

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

**The Honorable Joseph Rhodes, Jr. (D)**

24<sup>th</sup> District

Allegheny County

1973-1980

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**Raymond J. Whittaker, III (RJW):** Good afternoon.

**The Honorable Joseph Rhodes, Jr. (JRJ):** Hi.

**RJW:** I'm here today with former Representative Joseph Rhodes, Jr., who is a Democrat who represented Allegheny County and the 24<sup>th</sup> District from 1973 to 1980. I'd like to thank you for coming today.

**JRJ:** My pleasure.

**RJW:** I'd like to start off with asking you a little bit about yourself; tell me a little bit about your family, your background and your education before you came into the House of Representatives.

**JRJ:** Well, my mom and my dad met in the War, the big War, in the Philippines in [19]45. So, my mom is a Filipino/Chinese person, was a Filipino/Chinese person. She just died last November. My father was an Afro-American. And they met and hit it off. And she stayed in the Philippines while he went back to the States to have their baby which turns out to be my older brother, Eduardo. And then she went on this horrendous trip from the Philippines to Pittsburgh and she'd never been anywhere, I mean she's country country, you know? And she got on a boat with her newborn baby and she sailed to San Francisco and got off the boat and got on a train and took a train to Pittsburgh and I always call myself a "Hello Baby," because when they got together in Pittsburgh I was born nine months to the day afterwards.

**RJW:** Wow. How about your education? You have a quite diverse educational background.

**JRJ:** Well, I went to Pittsburgh public schools, which was a wonderful school system. We had a great superintendent and one of the things they believed in, which you couldn't even find that today, was that every student should have an opportunity to play a musical instrument in the whole district. We had lots of bands and lots of orchestras and that's how I learned to play the violin. I played in all-city orchestras since I was elementary school all-city, in junior and then high school all-city. I got to the third stand outside of the first violin. I was very interested in science and history when I was in high school. I've always been interested in history. And then toward the end of my high school I was invited to be a member of a national science foundation program at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, which was for, quote, gifted science high school kids. There was 25 of us. We went down to Charlottesville. I've never been south like that. I've been to Mobile where my dad was born, but never been on my own in the South and I worked on a nuclear reactor for the summer of [19]64. Then came back from that and I got all excited about nuclear physics, so I applied to Caltech in Pasadena and M.I.T., because I wanted to be a physicist. So, I got admitted to both. So, I was at a conference at West Point, of all places, and its featured speaker was J. Robert Oppenheimer<sup>1</sup> and there were all these Generals standing around him and everything and I thought, what a disgraceful demonstration by these generals. They made his life misery. And here they were all glad-handing him. But I snuck up toward him and I said, "Dr. Oppenheimer, I've been admitted to Cal-Tech and to M.I.T. and I want to be a physicist. Where should I go?" He said, "There's Jerry Wiesner," who was the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robert Oppenheimer, [b. 1904, d. 1967] is credited as the founding father of theoretic physicists. Under his direction, the Manhattan Project , a secret World War II program, created the first atomic bomb.

Provost at M.I.T., he said softly, quietly, he said, “Go to Caltech.” (*laugh*) He had a big influence – I had other influences on me that are not as high falutin’ as that why I went to California. So, I enrolled at Caltech in [19]65, graduated in [19]69 and my last year my advisors told me, “You can’t finish in physics, because you kept postponing these 300-level courses. So, if you were to finish in physics, you gotta take three 200-level [sic] courses, all graduate courses, and you can’t do it, nobody could do that.” I said, “Oh well, what can I do,” I said. “Well, change you major to history and do something in history.” So, I said, “Okay.” So, I went to the history department and sat down with Dr. [Robert A.] Huttenback, who was the history professor and master of student housing, and I said, “Dr. Huttenback, they say I have to become a history major to graduate. What kind of history should I do?” He says, “Well, do you speak any languages?” “No, just English.” He said, “Well, that confines you to English history or American history. Since I’m a British Imperial Scholar, in terms of the Empire, I suggest you pick English history.” So, I said, “Okay.” So, I became a history major in British Imperial History. And then he put a question to me. He said, “One question for your thesis,” he says, “that I’ve been wondering about all my life is, why was so many English people in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century so racist? What was the underlying thing?” I said, “I don’t know.” So, he says, “Well, take that on.” So, he gave me a big stack of books: all the famous British Imperialists, like Lugard and Livingston, Chinese Gordon, and all these guys, and being a good Caltech physics major, every time I read through the book, I had a little notebook. Every time I thought there was a racist comment I’d put it in my little notebook and then at the end of the letter I wrote this thesis. It was about 70 pages long, all about how they became racist, and one morning I was taking a shower in Blacker House – by the way, I think it was purposefully that put me in Blacker House; I was the only black student at Caltech for two years – I was taking a shower and

all of a sudden, I went, “Oh no.” And I wiped myself off and I ran across the Olive Walk to get a hold of Professor Huttenback. And I said, “Dr. Huttenback, my thesis is all wrong.” He said, “Why, what’s wrong with it?” I said “None of these guys were racist.” He said, “They had to be, of course they were racist.” I said, “I’m telling you, I was trained as physics major to look at the evidence and the evidence says they weren’t racist. So what am I gonna do?” He says, “Well, you better come up with a theory about why they weren’t racist when they should have been.” So, I came up with this theory called the Theory of Residual Values. And I wrote up in my thesis and I defended it and the faculty agreed with it. I graduated from Caltech. I almost didn’t graduate because the last course I took at Caltech was in statistics and probability theory and I flunked it ‘cause I didn’t go to any of the classes. The reason was I was President of the student body for two years –

**RJW:** Oh.

**JRJ:** – and Governor [Ronald] Reagan was waging war on students, on people who resisted him and resisted the [Vietnam] war. So, I had to go to a lot of different places. A lot of people got hurt. I don’t know why people idolized Reagan; he was a monster. But, anyway, I didn’t pass my last course in statistics and when it came up in front of the faculty – they’d have to waive these four credits, I needed two hundred and some odd number of credits – I was very moved by the number of faculty that stood up and said, “If anybody deserves to graduate from Caltech, Joe Rhodes does.” (*laugh*) So, they waived the four credits and I graduated.

**RJW:** That’s great, yeah.

**JRJ:** And one of my professors at Caltech, Professor [John] Benton, who was a history professor, he had sent my essay on the Residual Value Theory on to Harvard for consideration. Meanwhile, I was all gearing up to become a Rhodes Scholar. Because I went out for football only because the Rhodes Scholarship required demonstration of proficiency; I quote “demonstration of proficiency in a manly sport.” So, I went out for football ‘cause the coach came up to me in freshman camp and said, “You should go out for football.” I said, “You only said that because I’m black and I’m the only black guy in the whole class.” “No, no, no, you look like you could...” Anyway, I played on the football team for four years. We won one game my senior year and that was one game in four years.

**RJW:** Oh no.

**JRJ:** But I got one of the game balls. Even though I only played one play. But I always wanted to be a Rhodes Scholar. And then, all of a sudden, I got a telegram from Harvard saying, “We reviewed your material and we think you would be a good nominee for the Society of Fellows, Junior Fellowship. And would you send us some copies of your best published work.” Well, the only thing I had ever published was an article in the California Tech newspaper about the football team. So after I thought, “Oh, this is ridiculous.” So, the next thing I know the history faculty calls me, and they said, “Joe, why haven’t you responded to Harvard?” I said, “Well, they’re not going to make me a Junior Fellow.” They said, “Respond. Go to Cambridge.” So, I responded; I went to Cambridge. I explained to them that my interests were not purely academic; I was interested in trying to change the way higher education functioned in the

country. And as an aside, I was interested in Victorian intellectual history and its Theory of Residual Values, which I invented. So, I walked back to the Society of Fellows headquarters and I went up to the secretary there, who was Elizabeth Hill, a wonderful woman. I said, “Can you change my return ticket to Pasadena, because I, you know, they don’t want me hanging around here.” They said, “Joe, they just appointed you. You’re a Junior Fellow.” I said, “What?” So, that’s how I became a Junior Fellow at Harvard; their youngest and only black, at that point, and so my education moved into other circles. Then I started my academic interests trying to expand to understand why racism had the effects it had in Victorian society and how it evolved, and the only person that wrote anything on the subject that made sense to me was [Dr.] Walter Houghton [1904-1983] at Wellesley [College] who wrote a book on the Victorian Frame of Mind<sup>2</sup>, which was a beautiful book. So, I called him up one day, I say, “Professor Houghton, I’m Joe Rhodes. I’m a Junior Fellow at Harvard and I’d like to come talk to you about Victorian racism.” He said, “Come on up.” So, I walked up to his office at Wellesley. He said, “You know, I wonder when the first time that phrase, “racism,” was ever used.” I said, “I don’t know.” So, he goes to his library and he starts pulling out books and I’m helping him pull down books, and we’re going through all these books, and he found it, “racism,” it was used by the French in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And I thought, “This is a great guy. I gotta work with him.” So, for three years he and I worked together on my concept. Anyway, that’s my educational background.

**RJW:** Well, how about transitioning into, how did that afford your work opportunities and your past work experiences before coming to the House?

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<sup>2</sup> Yale University Press, 1963

**JRJ:** None, it had no effect. Nobody wants to hire a Victorian intellectual historian. (*laugh*)

What happened was I had this experience on the Scranton Commission. This was a Commission President Nixon appointed to investigate killings at Kent State and Jackson State, because I was on good relations with John Ehrlichman [1925-1999]<sup>3</sup>, because he had used me as – I don't take the word, "used," in the kind of typical degrading sense – he worked with me, he used me to figure out certain things when there were big demonstrations going on. I was always concerned about the loss of life since I remember Reagan had set up a situation at Berkeley that got James Rector killed at People's Park.<sup>4</sup> Anyway, after Kent State and Jackson State, President Nixon and Ehrlichman called me up and asked me if I'd be on a Commission to investigate that. And I said, "What the hell's this Commission about?" He said, "We're going to investigate why this happened." I said, "What's the name of the Commission?" "The Commission on Student Violence." "The Commission on Student Violence? You're going to investigate how the students ran into bullets? And they did violence to the buck shot? I don't get it. You better change the name." So, Ehrlichman called me back and said "The President agreed to change the name, The Commission on Campus Unrest, if you agree to be on it." I talked it over with a lot of my friends at Harvard. They all thought I was crazy. They all considered the Nixon Administration, like, war criminals and all. I said, "But if I can save one life, I should try it. I should do it." So, I agreed. I did it. Two weeks after I was appointed, Vice President [Spiro] Agnew called for my exit. He wanted the President to fire me 'because I had said some things to the New York Times about what I wanted to investigate. I called the White House about it and Ehrlichman got on the phone and said, "Is this the famous Joe Rhodes?" I said, "It's just me, Mr. Ehrlichman. I just told the truth. I want to know why these cops and National Guardsmen

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<sup>3</sup> President Richard Nixon's Chief Domestic Advisor, 1969-1973.

<sup>4</sup> A protest on May 15, 1969, in which Governor of California called in the National Guard for assistance; Rector was shot by a police officer; he died four days later.

thought they could just shoot at students, like, shoot them down like dogs. I'd like to know why? What made them do it? And then something you or the Vice President said about students, calling them 'bums' and all that. Did that encourage the police to think they could shoot students with impunity?" And, he said, "Joe, you're doing a good job. Just keep at it." So, all that summer of [19]70, I was attacked by all kinds of people; Congressmen got up in the House and they attacked me. I got sent a canister of pennies and the note said, "We got together and we decided that we would to take up a collection and send you back to Africa, you nigger." And I thought, I took the pennies with my buddies, we went to a local bar and we had two, three beers on these guys' pennies, on the pennies. A lot of things and a lot of other things. I got, like, a hundred death threats and stuff like that. But, because of that, I had notoriety. And the Scranton Commission Report is a good Report. You read it today, it's alive. It was talking about what was going on in 1970, how serious everything was; people were going to be hurt. After that, I was talking with some people from my home town, Pittsburgh, and they said, "Why don't you come back and run for public office, be a state Representative?" I said, "I don't know anything about being a state Representative." And they said, "You know, you'll figure it out." So, being a young black guy from Pittsburgh and the credo in Pittsburgh was "The young bright, young black guys and women, they all leave and never come back." So, I said, "Being half black and half Asian, you have a special tug on you, they can grab you, make you, I wanna prove that I'm as good as any other black. So, I said, "I'll go back," and I ran for office. I spent 2,000 dollars, I think, in my campaign in [19]72 and I won by three to one.

**RJW:** Yeah.

**JRJ:** So, that was my first term in the House. That's how I got in politics. I asked them – they were going around talking about Committee assignments. I said, "I don't think I know what the legislature is that you deal with highways, and highway safety interests me." And the leadership people told me, "Are you nuts, Rhodes? The Transportation Committee is where all the stuff goes on. You can't be on that Committee." So, they put me on Judiciary and what was called "Ways and Means."

**RJW:** Ways and Means.

**JRJ:** So, that's how I got into politics.

**RJW:** Let's backtrack a second. What influences shaped to become a Democrat, then?

**JRJ:** I was not registered till the first time I ran. The first time I registered was when I was running, so I could vote for myself. I mean, I just, I wasn't a politician type. I mean, I was a nerd. I was from Caltech and the Harvard Society of Fellows. I wasn't interested in politics. But I saw a lot of things and I was there when James Rector was killed and the country was bleeding, a lot of wounds, and I felt I could do something. I was brought up a Christian that believe you're supposed you try to do what you could do, and nobody in my family was anything but a Democrat, so that's why I became a Democrat.

**RJW:** Well, did you enjoy campaigning, then?

**JRJ:** I loved it. Oh, yeah. Oh, I found out lots of things. I ran four times for the House, and once for the United States Senate in [19]80, and every time I was up for election, all my people would say, “You don’t need to campaign, Joe. You always win with 90 percent of the vote. What are you campaigning for?” I said, “Well, I get to know the district.” And I’d go around and knock on doors. The reason I got involved with unlicensed boarding homes was one day I was canvassing my district up in Lincoln Park, Penn Hills Township, just east of Pittsburgh, and I knocked on the door, no answer. I knocked it again, door opened and this frail person came up and I said, “Well I’m here running as your state Representative, reelection.” She says, “Oh, come on in.” I said, “Okay.” So, I went in and I start walking around and the place stank. It had an odor that would blow you away, and then I noticed all these people lying in beds with bedsores and moaning and everything. And I thought, “What is this?” She says “It’s a boarding home.” I said, “This ain’t no boarding home.” So, from that day on I fought to get the boarding homes under license which they are now. I’m proud to say. I’m not sure I made it happen, but I was part of it for a lot of people who were concerned in addition to me.

**RJW:** Well, how has your district changed over time then?

**JRJ:** It’s gotten bigger, geographically, because the city lost population and so you had to span the districts, and now it goes into Point Breeze, even further than that, but the 24<sup>th</sup>, that’s my district.

**RJW:** How do you see yourself – how was your relationship with yourself and your constituents over that time? You said you knocked on a lot of doors –

**JRJ:** Yeah.

**RJW:** – and you came up on a lot of issues.

**JRJ:** Whenever I went out in the district, campaigning or not, I always found something that they needed. I had a rule, but the way, which was if I'm ever in the district and I see a police car or a fire engine going with lights and sirens, I jump in my car and I follow them. I go through lights and everything. I'll never forget one night I went to visit the 13<sup>th</sup> ward committee women. And so, I walked up Frankstown Avenue which is a main drag in Homewood. So, I walked in this place and there were all the committee women. And they just beat me upside the head like you wouldn't believe. "Joe, you're never here. You're always in Harrisburg." I said, "But you elected me to go to Harrisburg. What do you want me to do? I'm not a social worker at home. I'm supposed to represent your interests in Harrisburg." "Oh, Joe, you forgotten your roots. You don't care." I said, "Okay, okay." They all love me, by the way. I've never lost a district in the 13<sup>th</sup> ward in four times. I walked out of the club, I think it was the Metropolitan Club, I forget where it is, as I walk out, this police car goes flying by with lights and sirens. So, I jump in my car and I follow, and they go up to Oakwood and Frankstown Avenue and there's a bar there on the corner and there's a couple police cars and lights and everything. So, I go in and there's this guy lying on the floor. He had his throat slit.

**RJW:** Oh no.

**JRJ:** Blood was everywhere. The cops are trying to tell everyone, “Get back, get back.” And I said, “Hey, people, listen to the cops. What are you doing? Back up.” Some of those guys were half drunk and they looked at me like, “Are you nuts?” I said, “Look, I’m your state Rep[resentative]. You back off. Let these cops do their job.” And I bent down to see if this guy was dead or something. There was a hole in his neck, it was right where it was sliced. He was dead as a doornail. And I went home that night and as I came through the door, my wife then, Linda Colvin Rhodes, who became the Secretary of Aging in the [Robert] Casey Administration [1987-1995], she looked at me and said, “What happened to you?” I was all covered with blood. I said, “Well honey, it’s just like this. I mean, I went to this meeting of the committee women in the 13<sup>th</sup> ward, who were telling me I’m not involved in the community (*laugh*) and then I had to go up to this bar.” So, my relationship with the committee was pretty good. I remember one time, I was in my office, which was way up under the eaves of the Capitol, fifth floor. Somebody runs and says, “Representative Rhodes, you gotta go downstairs, ‘cause there’s all kinds of trouble in front of the Capitol.” I said, “What kind of trouble?” He says, “There’s all these welfare people trying to get into the Capitol and they’ve broken a little old ladies arm in this revolving door and it’s gonna get terrible.” I said, “Oh, me.” So, I ran downstairs. There it were, hundreds and hundreds of people outside the front door of the Capitol. And all the Capitol Police all lined up. So, I went to the Capitol Police Captain and I said, “What’s going on here?” He said, “Well, these people wanna come in the Capitol.” I said, “Do you understand you work for these people? They’re constituents. They own this building. You can’t block them.” “They don’t have an appointment.” I said – so, I grabbed a flyer from one of the people and I wrote on it – “To whoever it may concern, everybody in front of the Capitol right now has an appointment with me, right now, Representative Joe Rhodes.” And I gave it to him. “Now they have an

appointment.” So, they all started streaming into the Capitol and I had to find a place to put them. So, I ran up to the E-Floor. I tried to find a room and finally I got to the minority caucus room and it was full of farmers, because Representative Kent Shelhamer [State Representative, Columbia County, 1965-1976] was having some farmers meeting. Wonderful guy. Absolutely reliable. As true as the driven snow. And I went to Kent and I said, “Kent, you gotta get out of here. I need this room.” He says, “Why?” I said, “Don’t ask questions.” I said, “Just trust me. Get everybody out of here.” He said, “Okay, Joe. Let’s leave everybody.” So, I went downstairs and all these people were down grinding in the rotunda and I said, “Come with me.” So, they all went upstairs and went into the minority caucus room. Then I go down the steps, make sure everybody got in and I look to the Senate side of the Capitol and there was this big trooper, State Trooper, a big platoon or whatever, of State Troopers in riot gear with great big long batons? And I went to the first person, it was a Sergeant, I think – and they all meant well – I said, “Why are you here?” “We’re here to keep the peace.” I said, “Look, Sergeant. You wanna keep the peace? Leave the building. Okay? I’m Representative Joe Rhodes. I represent a lot of these people. They have a proper question to put to the Legislature. So, just leave.” I said, “Just go down here and go out the Senate door.” So, I pushed him a little and he backed up a little and he gave me this look in the eye like, you push me one more time, sir, I’m gonna open you up from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. But I kept pushing him and they kept moving out. And they moved out of the building. So, I ran up to the minority caucus room and there’s all these people milling around and everything. And then there was a very wonderful community activist named Fannie Lou Hamer [1917-1977], who was leading this whole group from Pittsburgh. And as I walked in, she shouts out to me, “Oh, there’s our Representative, Joe Rhodes. Are you with us or against us?” And then I said something intemperate, (*laugh*) which

was basically telling her where she could go. And, but I did my duty. My duty was for the people. I did it that day, and later on, she ran into me and said, “Joe, I’m really sorry I said that.” I said, “I’m sorry for what I said, it was a heated situation but I was mostly concerned about the safety of these people.” She said, “I know you were.” So, I always won my legislative seat by 90 percent of the vote, 80 percent, something like that. Sometimes nobody ran against me.

**RJW:** Yeah, yeah. What did you think of the Capitol first time you came here? Or on Swearing-In day, what kind of feeling did you have then?

**JRJ:** I kind of screwed up on Swearing-In day because I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t know what it was, so I came to the Floor of the House and there’s all these flowers on the desks on Swearing-In day and I didn’t have anybody there with flowers, so I had put in a resolution – this will date me – I put in a resolution to memorialize the Congress to stop the bombing of Hai Phong Harbor<sup>5</sup> in Hanoi. So, after we were Sworn-In, I jumped up to the mike and – a total novice, oh, what a little kid – I jumped up and I said, “Mr. Speaker,” and the Speaker recognized me. His name was Ken Lee [Kenneth B. Lee; State Representative, Sullivan, Susquehanna and Wyoming Counties, 1957-1974; Speaker, 1967-1968 & 1973-1974] wonderful guy from Eagles Mere. “Mr. Speaker, I call up House Resolution 1.” And people all over the Floor said “We’re not here to do business today. What’s this guy doing?” And Ken Lee, bless his soul, he said, “We’re all Sworn-In, we’re the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth, a Member has a resolution he wants to put before us. It is before us.” And so, the House Resolution was in front of us and we started debating Vietnam for about an hour. *(laugh)*

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<sup>5</sup> Located 100 kilometers east of Hanoi, Vietnam.

**RJW:** Wow.

**JRJ:** And the guy that gave me the most trouble on the Floor was Jack Murtha [State Representative, Cambria County, 1969-1974; US Congress, 1974-2010]. He just came back from ‘Nam; he just cut me a new one. We were going at it, you know. But the issue got in front of the people, got in front of the House. That’s what I was trying to do. Years later he and I became, I would say, good friends. So, that was Swearing-In day for me.

**RJW:** You talked about a couple issues already, boarding homes and the war in Southeast Asia. What were some of the other issues that you felt were personal for you, or that you fought for throughout your time here in the House?

**JRJ:** Almost every issue I got involved in, I stumbled into. I didn’t mean it. One day Representative Jim Kelly [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1971-1976] who is a Republican from North Hills in Pittsburgh. He and I became, I would say, good friends, he asked me, “A bunch of us are going over to Western Penitentiary<sup>6</sup> to check it out. You wanna come with us?” I said, “Sure.” So, we went over to the Western Penitentiary and knocked on the door. There’s a lot of doors to get into Western Penitentiary. We went all around the prison and we got to this one section called the Hole, by the guys, but it’s technically the Behavioral Adjustment Unit. It’s a segregated area for the bad actors. And we went down there and all the prisoners were all bleeding and had all kinds of injuries, they’re all beat up. So, we both got all

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<sup>6</sup> Pennsylvania’s oldest operating correctional institution, the Western State Penitentiary at Pittsburgh opened in 1826. Remodeled in 1882, the current facility known as Riverside is located on 21 acres of land and encloses approximately 12 acres inside the perimeter wall. The facility is located on the Ohio River approximately five miles from downtown Pittsburgh.

excited and called up Attorney General [Robert P.] Kane [1975-1978] and we wanted an investigation what had happened. And, as it turned out, they were just putting on this show for us. They stabbed themselves and stuff. But I didn't react, like, I wasn't mad at them. I didn't react like that. My reaction was, if things are so bad here that would drive men to do this then there's something wrong here, and from that day forward I had an interest in prisons. Later on I became Chairman of the Committee on Crime and Corrections. I spent a lot of time in prison. And I did all I could to make it better, but no one person, not even the Governor, could really fix it all. People think of imprisonment as a safe, simple solution. But it's not. We had 6,000 guys in prison when I was in the Legislature. I think they have like, 40,000 in prison now and things aren't better. You can't lock up people and hope that will solve everything. It just doesn't work that way. So, that's how I got into that. And then the other major thing I got involved in was juvenile justice, and I don't recall how I got into that. I think someone from Neighborhood Legal Services got me interested in that. So, I got deeply into how we treat juveniles under the law in Pennsylvania, and there was terrible flaws in the law. And so, I put in a bill with Representative Scirica, [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1971-1980], who's, Tony Scirica is now the President, Third Circuit, Court of Appeals. He was my buddy. We put this bill in which would totally change how you treat juveniles. And long story short, it passed after much effort, believe me, and became the model legislation for the whole country – my juvenile act. And again I stumbled into it. My other big area I worked on was organized crime and public corruption. And I got into that because in [19]77 or [19]78, we had a lot of public corruption issues in the Commonwealth and there was a lot of mob activity. I talked to the state police and others about what can we do to get into this fight? And the thing that really bothered me the most was we were at the mercy of the Feds. They would have an interest in it, and then

the interest would move somewhere else. They would start really clamping on organized crime, then they'd get another interest someplace, they'd go someplace else. I said, "Our," what do you call them? "Our Attorney Generals and District Attorneys, our prosecutorial function, needs to be armed with the right tools and they don't have the power to do a wiretap. And they don't have the power of a grand jury system." So, I proposed that, with the help of Representative Scirica and others, like Reilly, someone I hired from Pittsburgh out of the D.A.'s office. He was the chief of our staff, and we conducted this investigation into organized crime and public corruption. Leadership fought me tooth and nail. They tried to cut my money out. They tried anything they could, and we prevailed. And the bills came to the Calendar creating the grand jury system; creating the wiretap system; creating the new statutes on public corruption. And I got up on the Floor and I moved to bring up House Bill whatever it was. Then the Majority Leader called me down to the desk, Jimmy Manderino [State Representative, Westmoreland County, 1967-1989; Speaker, 1989], he said, "Look Joe, you've won. So, if I don't make any more objections, will you not make any more speeches?" And I said, "Sure, Jim." So, I went back, I just called them up and they all passed. And that's how we have the current system to fight organized crime, public corruption. Those were the main issues that I worked on. There were some other minor ones. I got a lot of laws in place.

**RJW:** Yeah, I was gonna say, you had nine bills passed in eight years of service, which is remarkable. And over, I think, seven resolutions adopted in that amount of time, that's –

**JRJ:** You have to be relentless to get any kind of legislation through the General Assembly or any legislative body. It's just very, very hard. Especially if it's going against the grain bucking against previous practice, like my organized crime legislation was. I remember I put a bill in

once on paternity, completely off the side. It's something I found out about. And, under the old law, if a guy was charged with being the father of somebody, all he had to do was get his lawyer to opt to have it heard in the criminal court, because there was an option to go to criminal court instead of the civil courts. Since the criminal court has a requirement of proof which was beyond a reasonable doubt, at that time there was no way to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that anybody was anybody's father. So, they always got off on that. And so, I put a bill in eliminating the criminal option. I got jacked up in the cloak room. Guys would come up to me and say, "What is wrong with you, Rhodes? Are you a sissy? What's going on?" I said, "It's right. If you play you have to pay. It's right. Women should have this option." It passed. It's still law. But, that's the way it is.

**RJW:** Out of all these accomplishments, which piece of legislation are you most proud of, then?

**JRJ:** I don't know how I would gauge. I'm very proud of the juvenile justice legislation: Act 41. I'm very proud of my organized crime and public corruption investigation. Every time I see a grand jury doing something or a wiretap or something, I say, "There we go. That's what I did." But, I was also proud of little things, not legislation, like, I told you I learned a lot by canvassing my district. One day I was working in Penn Hills canvassing, knocking on doors, and I said, "God, that stinks. What is that?" And one of the guys with me went, "Look at that." And there's just raw sewage running down the sidewalk in a little ditch. I said, "What the hell?" So, I got in touch with the people who lived there and they said, "We've been trying to get secondary sewage here for years and they won't give it, they can't get it done, it's too expensive, blah blah blah." So, then I found out that every year, the state had this big budget to allocate for sewage treatment, like ALCOSAN [Allegheny County Sanitary Authority], big, big projects. So, I went

to the Secretary that was involved in that and I said, "I really need you to give me my sewage." He said, "Oh, we can't jump you guys." So, he was on the Penn State board with me. I was on the Penn State board. I don't know why [Governor Milton J.] Shapp [1971-1979] put me on that, but he did. I had nothing to do with Penn State. I'm from Pittsburgh; I'm a Pitt rooter. But anyway, I was on the Penn State board and at every board meeting I raised my hand and the President of the Board would say, "Ok, Joe, what do you want? We know what you want." I'd say, "Yes, Mr. Secretary, when are you gonna give me my secondary sewages in Penn Hills Township?" He said, "Joe, I'm getting to it." Finally, many years later, I said, "Mr. Secretary, when are you gonna give me my sewers in Penn Hills?" He said, "Read the latest report on the allocation." So, I went and got it and it said, "ALCOSAN: 32 million dollars, and blah blah blah; the Southeastern Pennsylvania Sewage Authority: 28 million dollars;" then it said, "Township of Penn Hills: 815,000 dollars." Then, the next one, some other place, 20 million dollars. And I go back there. People still remembered me that I got them their sewers. That's concrete, literally.

**RJW:** Absolutely.

**JRJ:** And it really mattered. I liked getting things done for people. In the years I served in the House I only submitted four citations to the Legislative Reference Bureau. Most Members generate hundreds of these things, people's weddings, anniversaries, and everything. But I only introduced four and they were always for one thing; it was always for a child, a youngster, who had done something heroic. And we'd have a little banquet for him. I'll never forget the first one. It was a kid who was in a school bus going down the Parkway East and the bus driver had a fatal heart attack and they were going along at 60 miles an hour and this little kid, he's like, ten

years old or something. He jumps into the driver's seat, he starts driving the bus and he asks some other kid to push the brake with his hands 'cause they couldn't reach the brake, and he gets the bus over to the berm. What a brave kid.

**RJW:** Phenomenal.

**JRJ:** Every one of those was a story like that. The Legislative Reference people, whenever I called them, they'd send somebody down. They said, "We always look forward to your citations because they always are meaningful and we really will do a good a job on yours." That's the broad range of legislative job. I run down the street and chase police cars. I tried to reward or acknowledge the heroism of my kids. I try to pass the laws that should be passed. I did my duty.

**RJW:** How about your leadership positions, especially within the Committees? You were Vice Chairman of Finance, like you said, you were Subcommittee Chairman of Crimes and Corrections. What kind of things in your Committee work can you talk about?

**JRJ:** Well being Vice Chairman of Finance meant nothing, because the Ways and Means, which became the Finance Committee, was never – what it worked on was so important it was never given any authority; the tax laws, right? So, when we had a tax law coming up they would send it to us at the last minute, a new tax bill, all done and we were supposed to all vote for it, pass it along to the full House. There was no discussion. So, being Vice Chairman of the Finance Committee was not much of a job. Chairman of the Committee on Crime and Corrections, that was a big job. I Chaired with Tony Scirica, he is a great guy. He had a real heroic sense of justice. And well, we passed good laws. And one of the saddest things that happened to me in that whole arena was one year we passed the E.R.A. [Equal Rights

Amendment, 1972] Constitutional amendment in Pennsylvania. And one of our Representatives<sup>7</sup> was in charge of that and she put in a whole series of bills to end all kind of discriminations in the statutes. It was like a computerized thing, nobody really read, ‘because there was hundreds and hundreds of statutes going back to the 1600s.

**RJW:** Right. Oh, yeah.

**JRJ:** One of the statutes they repealed was a statute because the front of the statute it said, “Women in state prisons would not get clothing” or something like that, as opposed to men, who would get it. You know, stupid. It was done in the 1800s. So, her bill abolished that statute and she forgot to notice that another section of the statute gave the legislature the right to make unannounced inspections – and the Philadelphia Prison Society – to make unannounced inspections of prisons. Prison are bad enough, believe me. But if they go unmonitored, they’re hell-holes. The most important thing for the legislature was to monitor the prison, make sure the prisons, the wardens and all knew that any moment a Member could show up and knock on the door and say, “By authority of blah blah blah, I want to have access to this prison. I want to see everybody.” Well, we accidentally did that and the legislature has never repaired that damage. A lot of people tried but Governors love that we took away that authority from ourselves, so I regret that very much. You have to really be vigilant if you’re a legislator. I mean, you have to risk things. You have to go out and look at things that nobody wants to look at. Otherwise, you have dark societies in the Commonwealth where nobody sees and anything can happen to it. I mean one time, I went to a Penn State football game. First time and only time. I was on the Penn State board, but I didn’t care about watching football. I played football in college and I didn’t like watching it. But, I went there with a person who became my wife later on and we’re

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<sup>7</sup> Helen D. Wise; State Representative, Centre County, 1977-1978.

driving back from Penn State and we passed Muncy, because it's on the road back from Penn State. And I said, "Do you mind if I pull over here – " it's like ten o'clock at night –I said, "Do you mind if I pull over here? I wanna go in and see what's going on." She said, "No, go ahead." So, I pull up and I get out. I go up to the door and I look around and there she is standing right next to me. I said, "You can't, this is not for you to see." She says, "Just go and get in the prison." I said, "Alright." So, I rang the thing and the guard comes out and I said, "I'm State Representative Joseph Rhodes and under House Resolution so-and-so, I demand immediate admission to this institution. If you don't let me in in five minutes, you'll be in contempt of the House and you'll be in a state institution tomorrow. Believe me." So, there's a big jumble. Five minutes later a whole bunch of people come down and it's like late at night and they opened up the place. They say, "Do you wanna go see the infirmary?" I said, "No." "You wanna go see the cafeteria?" I said, "No. I wanna see the Hole." That is the heart of any prison. How the worst are treated. "So, just show me the way." So, we went to the Hole, the Behavioral Adjustment Unit; every institution had one. And most of the cells are empty and we get to the end one and there's this black woman, huddled, like this, shivering in the corner, totally drenched. I said, "Open this cage." So, the guard opens it and I go up to her and, "Ma'am, what happened to you?" "Oh, leave me alone, leave me alone." I said, "What happened to you?" "Oh, he used a fire hose on me for the last hour." I said, "They bounced you around in the cell with a fire hose?" She said, "Yeah, that's what they did. You're not gonna do anything about it." I said, "You just sit there. What's wrong with your wrists?" "Oh, I cut them." Turns out, that they suspected her of having contraband, like marijuana or something, in her very personal area, and so they pulled her into the infirmary, spread her legs on this table, two big guys, and they want to probe her to see if there's anything in there and she jumped off the bed and smashed her

hands through the window which was all barred, so she couldn't have gotten away. But she was so terrified that she busted the windows and the shards cut her up and everything. So I said, "I wanna see the warden right now." So, they got the warden. He didn't want to see me. And let's just say there were some changes made at Muncy prison after that. You have to go when they don't expect you, otherwise you don't see anything. And you gotta believe it's your job. You're a Representative of the people, not just your district, but of the people of the Commonwealth. And you have to go out and represent them.

**RJW:** Absolutely.

**JRJ:** That's the job.

**RJW:** How about with so much of your legislation being passed into law, so much is talked about now about bipartisanship and working both sides of the aisle. How did you do that to get laws passed when you're in the majority or the minority?

**JRJ:** We had a rule in my Committee, my Subcommittee on Crime and Corrections. Tony Scirica, who is now Third Circuit Court of Appeals, President Judge; he and I had one staff. They all worked together. When the Republicans took over, he was, quote, the Chairman, but I was the Co-Chairman. When the Democrats took over, I was the Chairman and he was the Co-Chairman. We did everything together. I believe that there's no place for bitter partisanship over certain things. Now, some things are naturally going to be partisan like the budget, but I never got into the budget much. I had a lot of friends on the Republican side and I never thought that was a stigma, that they're Republicans. I mean, we worked together for the benefit of the people. I remember when we were pushing the organized crime and public corruption package

through the House, Tony and I. People would stand up in our caucus and call me names I can't repeat, questioning my manhood in relation to Scirica, and I'd say – I can't say what I said. Basically, I just told them, "Leave off of that, 'cause we don't want to get into any fisticuffs here in the caucus." But, I loved that guy. He and I did good work. And he's been a great judge, Tony Scirica. But, you can be very partisan if you want to be, but you won't get anything done. In the Commonwealth, 12 million people there's a lot needed to be done. Laws have to be extinguished and laws have to be enacted.

**RJW:** Well, so much is different now, in terms of the way the Legislature is either run or, in terms of technology and things like that. What are some of the things that you think are beneficial now that may help the Legislature run better or are there some things in your time that you thought should have stayed around longer or things were run better, things like that?

**JRJ:** Technology is a simple one. Okay, Jack Murtha, who is now a very distinguished member of the United States Congress, he was totally loved in the entire Assembly for one reason; he managed to convince leadership to install a phone in every member's home they could use, with dialing eight to call – it was on the Pennsylvania Network. You could call everybody everywhere. We considered that an astronomical advancement in technology. Oh my God, that was just way before – now you go down to the House, they all got computers on their desk and everything is so complicated, but that was a big step forward. I think the Assembly has made progress in the use of technology. And there'll probably be more progress in the future.

**RJW:** Well, what was an average session day like for you? Or non-session day? Either one.

**JRJ:** Oh, session days. Well, Monday was always kind of empty ‘cause that was the day everybody was getting to Harrisburg and the only real vote was the roll call vote which allowed you to get paid for that day. *(laugh)* So, you called the roll call vote up and everyone runs up and pushes the button. I used that once. I was sneaky, but I did it for a good reason. Every year a dozen kids were dying in adult facilities in Pennsylvania, and I had to pass the Juvenile Act. I had to get kids out of adult prisons. So, I went up to the Speaker, Mr. Irvis [K. Leroy Irvis; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1959-1988; Speaker, 1977-1978 & 1983-1988], and I said, “Mr. Irvis, do you mind if I run my Juvenile Act as the roll call vote today?” He said, “Joe, it’s a substantive bill. We’ve never run substantive bills on Monday as the roll call vote.” I said, “It’s the one way I can think of we can get this dog-gone thing passed and stop killing kids in adult facilities.” “Okay, Joe, go ahead and try to do it.” So, they called up my bill as the roll call vote and Members ran up to the floor and they just hit yes ‘cause that’s all you do for roll call and they went back to their offices. And then I told the Clerk, “Get it signed by the Speaker right away *(laugh)* and send it to the Senate so they can’t recall it.” So, the Speaker signed and the courier took it over to the Senate and a lot of things are arcane in the Legislature. One of the arcane things is when the House or the Senate has a bill, they physically have the bill, a blue-back bill, they have it. And they give it to the other body or to the Governor and they don’t have it anymore, and you cannot vote for reconsideration if you don’t have the bill.

**RJW:** Absolutely right.

**JRJ:** And I got that Juvenile Act over to the Senate – bang. I know it was a little bit, not dishonorable, but less than upfront, but I was fighting for children’s lives and I’d almost do anything for them, anything. So, it was a bit of gamesmanship in the Legislature. Still is. Little

bit of that always. You just gotta know why you're doing it. For your vain glory or for some financial interest for somebody or you doing it for the good of the Commonwealth? I know everyone has a different notion of what is the good of the Commonwealth. I understand that. That's the risk you take. You could be wrong, but don't come in this Assembly without some notion what is in the interest of the Commonwealth or you're in the wrong place, brother. You should be doing something else.

**RJW:** You talked a little bit before we started about you certainly were not alone in your office. You had multiple Representatives in your office.

**JRJ:** Just my first year.

**RJW:** Just your first year?

**JRJ:** First two years.

**RJW:** And how about in terms of staff? Secretaries and things.

**JRJ:** The first two years I shared a secretary, Wilma, wonderful girl, with three extremely ambitious and busy members, all from Philadelphia, black members from Philadelphia. So, I went down to the Chief Clerk, I said, "Why you put me in a room with three black guys from Philly? I don't get it." "Don't you wanna be with blacks?" I said, "Are you confused? I'm from Pittsburgh. I want to be with Allegheny County people. I don't care about this and that." But, it was too late and they couldn't change it. So, for two years I spent a lot of time with these Philadelphians. I grew to have a lot of affection for some of them and it helped me a lot get things done. One of them was Dave Richardson [State Representative, Philadelphia County,

1973-1995], who subsequently died, but boy Dave and I did a lot of things. A lot of things together.

**RJW:** How about in terms of mentors? You said you had a lot of mentors along the way. Who were some of those, more specifically, in the House? And did you offer any mentorship before you left?

**JRJ:** I don't know if I was a mentor to anyone. I tried to give some of the new guys suggestions. One of them was Bill DeWeese [H. William DeWeese; State Representative, Greene, Fayette and Washington Counties, 1976-2010; Speaker, 1993-1994], who lived in my building and I didn't mentor him but, we hanged out. In terms of myself, a guy named Jim Ritter [State Representative, Lehigh County, 1965-1982] from Allentown. He accidentally had an office next to my office and so we talked a lot. A guy from Pittsburgh wouldn't have any concept what a guy from Allentown would care about and we got to know each other. Of course, my primary influence in my life in the legislature was K. Leroy Irvis. He was my idol, my image, what I'd like to be, you know? And he was always willing to talk to me.

**RJW:** How about humorous stories? I know we talked a little bit off camera about some humorous stories or good natured stories during your time in the House. Would you share some of those with us?

**JRJ:** Humorous stories? Well, I remember one, which wasn't exactly humorous but it was funny to me; we had a bill on the Calendar in the Senate that wanted to make anyone who had an abortion a capital crime, I mean, had committed a capital crime and would be executed. So, after session, they had a big fight on the Senate floor. It didn't go anywhere. After session I was in

Jimmy's, which was a little restaurant – it's now gone; it's a curio shop now on Walnut Street – and I was in there with a bunch of buddies and Tom Nolan [State Senator, Allegheny County, 1971-1978] came in, who was the Majority Leader of the Senate. And one thing led to another, maybe we had a couple of drinks, I don't know, but he and I start arguing about the abortion bill. You execute someone who had an abortion, and I said, "Tom, I know you, I know your kids. If one of your kids had an abortion, you wouldn't want them executed. I know you wouldn't do that. You're a decent guy. What are you talking about?" Then he started to want to fisticuff me, because I said he wouldn't kill his daughter. *(laugh)* And I was stunned, I said, "Tom, put your hands down. No, we're not going to fight to prove you that would kill your daughter. No, I don't think so. 'cause I know you wouldn't." That happened, yeah, that happened. There are other things that happened that were funny. But, well, I can't recall any one that stands out right now.

**RJW:** I know when we talked to Representative James Kelly in the past, he quoted that you often, what he termed, babysitted his son, I guess, during session.

**JRJ:** Yeah. We played X and O's.

**RJW:** For hours.

**JRJ:** Hours, because session is boring most of the time. So, he'd come over and sit under my desk and we would play X and O's for hours. I really enjoyed that. I got close to Jim. I really liked him a lot.

**RJW:** Well, why did you end up leaving the House of Representatives then in 1980?

**JRJ:** I didn't really leave. I decided to run for the U.S. Senate.

**RJW:** How was that experience different than running for a House seat?

**JRJ:** Oh God, in every possible way. We were all sitting on the Floor one day and everyone was talking about who was going to run for the Senate and this-and-that and somebody said, "Joe, why don't you run? I mean, you're more qualified and you'd make a better Senator than all these other guys." I said, "You're right. I should run." So, I started circulating petitions and I got on the ballot. I think the hardest part about me running for the Senate was Philadelphia. Some other areas of the Commonwealth were hard. We have some very tough counties for a black guy to run in. But since I was married to a white woman and a lot of people made much of that, I go to Philly to campaign, and oh gosh, sometimes it was all kinds of – but I had a lot of supporters in Philly, and I was surprised that one of my opponents was C. Delores Tucker [PA Secretary of State, 1971-1977], 'cause I really stuck my neck out for her once. But, she ran and I didn't have a lot of money and Pete Flaherty [Mayor of Pittsburgh, 1970-1978; Deputy United States Attorney General, 1977-1978] had a very good name recognition, number across the state. I remember though one thing happened, right in the heat of the battle when they were attacking me for being married to a white woman, which I thought was so old-fashioned. Wake up, we're in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> century. I mean, give me a break. She's the mother of my children, well, she wasn't at that point, but she would be. I remember the mine workers endorsed me for the Senate which startled me, 'because I thought, "Why would the mine workers endorse me?"' But, all these years I've always been able to rely on the mine workers. I always did. Anything I could. When I was on the Public Utility Commission, I did anything I could to help the mine workers. Anyway, they asked me to campaign with them for the Senate. "Come down to Greene County

and go down in the mine and meet some of the mine workers?” So I said, “Okay.” So, I went there with a couple people and we got all the garb on the breathing apparatus and the helmet and all this stuff. We go way down in this mine, I mean, way down, maybe 1,500 feet down, and we’re walking along in the tunnel and I see these three figures coming toward me and I thought, “Oh, what’s this all about?” They had picks and things and they were coming toward me. So, they got up to me and I could see enough with my little bulb, my little light on top of my helmet, I could see they were all black women. (*laugh*) And all these people from Philly were attacking me for being married to a white woman. It was so funny. And one of the women came up to me with her pick and she says, “Joe, we had a meeting of the black women miners and we decided we’re all going to march on Philly and teach those people they can’t treat you like they’re treating you, ‘cause you’re our man and you’d make a great Senator.” I gave them a big hug. I said, “Probably not a good idea for you to go march on Philly, (*laugh*) but I really appreciate what you said.” It gave me big boost for a week or two.

**RJW:** What have you been keeping yourself busy with since you left the House?

**JRJ:** Well, for seven years I worked at the Westinghouse Corporation in corporate planning. I didn’t know anything about business, nothing, and I learned that dealing with deals involved in millions of dollars in deals, I had to really understand fast. So, I learned a lot about the world of business. And then my ex-wife, Linda, she was nominated by Casey to become Secretary of Aging and she said, “I’d really appreciate it if you’d come with me and the kids to Harrisburg.” I said, “Okay.” So, I went, left my job, just when I was getting to a certain point at Westinghouse where I could really do something, and Governor Casey asked me to be the Deputy in Commerce, because they had a lot of trouble in Commerce and the Secretary couldn’t

get confirmed because some of the Republicans in the Senate were making a fuss over nothing. So, I had to take care of a lot of the details. And then after a year of that, Governor Casey kept sending names over to the Senate to be PUC Commissioners and they had all been rejected by the Senate. So, he sent word to me through one of his people that "We'd like to nominate you for the office of Public Utility Commission." I said "I don't know anything about Public Utility Commission, because when I was in the legislature I was in criminal justice and juvenile law." "Don't worry, Joe, you'll pick it up." So, he nominated me and there was a lot of fuss about it and everything. But, I got confirmed unanimously by the Senate and I served seven years as a Public Utility Commissioner. That was what I did from [19]88 till [19]95. I really enjoyed it, I mean, because on the PUC you only had to convince two other people to get something done, because there's five of us. Most of the times, not even five. When I served the Commission, sometimes there were only two of us. I had to convince him or her to go along with me. But the PUC was different than the Legislature, because the Legislature passes these big broad bills and the budget and all that kind of stuff. It's kind-of very broad and broad swath of things. That happens in the PUC too, when you pass rate increases, but a lot of the work in the Commission was little deals and I enjoyed doing that. I got involved in lots of things like settling disputes between the mine workers and the utilities that didn't want to buy their coal from certain people or something like that, and the one thing I got really interested in at the PUC was railroad crossings. None of the Commissioners were particularly interested in railroad crossings so I took that on as my interest. The Commission has the authority to establish the rules around railroad crossing. And so, I got really into that. That sounds like a minor thing, but when you got hit by a locomotive going 60 miles an hour with 100 cars behind it, you're dead.

**RJW:** Yeah.

**JRJ:** And I remember one time I got a call from the safety people saying there had been a railroad crossing accident out in Pittsburgh on the North side. The first question you always ask, “Did anybody survive?” He said, “No.” I said, “How’d it happen?” They said, this guy had gone to a Pitt basketball game, or something like that, had driven down to a little hollow on the Allegheny River where there was, like a sort-of a, how you put it, without using inappropriate language, less than middle class people lived in little trailers and things. And he went over to see his girl and when he left he had to cross the railroad tracks. And as he was crossing the railroad tracks, there was a cross bar and the light in the middle of the cross bar was out so it didn’t blink. He assumed, as you should assume, that there was no train. Had he waited two seconds he would have seen the train. If he had gone two seconds before that he would have gotten across the tracks, but at that precise moment, I don’t know if it was fate or whatnot, he goes across the tracks and this big three-locomotive unit train comes by and WHAM. It took them about a mile to stop, and he’s all mushed up and everything. And they call me up and say, “What are we going to do, Commissioner?” I said, “Well, simple question, has anybody replaced the blub in the crossing light?” “No, Commissioner.” “Why not?” “No one agrees it’s their responsibility.” I said, “You are kidding me.” So, we called up PENNDOT, we called up CONRAIL, we called up the Township. “Will you go out there and put a bulb in that blanket-blank signal?” “It’s not our responsibility. We won’t touch it. It’s not our responsibility.” So, after a while I got really steamed, so I told my people, I said, “Get me a plane to Pittsburgh and a car. Get me a bulb to go in that thing, and get all those people on the phone,” I said – these were all Presidents of these things – I said, “Sirs, I am going to go to the airport and catch a plane to Pittsburgh and I’m going to have a press conference right there where that poor boy got mushed, and I’m going to put this lamp into the cross-signal unless one of you goes out there and fixes it.” So, I drove out

to the Harrisburg airport. Just before I got there, the phone rang in the car, “Commissioner?” “Yeah.” “This is Safety Officer – you don’t have to go.” “Why?” “The light bulb was installed.” “Who did it?” “I can’t tell you.” (*laugh*) So, you get involved. My job with the PUC was, in a way, the same as my job in the Legislature: take care of the people of the Commonwealth and don’t let the bureaucrats kill them. There’s nothing like a railroad crossing accident, I mean, nothing like that. But since then, since being on the PUC, I’ve just been doing some consulting work for one of the leaders in this House and also for various large corporations and that keeps me busy.

**RJW:** How about any regrets?

**JRJ:** About serving?

**RJW:** About serving, yeah, your service in the House. Any issues you think you maybe should have pushed harder on?

**JRJ:** The only subject matter that I never got enacted, which later on was enacted, I always felt bad about was boarding homes. I asked people, “How do we get this boarding home bill passed?” And people would just tell me, point blank, “You got to have a disaster at a boarding home where nothing but white older people get killed.” I said, “That’s a hard one to take.” But, that’s what got the juvenile act passed. Some juveniles were killed by a fire at a Lycoming County jail. So, lo-and-behold, in March of 1979, there was a fire in a boarding home in Connellsville where they had steps going down to the basement where they kept all the senior citizens in wheelchairs. Steps and wheelchairs. And of course, none of them got out. You know, a dozen people were killed. I said, “Oh Lord. This is it. We have to move on this now,

this boarding home issue.” Unfortunately, nobody paid any attention, because that day was the day that Three Mile Island happened.

**RJW:** Timing, yeah.

**JRJ:** And the whole world was looking at Three Mile Island, for a high tech disaster which never happened, because the reactor worked the way it was supposed to work. It was well designed and it shut itself down and melted. That’s what it was supposed to do. Meanwhile, a very old fashioned form of heat – fire – killed all these people in Connellsville. So, there’s a lot of luck involved with serving the people. A lot of luck.

**RJW:** Overall, how do you feel about your contributions to the Legislative process?

**JRJ:** I did my duty as I saw it, just like I did on the Scranton Commission. You can always do more, but there’s only so much a man can do. And I did everything I thought I could do. I tried as hard as I could, but that’s why there’s 203 members of the House. There are other people that have a say in what should happen or not happen. I don’t think I have an exclusive contract or arrangement to know the truth. That’s why we have a big body; people argue and the truth comes out, sort-of. But, no, I’m not ashamed of what I did in the Assembly, I’m very proud of it. I’m proud of what I did on the PUC. I’m proud of what I did on the Scranton Commission. I’m proud of what I did as Deputy of Commerce. I’ve had a good public life. I got a chance to serve the people. There’s no greater joy than that. I don’t mean to sound corny, but that’s exactly how I feel.

**RJW:** Do you have any advice for any others who would pursue a career in public service?

**JRJ:** Well, I always tell people when they talk about Harrisburg, I tell them one thing: If you're gonna survive in Harrisburg, in any job, any political job, any state job, the only way to survive, you have to develop a keen, not a casual, but a keen delight in the perverse. So, things will happen to you and things will happen and you'll go, "Wow, how could they have done that? How could he have done that? That's really perverse." But if you chuckle, you can get through it. If you get so serious that you can't see the delight in the perverse, you're a goner in the Assembly, or anywhere, the Governor's office, anywhere, any of the judgeships. Nobody is that right all the time.

**RJW:** So, where does Joe Rhodes go from here?

**JRJ:** I'm retired. My kids are all grown up now. I might go back to finishing my book on Thomas Carlyle [Scottish Philosopher, 1797-1881] and John Stuart Mill [British Philosopher, 1806-1873] which I wrote at Harvard. I wrote it, but I didn't like it much; 450 pages, but I didn't like it. So, I let it sit for 20 years and I have time now. Maybe I'll go back and look at the draft. The basic gist of it is right, but some of it is not good prose. I might do that. People ask me to consult on different things and I do it, but I always tell them, "You don't buy my judgment or my word, you hire me to do something, you have to understand I'll do what I think is right and I'll say what I think is the truth, and if you can't handle it, don't hire me." That's why I haven't had a lot of clients lately. *(laugh)*

**RJW:** Well, I gotta say, Representative Rhodes, it's been a fantastic interview and I appreciate you coming in this afternoon. This is where we can end it if you like.

**JRJ:** Fine.

**RJW:** And I wish you much luck and, again, I appreciate you coming in and spending time with us today.

**JRJ:** This is all part of my duty to the Commonwealth and I'm happy to do it.

**RJW:** Thank you.

**JRJ:** Thank you.