a political question. If you tie up my hands and cut off military support or financial support as you did in Vietnam, if you do that, then certainly I can't handle it." I decided that there was only a commercial interest down there. If you could keep the canal fees down that it didn't have the military significance that it once had because we couldn't get our carriers through there and you can't get the super-tankers through there. And I decided that rather than trying to get a bunch of young people killed in defense of a shipping land that we'd better recognize that it wasn't worth it and ratify the treaties.

JE: But you've felt tremendous pressure on both sides of that question.

HB: Not pressure to confirm the treaties, because there was very little local support for that. Again, there's kind of a class I'll call them, the opportunists that hang around Washington and try to identify these emotional issues and use them to build their organization, or to fatten their treasuries by making claims and raising people's fears, and they hit on the Panama Canal as one of those issues. The John Birch Society for instance used the Canal

argument to fatten their treasuries for years. A lot of people don't recognize what's going on. I have even known of good people who have fallen for some of those games that the parasites play.

JE: How soon before the vote did you actually make up your mind?

HB: A day or two. But Shirley and I had kind of a pattern we would go to the grocery store on Wednesday night and buy groceries for the week. We went this night to the grocery store and we were walking down the aisle and Shirley asked me if I was going to vote on the treaties. I told her truthfully I didn't know. So I had to come back to the state for something and then I had to go back to Washington on Sunday night, I think it was Sunday night. I took a tablet with me. I told myself that I was going to write down all of the pros and cons that I knew about the treaties. I first wrote down the pros and when I got through with them I realized there was not even an argument. So then I made some notes for my statement the next day, which would have been Monday, if I'm right about it. I dictated my statement to my secretary and the next day I read it on the floor. Jimmy Carter had a guy named Herky Harris who was a White House lobbyist who was assigned to me to try to persuade me to vote for the treaties. I called Herky and I told him I was going to do that.

JE: Did President Carter encourage you to vote for it?

HB: President Carter and Herky Harris invited me down to talk to Carter many times and I told them I thought it was such an emotional issue that I better make the decision on my own and not appear that I had been influenced by the president. There was a kind of a curious I guess they call it a codicil to this whole thing. When I told Herky I was going to vote for it I said, "Now you guys have got to realize this is going to cost me dearly with my local supporters because this is not a popular position in the state." I said, "I'm not asking you for any commitment, but if you can approve similar water projects it sure would help me." And they did. I didn't ask them to do anything specific, except I tried to get them to support or authorize the version of the Salt Fork River around the Great Salt Plains. There was a Corps of Engineers Program already on the books to build a new river around the salt plains and leave the salt there to flood into the Keystone Reservoir. If we could get that done Keystone could become usable for industrial purposes as it is now, flood control and power generation is all you can get out of it. Anyway, the Corps of Engineers couldn't justify the economics of the Salt Fork diversion. But Herky Harris and a guy named Jim McIntire who was a U.S. budget officer put in money to the appropriations bill to build Arcadia Reservoir and I think it was Atoka. Jimmy Carter in his book, I haven't read it, but I heard about it, more or less accused me of trading my vote for those two water projects and that's not true, that didn't happen.

JE: You had already made up your mind and then said, "Oh, by the way if you can do that..."

HB: Yes. I was more specific about the Arkansas diversion. They have what they called a cost benefit ratio and it didn't meet the standards. It still ought to be done. That's another long story but I won't go into it.

Chapter 16 - 4:36

Ed Gaylord

John Erling: Reaction from Oklahoma? I believe even The Daily Oklahoman even called you a traitor.

Henry Bellmon: They called me a traitor, which I resented. I don't think you can justify attacking the patriotism of somebody over a policy.

JE: We are talking about The Daily Oklahoman and we are talking about Ed Gaylord. Was that relationship one that you had back and forth all the time?

HB: There could be a short book written about that. Ed Gaylord and I became acquainted through a fellow named Irvin Bollenbach who lived out in Kingfisher, whose wife I married when my wife died, Eloise. She's there now in bed, (motioning) bedfast. Anyway, Irvin invited me up to his ranch to go dove hunting, and he invited Ed Gaylord at the same time. We had gotten into a pitch game after the hunt. Anyway, I had been stationed down by an oil drill where I think they wanted to watch somebody miss those doves. And I didn't miss them I killed 17 and they sent somebody down there to tell me to stop shooting because I had already exceeded the limit. Gaylord and I had different meetings at Bollenbach Ranch and mostly either quail hunting or dove shooting. We had contacts of a social nature at different times. Dewey Bartlett died and we had a group of senators come to the state. There was a fundraising event held in honor of Dewey Bartlett. We had several people from Washington there and Ed Gaylord stood and abused me horribly. My friends in Washington couldn't understand how we could be in the same room together. But some how or another, over the years, and it went on for many years, we managed to keep our personal relationship separate from our official relationship and it wasn't easy. I remember one time he invited me to breakfast at the Skirvin Hotel, when they were still operating the Skirvin. He brought me some material about the Panama Canal, all of it from the John Birch Society. I remember I had been up here at the farm and it was in the spring and the asparagus was growing and I had picked a mess of asparagus and I took it down and gave him my asparagus. Anyway, and one time we were at the Bollenbach Ranch and I didn't know it but Ed had raised some pheasant. And he brought three pheasant cocks out there in a cage. He told me to get out in front with my shotgun and he released those three pheasants one at a time. They flew high and I had

a 20-gauge shotgun and it was about out of my range but I got all three of them. He was impressed that I could hit them. Then one of our girls got married and they used those pheasant feathers to decorate the church and the wedding. Well, anyway to get to my point about Ed Gaylord, there was a time when Bill Banowski was considering running for the Senate.

JE: We should say that Bill was then the president of OU.

HB: Yes. Ed Gaylord had a dinner at his house, the intention of which was to convince Banowski that he could be elected and that he had support in high places. Shirley and I were invited to the dinner and went and we were the last ones to leave. And Ed, when I got ready to go out the front door, took me by the arm and said, "Come back here I want to show you something." He took me back to his bathroom. There was a cabinet with doors on the front of it, and when it was closed you couldn't see what was inside. He opened this door and there were two photographs, Dewey Bartlett and me. And he said, "I just want you to know those are my two favorite politicians." That was all that was said, and we turned around and walked out of the room and left. Even more unbelievable, Ed Gaylord caught pancreatic cancer, fell ill and died. And he had kind of a girlfriend, a companion named Josephine Freede and he has a son-in-law named Clay Bennett who was head of the Seattle ball club effort. Clay is married to Mary Gaylord. Clay is a fine chef, a really outstanding cook. Well, Mary and Clay invited Eloise and me, Eloise's husband had died, invited us to dinner and we went to their house for dinner and Clay had cooked up this fantastic meal. Ed Gaylord was there with his girlfriend and Clay and Mary, and Eloise and I and he died about three weeks later. Now, why did he want me to—that's probably the last event of that kind that he went to.

JE: Wasn't it tough to be around each other socially and so forth? I mean he had written all these bad things about you and all, and then you would still—is that just the game of politics?

HB: I don't know that it's a game. It's a fact of politics. You can't let things be personal because the thing you and I will fight most about today, tomorrow we will be on the same side. And if you let your feelings get to the point of personal insults and making arguments...you've got to not cross that invisible barrier of becoming offensive, and Ed, I think, crossed it a few times.

Chapter 17 - 5:17**HB 1017**

John Erling: You were glad to leave the Senate, right?

Henry Bellmon: Yes I was. I never felt I was good in the Senate. The Senate is a place where you go and talk and I would rather get something done.

JE: Then you came back to be governor again?

HB: Yes.

JE: George Bush Senior, you had a good relationship with him?

HB: Yes.

JE: Can you describe him?

HB: I will tell you about a circumstance and maybe this is the best way to describe him. He was a member of a thing called the Alibi Club, which had a clubhouse down in Washington in one of those old brownstone buildings. George would invite in an intellectual giant or an authority on some issue, and invite a dozen or 15 guests to a smoked-oyster dinner where you would eat smoked oysters and spinach salad. Then this person would talk a little while to set out an issue, and then you would have an exchange of opinions about what was being done. George invited me to those meetings at different times. They were the most intellectual events of all of my time in Washington. But I think it tells you about George Bush, he was just the opposite of Nixon. He was interested in domestic issues and very interested in getting to the bottom of what was wrong with the country. He had the head of the Federal Reserve sometimes and he had university presidents, he had people from Wall Street. I have a good admiration for George Bush.

JE: Did you become a campaign manager for his presidential run? Or it must have been state
Okay, we need to talk about House Bill 1017, the education-funding bill. This was in 1990. It was to increase funding and make kindergarten compulsory, smaller classes, teacher incentive pay and teacher tenure reform. That all sounds really good, but you had a fight on your hands with that Bill.

HB: Yes we did. You mentioned it happened in 1990, it started in 1989. I realized that the legislature was not going to come back into session until January. It being before an election, I didn't think there was any way to get the legislature to reform education in an election year, so absolutely on my own without consultation with the secretary of education or the OEA or anybody else, I called my candidates together and told them we were going to have a special session to deal strictly and only with education and that we would have to have a proposal to lay on the table when they called and to get something pulled together. And they did it overnight practically. Our bill was not a serious bill it was a vehicle to get the wheels starting to turn. I had called a special session and the

legislators were furious. They had just been through a session and they didn't want to be hung up for months in another one. I couldn't even get anybody to introduce our bill. We finally got a man from Tulsa, Bill...he was a good fellow. He introduced the bill. I think maybe one vote is all it got. But, at the same time, Steve Lewis, unbeknownst to me, had been working on an education reform act and he introduced his bill, which gave us the vehicle we needed to consider the subject. Steve and president pro tem of the Senate, Bob Cullison came to see me. And it turned out that the legislature had passed a resolution authorizing and instructing the governor, the speaker, and the president pro tem to create an education study commission. They suggested to me that we go ahead and create this commission quickly, and give it the duty of developing an education reform plan. We did that. We got George Singer Tulsa to be chairman of it and they had hearings all over the state for several months, and they developed this package of reform that you just read, and that became House Bill 1017. But it took nine months from the time I called the session until they voted for it. Cullison, Lewis and I agreed that there wouldn't be any bill unless it included the funding. The legislature often voted for reforms and would never fund them. We were going to take a position that reforms and the money to pay for them had to come at the same time.

JE: But because there was a required tax increase to make this happen, you had republican opposition?

HB: We had some republican support, but most republicans were opposed. At least nine House republicans voted for the bill and at least one senator voted for it. It was tough to get through the Senate. The concern was that the people that voted for the bill would lose the next election. The result was just the opposite. The ones who were defeated were mostly the ones who voted against the bill. And I think it's important to note that the opponents of House Bill 1017 circulated a petition to have referendum on the matter. They voted on it after 1017 had been in operation for maybe six months. The Daily Oklahoman editorialized vigorously against the bill and against tax increase, and yet when the vote was taken the voters approved 1017 and it's still on the books. I think that those who feel like voters won't support a needed revenue measure are misreading the facts.

JE: They will when they feel it's appropriate.

HB: Yes, and for a good purpose. The people are more foresighted than the politicians give them credit for being.

JE: The signing of House Bill 1017 actually happened in Tulsa.

HB: Yes, at the grade school where your wife was the principal.

JE: Marshall Elementary.

HB: Yes, there's a very nice photograph of the signing of that bill.

JE: That was a very impressive day and I was there to watch you sign that.

HB: I hope 1017 survives. It's under attack I think potentially right now.

Chapter 18 - 3:20

Bellmon's Advice

John Erling: What was the best job you had in government?

Henry Bellmon: Well, for me I preferred the governor's work in the executive decision-making position whereas in the Senate it's largely a negotiating and debating climate. So often, the purpose is not to settle the issue as to postpone making a tough decision.

JE: People would decide what was politically expedient and they do that today rather than taking the position. You took a position on a number of issues. It wasn't that you didn't care what the other people were saying, as much as you felt you knew in your heart what was right.

HB: Well, sometimes you wonder if it's that clear, what's right and wrong. Frequently you deal with the gray issues. You just don't have any solid basis for making the decision, you just have to get the best facts you can and then use your judgment as to what of course is in the best interest of the state. I don't think there's any handwriting on the wall that tells politicians what they do, they've got to use their judgment and hope they are right and more often they are wrong.

JE: But do they use their judgment, or do they just follow a party caucus?

HB: I think increasingly, you are right. They don't use their judgment because they want to hang onto their job. And they are not sure that they can follow their instincts and survive politically.

JE: Were there times when you may have not gone along exactly with what your judgment was, but went along with what the party wanted you to do?

HB: I'm sure there were, I don't recall them. One of the things that I'm convinced that politicians need to do is to establish a financial base before they get into government service. We used to have a lesson in the Marine Corps that they taught you. That is that if you are in a foxhole with some of your buddies, and the enemy throws a hand grenade into it, somebody's got to smother it with their body within five seconds or you are all dead. There are times in government when issues come up that you feel like may cost you your political life, but they need to be taken care of. I think that before you can become an effective political participant that you have got to establish a financial base so that your family won't starve or so that you won't be out on the street if you lose the next election. I think that increasingly politicians are more attracted by the high salaries and

the prospect of financial security then they are the opportunity to be of service.

JE: Young people who will be listening to this conversation many years from now and they are interested in government and they are interested in politics, what would you say to them?

HB: I, in my own case, got a lot of gratification out of being in public service. I never made any money at it. I never tried to make any money at it. And I didn't stay in Washington, when I finished my service I came back home and started up farming again. I'm not hurting financially, so I'm not complaining. If they are motivated by money, I would suggest staying out of government. If they are going to get into government, they need to think about how their family is going to fare if they lose their next election. The other thing that I would suggest to young people is, don't be in a big hurry to plunge into politics because you need some solid real-life experiences to guide your decisions after you get into office. You have to realize that once you get elected you're going to be under pressure from lobbyists of all stripes and people who will provide you with financial support or who will withhold financial support. You have to be in the position to recognize what the needs and the likely solutions are and not be guilty of selling your judgment to interests that are not necessarily in the state's good. I think also, before you get into public service you need to be educated to deal with complex problems, because a lot of the problems we confront are not simple.

JE: And finally, we haven't talked about a love of yours, and that is a career in farming.

HB: Yes.

JE: You came home from Washington on weekends and you wanted to be on the farm and you enjoyed this way of life?

HB: Yes, I like farming. I generally had other business to take care of in the state when I came back, although I usually try to spend one day (on the farm) when I was here on a weekend, or for a longer period. We established a home in Washington. My wife came back frequently, but not as often as I did. She liked Washington better than I did and had many friends up there, something that I wasn't able to duplicate. This farm has been in our family for now over 100 years. I hope I have arranged it so it can stay for another generation. But, farming is a gratifying experience if you raise good crops or if the prices and economics are favorable, but it can be a tough place to make a living if economics are bad or if the weather isn't favorable. On balance, we've done pretty well. We've got a cowherd and we've got land and equipment and it's all paid for. So, I feel like we've succeeded in the farming business, although we had other income to help pay the bills.

JE: It was a good way of life though wasn't it?

HB: It's a fine way of life. You are your own boss and you can do you want to do. As long as you don't make some serious errors in judgment, you'll have a chance to succeed.

JE: If you were to comment overall about your life, what would you say and how would you like to be remembered as you reflect?

HB: Well, that question was asked of me at the end of my second term as governor. I'd like to be remembered as a governor who faced the issue squarely and dealt with them intelligently, and maybe courageously.

JE: There was story here in the book about a businessman Bill Payne and he introduced you at an event?

HB: Yes.

JE: Something about cartridges and partridges?

HB: Oh yeah. If you don't shoot any cartridges, you won't get any partridges.

JE: Right.

HB: That's a good motto.

JE: I sure appreciate your time here. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

Chapter 19 - 0:28

Conclusion

John Erling: Voices of Oklahoma hopes you've enjoyed the story of Henry Bellmon. His voice and story are now preserved for the many generations to come. It is our hope that you will be encouraged to review our For Further Reading Section and our Bookstore for material on Mr. Bellmon and Oklahoma history. Our Founding Sponsors are pleased to make this presentation on VoicesofOklahoma.com.