

FRANCIS J. (JERRY) COOMES

Interviewed by

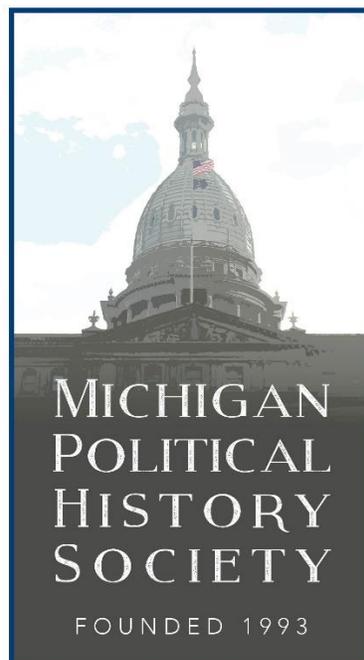
Bill Ballenger

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Bill Ballenger: This interview is part of the James J. Blanchard Living Library of Michigan Political History.

Bill Ballenger: Jerry Coomes, it's a great pleasure to have you with the Michigan Political History Society. Let me ask you, weren't you originally a Hoosier? Born and brought up in Indiana?

Jerry Coomes: I was.

Bill Ballenger: How'd you come up to Michigan? Tell us the story.

Jerry Coomes: Well, there was a recession in Indiana and in the country, and my father had a coal company that was on the edge of extinction, and so he migrated to Michigan in 1939 and brought the family with him, and so we've been here ever since.

Bill Ballenger: You were 11 years old at the time?

Jerry Coomes: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: What was it, Indianapolis where you were born and brought up your first 11 years?

Jerry Coomes: Indianapolis. Right.

Bill Ballenger: So, you come to Michigan where was it? Highland Park? And what was Highland Park like at that time?

Jerry Coomes: Well, actually it was in the city of Detroit around West Chicago, and we lived real close to the center of the city and went to Visitation high school. I think it's now called Martin de Porres, and I graduated from there and then went into the army when I was 17 after graduation.

Bill Ballenger: What was your neighborhood in Detroit like at that time?

Jerry Coomes: It was probably a neighborhood that was built in the 20's and it was decent, and I would say ranged from upper middle class to middle class.

Bill Ballenger: Did you have a sense of what was going on around Highland Park or that was your world kind of? It was almost like a little community. It could have been Greenville Michigan, or St. Johns, or Owosso or something?

Jerry Coomes: There were substantial portions of Highland Park that were upscale at that time, and they had of course a great community college. Highland Park junior college and it was noted around the country for its English program, and I went there two years.

Bill Ballenger: That's after you got out of the army?

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: So, you were in the army and they kind of focused your attention on what it took to succeed in life is that it? You decided I better go to college and get a degree?

Jerry Coomes: Oh, that was definitely a motivational factor.

Bill Ballenger: So, you go to Highland Park and you really loved Highland Park junior college right?

Jerry Coomes: I did, and they had a great history program, which I was drawn to and we had some really wonderful professors. I remember a man by the name of Colter that taught world history and that really excited me. That was kind of, a turning point for me, world history.

Bill Ballenger: Now, then did you transfer to Michigan State at that point for your last two years?

Jerry Coomes: Yes, in 1950 after I met Colette. She was going to U of D.

Bill Ballenger: Your wife Colette? The mother of your nine children?

Jerry Coomes: That's correct.

Bill Ballenger: How did you meet her anyway?

Jerry Coomes: Well, it was an interesting story. It was my first semester at junior college. It was December and that was the time when most of the students went to work for the post office at Christmas time, and I was a dragger and that meant I went down the aisles and selected let's say Rhode Island, and took it to the Rhode Island station.

Jerry Coomes: Colette was a sorter and there were 100's of them, rows of them and so several weeks before that I had declared the intent that I was ready to meet my wife. I hadn't dated seriously, I didn't have any close girlfriends, but I just said, "I'm ready."

Jerry Coomes: So, two weeks later I'm walking down dragging Rhode Island and I see this beautiful blonde standing there sorting, and scratching her back or attempting to, and so I walked on my routine walk I said, "Excuse me miss, but can I help you?" I'd be in federal prison today.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. You're right.

Jerry Coomes: She turned around and looked at me in the eye, and I looked her in the eye and that was it.

Bill Ballenger: Love at first sight.

Jerry Coomes: And a marriage made in heaven, which happened two and a half years later.

Bill Ballenger: Wow. Wow. That is a great story. She was from that area?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, well she was born in the UP. At the age of two and a half months she came to Detroit with her family. So, lived on the east side and she was attending U of D.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, so you have married Colette by the time you came to Michigan State? Or not?

Jerry Coomes: No. About a year later.

Bill Ballenger: About a year later. So, then you were married students? Or you were a married husband at Michigan State?

Jerry Coomes: Yes. We were married in '51.

Bill Ballenger: In '51.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: And so what? You graduate what?

Jerry Coomes: '53.

Bill Ballenger: '53.

Jerry Coomes: Went off to Clarkston to teach history?

Bill Ballenger: Clarkston high school?

Jerry Coomes: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: Clarkston high school, okay. So, you lived in Clarkston?

Jerry Coomes: Lived in Waterford.

Bill Ballenger: In Waterford?

Jerry Coomes: We couldn't afford Clarkston.

Bill Ballenger: How long were you there?

Jerry Coomes: Well, I was there about a month when the president of the local MEA chapter was arrested as a communist.

Bill Ballenger: Whoa.

Jerry Coomes: 1953 Clarkston.

Bill Ballenger: Right, right.

Jerry Coomes: And I don't know how this happened, but I was elected to succeed him. So I was a president of a local MEA chapter.

Bill Ballenger: And you were a freshman, new kid on the block, right out of college.

Jerry Coomes: Had been there a month, right. But we stayed March and April of '53 and returned to Michigan State grad school in fall of '54.

Bill Ballenger: '54?

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. How did you first get involved in state government and state politics? Wasn't Phil Hart your first boss?

Jerry Coomes: He was, but the intermediary was Fred Tripp from the highway department.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, okay. Alright.

Jerry Coomes: Fred's parents owned a grocery store in the east side of East Lansing just outside the city limits where they could sell beer. So, he hired me for a dollar an hour to lug the beer out to the students, but he was subsequently hired by Mennen Williams to be his lobbyist. So, in the fall campaign of 1954 Fred asked me to pick up he and Phil at UAW union hall on the west side of Lansing. I believe it's on Clare street.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Because they needed a ride home so I went to the union hall and listened to Phil for the first time. I'd never seen him. Actually, didn't know much about him at all.

Bill Ballenger: And at that time he was lieutenant governor?

Jerry Coomes: He was a candidate for lieutenant governor.

Bill Ballenger: Candidate for Lieutenant governor?

Jerry Coomes: Yes. For the November election of 1954.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: And I absolutely was, they say today blown away by him, and I thought he was Adlai Stevenson, Woodrow Wilson. He was the most admirable personality I had ever come across, and when he said, "No party has a monopoly on the truth," I thought, that's my kind of guy.

Jerry Coomes: So, I drove him home and Fred later said, "I've given him your name as his assistant. He only has a budget for one person so you may be hearing from him." So we waited and waited, it was just before Christmas and he called and said, "Come to work for me."

Bill Ballenger: Wow. You were like 25 years old at the time.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. 26.

Bill Ballenger: 26 years old.

Jerry Coomes: And with one child, and another one on the way.

Bill Ballenger: Right. So, that's pretty exciting for you? You went to work for him and how long were you with him?

Jerry Coomes: About a year and a half. Until the build up to the '56 election, and I was doing my thesis on the office Lieutenant governor.

Bill Ballenger: This is for a master's degree at Michigan State?

Jerry Coomes: Correct. And was able to finish that in June of that year, but the pay was so little that I could not raise a family on it. So, the fair employment practices commission was just created, I think it was in '56, could have been '55. But anyway, they needed a regional director for the Lansing office and I took that job, and it was a great experience for me. I learned an awful lot about community organizing.

Bill Ballenger: Well now, the fair employment practices commission, wasn't that viewed at least later as kind of a forerunner of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, which was actually written in the constitution?

Jerry Coomes: It was exactly that.

Bill Ballenger: I mean how did it come to be created? And how did it function as an agency during the time you were there?

Jerry Coomes: Well, it started with Harry Truman when he desegregated the armed forces, and it also started in my history when I was a young boy living in Detroit. I could have been 11 or 12, and we stopped at a gas station and a black man came up, and my cousin in the front seat said to him, "Fill her up sir." And his mother, which was kind of an aunt-in-law of mine said afterwards, "Bobby, don't ever call a negro sir." And I had never experienced being offended, morally offended by anything that ever happened before that, and that was the beginning of my rather strong belief in the equality of man in civil society.

Bill Ballenger: That was an eye opening experience?

Jerry Coomes: It was.

Bill Ballenger: When you had a chance then to be head of the regional office for the FEPC that was really appealing to you.

Jerry Coomes: It was, and it's a strain Bill, that appears throughout my life, and subsequently with the Michigan Catholic Conference.

Bill Ballenger: You obviously knew Phil Hart pretty well. You were involved with him, worked for him all during his political career here in Michigan before he went to Washington to become a US Senator. Tell us a few Phil Hart stories.

Jerry Coomes: He was probably the most beautiful human being in the field of politics that I have ever encountered. He had such a gentle nature that when he walked into a room or a hall he never ventured beyond the door, because he didn't want to offend anyone. He would stay by the front door, so, the purpose of his visit was never achieved, and similarly he learned a little trick that when he would walk out of the capital for example, people were so drawn to his nature, his humble nature, his gentle nature that they would walk him to the car and then they would never leave the window.

Jerry Coomes: So, he would say to them, "Well, let me walk you to your car."

Bill Ballenger: That's the only way he could get away.

Jerry Coomes: That's a classic.

Jerry Coomes: And another indication of this gentleness was when he was elected to the senate, but had not taken the oath of office. His headquarters were at the Willard Hotel and he had a suite, and a bedroom and so his aides were in the bedroom and one of them said to him, "Phil, it's time for you to go out and interview those four ladies and make a selection."

Bill Ballenger: As a secretary?

Jerry Coomes: As a secretary.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Jerry Coomes: He said, "I won't do that." And they said, "Why?" He says, "Because I'd hire every one of them."

Bill Ballenger: So, he was kind of a one of a kind personality?

Jerry Coomes: He was a one of a kind. He was so passionate about moral questions. Particularly racial equality. I remember, I think it was the voting rights act of '65 Phil was one of the principle floor managers, and they obviously filibustered that act, or that bill and he had cots brought in for all the senators to sleep overnight.

Jerry Coomes: He earned the title of the conscience of the senate.

Bill Ballenger: Right, and he had a congressional senate office building named after him.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah that was rare.

Bill Ballenger: That is very rare.

Jerry Coomes: I have one more little memory of Phil. I don't know if you remember Frank Blackford, but he was also head of the insurance commission here under Mennen, and he handed me a book of eulogies given on the senate floor after Phil's death and I was on my way to Escanaba for a meeting of the state bar, summer meeting.

Jerry Coomes: And I read the book on the airplane and it was full of great political rhetoric by the liberal democrats Edmund Muskie, George McGovern, Ted Kennedy, all praising his legislative career, and then I came to Strom Thurmond's comments and I was just struck with his capability to see the real Phil Hart. He said, "You could not be in Phil Hart's presence without feeling greater about yourself when you left him." I thought, whoa, how much more true that was than the record that Phil had in the senate except for civil rights.

Bill Ballenger: Sometimes you get the greatest tributes from people that are totally unexpected.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. But it captures, "Here was the moral enemy of his cause."

Bill Ballenger: Sure. Right.

Jerry Coomes: And he paid great respect to people as a human being.

Bill Ballenger: That's right. Absolutely. Sure. Absolutely. Well, let me ask you, what was the relationship between Phil Hart and G. Mennen Williams? Were they close particularly? Was it a political amalgamation that they ran together in '54 for

governor and lieutenant governor? Soapy obviously had already been governor for three, two year terms.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Chemistry wise Bill, it was similar to the relationship between Phil and Janey, and Phil and Pat McNamara. They were cut out of a different cookie cutter. Mennen was just an amazing, amazing man, but Phil was extremely sensitive. Could engage in great small talk. Mennen was not capable of small talk.

Bill Ballenger: But he was a big kind of gregarious, backslapping, the bow-tie, the square dances.

Jerry Coomes: He was. Square dancing.

Bill Ballenger: He'd come into a room, he wouldn't stop at the door, he'd be greeting everybody all through the room.

Jerry Coomes: Go right through it. And there's a story about that. He had his annual New Year's reception for the staff and the public, and they'd kind of mingle in together and go through the office, and more than once Mennen would grab the hand of one of his secretaries coming through and he says, "Good to see you again," which was his standard greeting, "Good to see you again."

Jerry Coomes: But Mennen had a strain of incredible, personal honesty, and public honesty that I want to demonstrate with this story, and I can't pinpoint the year, but it was in the early 50's running against Paul Bagwell for governor whose slogan was if you recall, "Ring the bell for Bagwell."

Jerry Coomes: Well, Bagwell got on television one of the first use of advertisements, television commercials in Michigan history, and his commercial featured a pair of very beautiful shoes. These are the shoes worn by our wealthy governor, and so Paul Weber and his advertising guys got together.

Bill Ballenger: Now, Paul Weber was his?

Jerry Coomes: Being his press secretary.

Bill Ballenger: Mennen Williams press secretary?

Jerry Coomes: Yes, and one of the finest in the nation. And well recognized as that. Came up with a response, and the response was, "Another pair of shoes." And the tagline was, "Paul Bagwell cannot fill these shoes." And Paul showed it to the governor and the governor said, "I'm sorry Paul, we can't use that." Paul says, "Why not governor? Those aren't my shoes." And there are other stories like that.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Jerry Coomes: And I've got to tell you this one. Weber comes back from the democratic advisory council's summer meeting in Chicago when the lead political reporter for the Chicago Tribune approaches Mennen and says, "What makes you think you can be president of the United States?" And the governor says, "Well, who knows? I could be dead by then."

Jerry Coomes: And the headline the next day was, "Soapy predicts Ike's death."

Bill Ballenger: Oh geez.

Jerry Coomes: So, I walk into Weber's office maybe a week later and I said, "Paul, what are you going to do about this? This is awful." He said, "I've taken care of it." I said, "How did you do that?" He said, "Well, I've told the governor he cannot talk to the press without talking to me first." I said, "Well, that ought to do it."

Jerry Coomes: So, Billy Farnum and I are appointed co-chair of the reception committee for Harry S. Truman's visit to Mackinac Island in August of 1955, and at that time there were maybe five or six members of the capital press corp that covered those events, and one morning Frances X. Martel, the leader of the AFL-CIO dropped dead on the streets of downtown Mackinac Island.

Bill Ballenger: Oh wow.

Jerry Coomes: And so they assemble on the front porch of the governor's residence and the governor remembers his promise to Paul. So, he's not going to say he's sorry that Frances X. Martel is dead until he has talked to Paul Weber. So, I am charged with the responsibility of locating Paul Weber. So, I run off to the surgeons quarters where I think he's staying and just as I get about halfway Weber comes up smoking a cigar.

Jerry Coomes: He's informed, he knows the governor's waiting for him, he gets about 40 feet from the porch and the governor has a Hawaiian shirt on, he walks over to the edge of the porch and he says, "Paul?" Paul says, "It's okay governor." And the governor turned to the waiting reporters and said, "It is with deep regret."

Jerry Coomes: That's one of my favorite all time stories.

Bill Ballenger: That is unbelievable.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: That is amazing. Alright, G. Mennen Williams is governor, Phil Hart is lieutenant governor, you're running the regional office of the fair employment practices commission. Were you really getting things accomplished? Was it achieving its mission as a state agency?

Jerry Coomes: We were laying the foundation. It was extremely slow going. I remember my greatest achievement in that job aside from organizing advisory councils in the city of Muskegon, in Lansing and helping in Kalamazoo was a part-time black person was hired in the department store in Muskegon. That was a big breakthrough. Never happened in Grand Rapids. Herpolsheimer's was the name of the store.

Bill Ballenger: Yes.

Jerry Coomes: Never happened in Grand Rapids, never happened in Muskegon until that date, but it was a beautiful learning experience for me because I had to go in and work with labor, the religion, education, business community and had to bring them all together and say, "Now, can't we make some progress in this area?"

Jerry Coomes: So, I learned a lot.

Bill Ballenger: So, that was a breakthrough.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: And that was an accomplishment.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: But after a year and a half, two years in that job, then Catholic Charities?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. It happened kind of funny. I'm coming out of the Muskegon Advisory Council meeting, and Monsignor Kehren, who was basically the lead pastor of the Muskegon Church, came up to me and he says, "Jerry, Cardinal Mooney and the bishops of Michigan have created a new agency called Catholic Charities of Michigan." He said, "Would you be interested?" And I said, "Well, Father, that's a great honor, and I'm most grateful to you. But I really don't think so." He said, "Well, we're paying \$10,000." I said, "Father, I am your man. You don't have to look any further."

Bill Ballenger: That was a lot of money in those days.

Jerry Coomes: Oh, it was. \$10,000 a year in 1958 was a lot of money. And I think I had maybe five children by then, so I needed it.

Bill Ballenger: Right. That was a great tribute to you. You'd been in state government. Had you been active in the church, up to that time, for them to approach you and ask you to do this?

Jerry Coomes: Not so anybody would notice, but it was more of a personal commitment.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Which started when I was maybe 20 years old.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, so Catholic Charities is kind of a new concept.

Jerry Coomes: It was.

Jerry Coomes: It's a new creation, right?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: And you were the guy who had to kind of make it all work.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: So, how did you undertake to do that?

Jerry Coomes: Well, the individual dioceses, which is a collection of geographical counties, three- five, and the archdiocese, to 15 or 20 out-of-state state never really had a unifying organization. They were like the principalities of Germany. This was a first-time effort to bring them together on one issue, and that was social services. And so, there were 60-some agencies involved, from Catholic Social Services to Homes for the Aging. I'd travel the state and try to figure out ways that we could all work together, to increase their services and their efficiencies.

Jerry Coomes: Along the way, somebody would say, "We need a Council on the Aging in the state of Michigan." That was our first opportunity to sponsor legislation, and we were successful. We did that in 1960. So, they saw more opportunities than just coordinating services. They saw an opportunity to be of greater service to the larger community.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Now, what the FEPC did while you were there, and in other places in the state, did that kind of feed into the writing of the Michigan Constitution? Did it become supported, to the extent by both Republicans and Democrats, that George Romney or whoever was in the convention decided, you know, "Let's build this into the Constitution, give it the name civil rights"? What about that?

Jerry Coomes: Well, that's an interesting prelude to the Con Con. Harold McKinney, who happened to be the Executive Director of the Michigan Counsel of Churches, and I were friendly, and he was extremely active and close to George Romney. George Romney formed, in 1960 I believe, an organization called Citizens for Michigan.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Which was also a prelude to the Constitutional Convention. They asked me to join it, and I did, and traveled a couple times to several meetings around the state, and liked his kind of bipartisan approach to improving Michigan

government. So, when I was asked in 1961 by I think it was Monsignor Malloy, who came to my home in East Lansing. He was the Chancellor of Detroit, which is kind of a legal office within the church and said, "There's going to be a Constitutional Convention, and we think that you should consider covering it, keeping your job with Catholic Charities because we're fearful that the MEA is going to put restrictive language in the taxation section, or in any of the other sections, that could lead to a prohibition against any future aid to non-public school students." And I said, "Okay."

Jerry Coomes: So, we went around the state and organized local councils of men and women, that later held public forums for Con Con delegates to attend, to express their views of what was going on and to hear from our local citizens. We monitored it very carefully. As you know, it began to wind down in the spring and summer of '62. The whole document was sent to the Style and Drafting Committee, in which there were no substantive changes to be made. Well, lo and behold, we find there is a substantive change made, and it's in the taxation section. And wouldn't you know, it was a pretty locked down, solid exclusionary provision that prevented aid to non-public schools.

Bill Ballenger: Your worst fear was realized.

Jerry Coomes: Yes, but we were fairly convinced that we could do something about it. We went to all the leaders in the Republican party, and simply said, "If this provision stays, we will go door to door in 83 counties in this state." And it was believed to be fairly close in terms of public opinion, at that time.

Bill Ballenger: Right. This is an up or down vote on the whole Constitution.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: So, if you don't like one part, everything goes.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, and the position of the conference was that this was essentially, on balance, a good Constitution for the state of Michigan. And we would have supported it, but not under those conditions. And Style and Drafting was commanded not to make any substantive changes.

Bill Ballenger: How did you get around that?

Jerry Coomes: They made a substitute change. The language was taken out.

Bill Ballenger: Did you do that through the Romney Republicans Kind of backdoor, through staff?

Jerry Coomes: Right, yeah. I did it through Walter De Vries.

Bill Ballenger: Walter De Vries, who was a delegate to the convention, I believe?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, he was a delegate. A PhD at the time, and looked to be the chief policy guy.

Bill Ballenger: He was a professor at Calvin College, I think at the time. Right?

Jerry Coomes: He was. Exactly right.

Bill Ballenger: And remember, there was a lot of support, you know this better than anybody, among the Christian reform schools in west Michigan, for aid to non-public schools.

Jerry Coomes: Yes. Right.

Bill Ballenger: They were just as supportive as Catholic schools were.

Jerry Coomes: But there was no contact between them in a political sense until that time, and after that. That single action within the Constitutional Convention was the motivational force for bringing the two groups together.

Bill Ballenger: Together.

Jerry Coomes: Subsequently, in the effort to secure some aid.

Bill Ballenger: Right. There's a clause in the new Constitution, creating a Department of Civil Rights, which pretty much subsumes the role and mission of the Fair Employment Practices Commission that you had been heading. Did that make the FEPC kind of an anachronism?

Jerry Coomes: Yes. Right. They inherited the employment section. And interesting, Bill, after the Michigan Catholic Conference was formed, co-chairman John Feikens, federal judge John Feikens, and co-chairman of the New Civil Rights Commission, Damon Keith, both federal judges, went to Cardinal Tierney and asked him if I could be released to serve as the first head of the Civil Rights Commission. And I told the Cardinal, "Please don't volunteer my services. I don't want to move to Detroit with my family," which was almost filled out by then.

Bill Ballenger: Filled out? Nine kids, by then?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. So, that didn't happen, but that was an honor that I appreciated.

Bill Ballenger: But one of the things, then, that did happen about this time, was that the Catholic Church decided about the Catholic Conference.

Jerry Coomes: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: Which, as I understand it, subsumed Catholic Charities, where you worked?

Jerry Coomes: It did. It became a department.

Bill Ballenger: They came to you, and what? Said, "Jerry, you've done such a great job with Catholic Charities."

Jerry Coomes: No.

Bill Ballenger: "We want you to be head of " That isn't the way it happened?

Jerry Coomes: No. That's not the way it happened. I had experience, in my days with the preceding organization, Catholic Charities of Michigan. Several times a year I would travel to Pennsylvania, to Texas, Ohio, or New York, to be with fledgling organizations that were like what the Michigan Catholic Conference became. And so I learned how New York and Ohio and Pennsylvania were organizing on a much broader scale, to contribute to the larger community besides the one single area of social services. So I proposed to them the advantages of having a General Motors, with its many divisions, rather than simply a Chevrolet, with just social services. And after the results of the Constitutional Convention, they saw what the unity of Catholic citizens could do, and said they agreed. And so, we started in February one of 1963.

Bill Ballenger: So, it was almost the other way around. You actually were the impetus for the creation of the Catholic Conference.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Before we get into your tenure at the Michigan Catholic Conference, while you were still the head of Catholic Charities, you were appointed by Governor Williams in 1960 to be a member of the State Labor Mediation Board. I think you ran into a few difficulties getting confirmed by the Republican-controlled Senate. Didn't you?

Jerry Coomes: Well, Mennen was running for President, and the Republican Senate wanted to make sure, and they knew he was leaving, they didn't want to confirm any of his appointments. So, no Williams nominees were confirmed late into 1960. So, he's getting desperate. He's leaving office, and he's got some positions to fill, and I'm sure Labor did not want to see him leave without filling the vacancy of Labor Mediation.

Jerry Coomes: And so, I get a call one December day. It's Sid Woolner, who was the Executive Chief of Staff for Mennen. Wants to know if I'd accept this appointment. And I said, "Well " I had already said yes in my head. "Let me think about it for 24 hours," you know? That kind of thing. So, I call him back. I said, "Sure." But the only reason I got appointed was because my wife Colette was working part-time in the Senate, and one of her Senators that she took dictation from was Senator Myron from Escanaba, who was on the Senate Business Committee, the committee headed by Ed Hutchinson. So, he actually broke down and cried, and

just complained to Ed that, "You're not treating me fairly. This is my secretary's husband, and you've got to confirm him." And they did, and after asking me what I knew about labor mediation, basically, which they knew to be nothing, I confirmed them, and they confirmed me.

Bill Ballenger: Well, that never stopped a lot of appointees, so why should that be a problem? That's good. This was just a part-time job though, anyway. Right?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, it was. Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: While you were also working full-time with Catholic Charities. Right?

Jerry Coomes: Right, yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. So, the Michigan Catholic Conference is created. You begin as the title Executive Director?

Jerry Coomes: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: What was the climate at that time? What was going on with the Catholic Conference? What was its mission? Were a lot of great things happening for the Catholic Church, for non-public schools? What developed? This is like in the early to mid-1960s.

Jerry Coomes: That's a great question. It's hard to justly and fully describe the magnitude of the positive environment of the early '60s. A combination of Cardinal Dearden's leadership, a combination of Vatican Two, and the openness in the church, of the political environment of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson on poverty. It was just like all lights were green. So we took off, and within that short period, created a Michigan Catholic Conference job training program. The Secretary of Labor said it was the best in the country. We created a job training center on reservations in Mount Pleasant to train Indians, obviously, on the reservation. We created a program called Project Equality, which ensured that everything the church purchased from any vendor, had to be from a vendor that guaranteed equal employment opportunities, regardless of race or religion or national origin.

Jerry Coomes: And then there was a series of legislative successes that included the Fair Bus School Law. Scholarships for college students in 1964. Auxiliary services to non-public schools, which I believe had eight separate service areas, like school crossing guards, school nurses, remedial reading. And then, tuition grants to college students, which survives today. Has never been challenged. Has been extremely important to private colleges in the state of Michigan.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: And then eventually, Parochiad also passed. People forget that it passed a legislature, and then subsequently voted down in a constitutional amendment.

Bill Ballenger: Now we're up to 1970, but even before that, there were a lot of great things going on for the Michigan Catholic Conference during the 1960s. All lights were green, all systems were go, but there were a few rear guard actions that probably you were still fighting. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court decision on banning school prayer, which to many people seemed to mean that maybe government shouldn't be giving state or federal financial assistance to non-public schools. How much of a challenge was that?

Jerry Coomes: Well, not much, actually. Because we took the position that we were asking the state to aid the secular aspects of education. The math, the science.

Bill Ballenger: Or busing.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Busing.

Bill Ballenger: You know, transportation.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. Crossing guards.

Jerry Coomes: And also, we were proposing that aid be given to the family, to the students, to the parents. Not to the institution. Although that's a fine distinction, it's nevertheless an important legal distinction. So we didn't acknowledge many restraints, philosophically or legally. Not that we were right, as it turned out.

Bill Ballenger: Well, still, the financial challenge to non-public school was mounting. There were real problems everywhere, not just in Roman Catholic schools, but Christian reform schools, and private.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: At the K-12 level. And so, that led up to the big battle over what was called Parochiad in 1969 and '70. And, you're right. The legislature passed a bill, or bills, sanctioning and approving aid to non-public schools, signed by Governor Milliken, who supported it.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: But then, a counter-petition drive by the Michigan Education Association, the public school teachers, was mounted, to get the question on the ballot to ban.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: Let me just ask you one question. Why such acceptance of state aid to private colleges, but not to non-public K-12 education?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Well, I think it's largely, Bill, because of the recognition that K-12, you were not an adult, and therefore were impressionable and could not make, or likely would not make, independent decisions about your religious beliefs. Whereas, college students, religion was an elective. Not part of the curriculum, so you could decide you weren't interested in taking the history of Christianity, or whatever.

Bill Ballenger: So, do you think that was a valid distinction?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Yeah, I do.

Bill Ballenger: But today, probably the language that exists today in the Constitution, because of the Parochiaid amendment in 1970, bans all aid to K-12 non-public schools, other than the auxiliary services that you have described which are still okay.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: But, you know, there's also been a push, in recent years, for vouchers. And that has gone nowhere with the Michigan public when it's gotten on the ballot, or in polls.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: In your mind, is there a connection between the issue of aid to non-public students, kind of backdoor, through tax credits or vouchers to their parents, on the one hand, as opposed to direct aid from the state to non-public schools 30 years ago, or not?

Jerry Coomes: Well, I think there is, and I think the driving forces of both movements are our movement in the '70s. And the current movement, starting in perhaps the early '90s, is quite distinct. I think the so-called religious right, the Christian Coalition, convinced the national Republican party that this was an important issue. That wasn't our motivation. We were basically isolated to Christian reform, Lutheran, and Catholics. This is a much broader, almost a political philosophical question against government monopoly of education.

Bill Ballenger: The state controlling education.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Whereas, you were simply trying to save religious schools that had existed for decades.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Exactly, yeah.

Bill Ballenger: They were embattled financially, and you were trying to prop them up and help them.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: This decade in the 1960s, a time of great ferment and controversy and achievement, there were some colorful legislators that you probably ran into from time to time, weren't there?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, and I'll get to that. I just want to say, the passage of that legislation, that took two years.

Bill Ballenger: This is Parochiaid again? 1969 and '70?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. It passed with no extra votes. I mean, the Senate was right on the mark at 20. I don't know whether the House had 56 or 57. It took two years to do it. And Bill Ryan, the Speaker of the House, was a Democrat from Detroit.

Jerry Coomes: He was singularly devoted to this issue, and just gave his lifeblood to it, almost. This was an achievement, in terms of the degree of difficulty in passing something through a legislative door. There wasn't a half an inch to spare.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: And I think it reflects the fact that it was an issue ahead of its time in the sense that it shouldn't have passed. I mean, it was just almost a miracle that it passed, and it reflects a division in society. We were way ahead of the judicial time frame for this question.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well it was a little surprising to a lot of people that Governor Milliken, a republican who had just taken office in '69 when George Romney left to go to Washington with the Nixon administration came out in support of Parochiaid, whereas before that, Romney had opposed Parochiaid for K-12 schools, and I don't think Milliken had ever had much of a record in support of it, but he came out for it, and signed the bill.

Jerry Coomes: We cultivated, we, my friend Stewart Hubbell, who became the head of Citizens for Michigan, which was the armed forces, the ground troops of this effort to secure passage of Parochiaid, was a friend of Milliken's, and he introduced him to me. When Bill came here to Lansing in 1960, right after his primary, I was one of the first ones to meet him in the drugstore of the Jack Tar Hotel. We developed a relationship.

Bill Ballenger: This is Bill Milliken?

Jerry Coomes: Bill Milliken. We became quite close. Philosophically we were not very far apart, to the point, when he ran for Lieutenant Governor in 1964.

Bill Ballenger: He had a convention in the general election with George Romney.

Jerry Coomes: In which Romney was supporting Allison Green, the then speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives. We clearly went out and did everything we could to help Bill Milliken become Lieutenant Governor.

Bill Ballenger: Well you made history, because he narrowly beat Green in the convention, and then he was elected with Romney.

Jerry Coomes: And then in 1970, while the Parochiaid question Proposal C was on the ballot in 1970, we put people door-to-door, in many, many counties in the state to remind the people of his commitment to the question of educational equality.

Bill Ballenger: And he won by only 44,000 votes over Sander Levin.

Jerry Coomes: He didn't win by many, no. I really think we were a substantial difference in that election for him.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: There was a connection that was at that point 10 years old.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: He had many personal characteristics similar to Phil Hart. When he was with you, he had great listening ability. You could always predict on any given social question where he was going to come down. It was always on the side of the underdog. Philosophically, he was at least a moderate democrat, and some issues, a liberal democrat. He didn't have too good a relationship with the UAW, but he was smart enough to build one with the AFL-CIO. With George Weeks's help, he was very shrewd in building a relationship with the free press.

Bill Ballenger: Now, George Weeks was the Governor Press Secretary.

Jerry Coomes: Press Secretary, yeah.

Bill Ballenger: And later his chief of staff.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: And a former Detroit news columnist, and later a Detroit news columnist.

Jerry Coomes: Right. And a friend of mine since my days with Phil Hart, when George was next door, where the wire services were

Bill Ballenger: Oh, okay, that's interesting.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Good man.

Bill Ballenger: Well let me ask you about George Romney, Milliken's predecessor, as governor, who was governor for six years, from 1963, until early '69 when he left to go to Washington. What were your impressions of George Romney during all these years?

Jerry Coomes: Well I admired his nature. It was intense. When he would give a speech on something he felt strongly about, you could hear Martin Luther talking, or Martin Luther King talking. He had an intensity about him, which was extremely convincing. He'd point that finger. You would feel a sense of wow, this must be right. We had a common thread that went between us. I happened to be, during my Michigan Catholic Conference days, and during the Detroit riots, the chairman of the Michigan Advisory Committee of the United States Civil Rights Commission. And as you recall, Governor Romney was really thrown off balance during that riot. I saw it first-hand when he called citizens together and I was one. Coleman and I sat right across the table.

Bill Ballenger: Coleman Young?

Jerry Coomes: Coleman Young.

Bill Ballenger: State senator.

Jerry Coomes: Senate Democratic Leader at the time. George was trying to invent some approaches as to how to deal with this crises, which was essentially rocking his presidential potential.

Bill Ballenger: Because he was interested in running for president in 1968.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. But I'm getting off the track, the point I wanted to make is he came into the constitutional convention convinced that there were certain tenets in the Mormon religion that were susceptible to questioning when it came to racial equality. He was convinced he had to solve that question. He knew of my background. He wanted assistance, advice, whatever, on that question. He was true to his commitment, because 1967, he took on open housing.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Open occupancy it was called.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: This was a battle. We were heavily involved in it, particularly with the Catholic legislators, of which, God bless him, Bob Mahoney put his job on the line.

Bill Ballenger: Who is another state representative, a blind state legislator.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. One of the all-time favorite people that I came across.

Bill Ballenger: Still alive today?

Jerry Coomes: Still alive. I've got some great stories, but will tell them in a later time. But talking about characters, one of my favorite characters, and I'm not talking about great political history here, I'm talking about just characters was Senator Arthur Cartwright, from Detroit. He was called the slum landlord back then, but he wasn't. He owned some Detroit hotels in the inner-city.

Bill Ballenger: He was an African American state senator from Detroit.

Jerry Coomes: Yes. With a most colorful rhetorical manner that I wish that I had recorded some of his sayings, I could have made a fortune from him. The one that I remember was Perry Bullard, state rep from Ann Arbor introduced a bill to ban aerosol spray cans, because it was destroying the ozone layer. Senator Cartwright was chairman of the State Affairs Committee at the time, and it passed the house. He held the hearing in the Senate, in which it was reported out on the floor. One of the senators who told me this was in the room when most of the people had exited, and Arthur picks up this aerosol can and he is looking at, he's saying, "I just can't imagine this, that this little bitty can, can destroy the air in the Ozarks." Arthur had a way of saying things that were memorable.

Bill Ballenger: I would say so.

Jerry Coomes: But I got to tell you this story, I'll have to have it deleted. Let's see how I can put this in perspective. Senator William B. Fitzgerald was dethroned as senate majority leader.

Bill Ballenger: This is like late '70s.

Jerry Coomes: '76.

Bill Ballenger: '76, or '77.

Jerry Coomes: Late '76, correct. The UAW was really mad. Frank Garrison wanted to strike back. His methodology for striking back was to introduce a lobby-reform bill. It was sent to Arthur's committee. It didn't come out in '76, it didn't come out in '77. Sometime in '78, the UAW went to Senator McCaully from Wyandotte, who was the democratic caucus chair, and said, "You got to call a caucus. We got to get this bill out." So they called a caucus. They said, McCaully said to Arthur, "Arthur, you got to report this bill out at committee."

Jerry Coomes: So Arthur stood up, hooked both thumbs in his vest pocket, looked around the room, and said, "Gentlemen, there once was a Governor named Kim Sigler. " Now it happened that Kim Sigler introduced the first lobby-reform bill of 1947. And Arthur continued, and he said, "And one day," and Governor Sigler was his

own pilot, "One day, the Lord whispered to Kim, he said, "Kim, time to take a flight in your airplane." So Kim, just up there flying. And he's going flying, and the Lord grabs a hold of that plane, and dashes that M-blank to the ground." Arthur rears back, puts both fingers in his vest and says, "Gentlemens, that's what the Lord thinks of political reform." So anyway, that's why he's one of my characters, my favorite characters.

Bill Ballenger: And I think the bill never did get out of committee, did it?

Jerry Coomes: Yes it did.

Bill Ballenger: But it didn't pass, did it?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, I think it passed, and it went to the Supreme Court, and Larry Lindenberg tossed it out, more than one purpose. But it eventually passed.

Bill Ballenger: In some way, shape, or form. There were some characters, there's no question about that, absolutely.

Jerry Coomes: Oh boy.

Bill Ballenger: All right, Parochiaid has just been defeated at the ballot box in 1970. A lot of things also are not going so well for what the mission of the Catholic Conference had continued to hope would be the case. Windows seemed to be closing, opportunities seemed to be limited compared to what they had been for most of the decade of the '60s, what was going through your mind at that time?

Jerry Coomes: Well, I felt like somebody that went to the moon, the journey to the moon, and then found out it was made of blue cheese, and I couldn't walk on it. At any rate, I felt, not only exhausted, because this had been a nine-year effort, started '62 or so. I was shattered, absolutely shattered. I did not know what I was going to do. I took about 10 days off, I went to the Keys, to just try to recover. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown. Down there, some ideas came to me about my future because I didn't want to go back to the conference because I knew it would not be the same. I really enjoyed the idea of doing something legislatively significant.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well you built up all these contacts over the years through the Catholic Conference, and in your various jobs in the state government.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: But I mean, there were other things going on that weren't really good for the kind of mission that you were on. I mean, the abortion issue became much more prominent.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, was coming up.

Bill Ballenger: The Vietnam War had raged out of control.

Jerry Coomes: Correct. And also, Bill, the church itself, after having this enormous, exciting period of Vatican II, opening up to the laity, began to go this way, began to close.

Bill Ballenger: Close in.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: So you saw the windows closing.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, the window was closing for great social reform. I invited Emil Lockwood over to have breakfast.

Bill Ballenger: Now who was Emil Lockwood?

Jerry Coomes: He was senate majority leader.

Bill Ballenger: He was a Republican.

Jerry Coomes: He was Republican, he had run and he was an ally on this issue.

Bill Ballenger: On Parochiaid.

Jerry Coomes: I had great respect for him, for his effectiveness, for his nature. He had run for secretary of state, got the nomination on the ballot in November against Dick Austin.

Bill Ballenger: In 1970, the same year Parochiaid was on the ballot, and the same year that Milliken and Sander Levin ran against each other.

Jerry Coomes: Right.

Bill Ballenger: And Austin beat him for secretary of state.

Jerry Coomes: Right. He did.

Bill Ballenger: So he's out of a job. He's working as deputy director of the Department of Commerce.

Jerry Coomes: I said to myself, "Emil can be more useful than that to Governor Milliken who was just elected." So I went to see the governor, and I said, "Governor, have you given any thought to asking Emil Lockwood to be your lobbyist?" I said, "He's sitting over there in the Commerce Department, not using all of his talents." I said, "But if you're going to get him, you should walk over, and ask him yourself in his office," which he did. Emil said, "I'll do it, but I have a favor to ask, would

you consider appointing me to the next vacancy in the Public Service Commission?" The Governor says, "Yes."

Jerry Coomes: A month or so later, I invite Emil, I said, "Emil, I don't think the timing's right on this, but what about when our issues get over with," because I was waiting on the Supreme Court to rule, and Emil was waiting on the Governor to appoint him to Public Service Commission, I said, "if this works out, why don't we consider joining ourselves in a lobbying firm?" He said, "Well, I'll think about it." February goes through, March, April, May, June 28th comes, I get a phone call, the Supreme Court has rejected our appeal to the Parochiaid issue. Shortly thereafter, Emil calls and said, "Guess what? The Governor has just appointed somebody else to the Public Service Commission." He says, "Maybe we ought to talk."

Bill Ballenger: The timing is right.

Jerry Coomes: The timing is right. He said, "I'm going up to Alma to haul some hay for a secretary that needs some hay," which was typical of Emil, he was just the most common touch person you'd ever meet. I said, "Yeah, great." So we went up and on the way back, I mean it's an 80-mile ride, we agreed to do it. Well, actually I didn't, I said, "Well, let me think about it over the fourth." I went up to Stewart Hubbell's cottage, took our family up, which is kind of a tradition on little Traverse Bay, spent the weekend there, came back convinced that this was a good fit.

Bill Ballenger: You should do it.

Jerry Coomes: It was a good combination. We agreed to go into business on October 1. I informed Cardinal Dearden. We had something like eight clients on October 1, when we opened. Emil was just the most perfect person for me, because he had a master's in accounting, he was a genius. He could take a dead business, and somehow put his hands on it, and it would rise up like Lazarus, which he did for my father and mother's restaurant.

Bill Ballenger: Really?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah, when it went belly-up.

Bill Ballenger: Well let me ask you this question before you get into exactly how you and Emil worked at the lobbying firm. We live in era of term limits. People contend that there are a lot of rank amateurs in Lansing who don't know what they're doing. It takes them years to learn the job, and then they have to leave before they can take advantage of it. Yet, Emil Lockwood, back in the 1960's, who many people regard as the greatest majority leader in recent Michigan political history, certainly in the last 40 years, only served in the Michigan Senate for eight years.

Bill Ballenger: In fact, after his first two-year term, when senators had two-year terms, as a freshman, he was elected minority leader, and then two years later, he was elected majority leader, what does that say about Emil Lockwood? What does it say about the people we're electing today under term limits, or maybe doesn't it say anything about anybody?

Jerry Coomes: Well, it might, but I'm probably not the guy to answer that question.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I mean, it didn't take a lot of seniority for him to thrive.

Jerry Coomes: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: He was a genius as you say.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Maybe that's the answer. Certain people, if there were certain people today, like Emil Lockwood, they would rise up and be Emil Lockwood.

Jerry Coomes: I think that's a very good assumption. It was because he was a genius. I wouldn't have suspected that with Emil. He was so precise, and analytical, but boy, he was smart. You know, one of his strongest features was his commitment to bipartisanship. It didn't really matter what your political place was. If you could help me on this issue, we could serve the state better.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Democrats really admired Emil.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Jerry Coomes: I have to tell you this, because it happened in your hometown, Owosso. When Emil was running for Secretary of State, he was, I think, giving a speech at the Rotary Club. This is one of Emil's dominant personality characteristics, his commitment to equality. He was castigated, he was criticized severely on that occasion for supporting fair housing. He simply told that audience, "If you don't support equality of opportunity for all people, don't vote for me." And he meant it. I mean, I don't find that kind of commitment. Well it was rare in either party actually, I was going to say in the Republican party today, but that wouldn't probably be fair, in either party. I mean, it was very deep. It was very similar to Milliken, and very similar to Phil Hart. I had been blessed, really to be associated with those people.

Bill Ballenger: Those people. Okay, you opened this multi-client lobbying firm. Multi-client lobbying was not a widespread phenomenon at that time. There were scarcely any multi-client businesses in Lansing. Jim Karoub had started one just a few months before you did. There were early pioneers like Bill Doyle, and Tom

Cleary who had started a multi-client firm's meaning that they had more than one interest that they were representing. But you started your firm, did you have any idea that it would become as big as it has become today? Did you have any conception of what you really were getting into?

Jerry Coomes: No, we didn't. Well, we wanted to be bipartisan. So that was achieved with AN11 but we had no vision that the federal government under Reagan would practice what we then called Devolution or a devolving of powers from the federal government to the States which turned many national corporations to the States to find lobbying talent.

Jerry Coomes: We had such crisis as consumer protection. We had environmental loss that where the DNR began to seriously fine Michigan corporations for violations, pollution violations. So, it became very complex and that just made it a growth industry.

Bill Ballenger: So, you started this firm and you're immediately thrust into battles that involve things like 3M company, and the Motion Picture Corporation of America, and later Pigeon River Drilling.

Jerry Coomes: Right. Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: These are so far removed from Jerry Coomes and what he started out doing back in the 50's in the Fair Employment Practice. Did you kind of wake up some mornings saying "What am I doing here?"

Jerry Coomes: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Or what has happened?

Jerry Coomes: Well, it helps to remember Churchill's observation about if you weren't a Liberal when you were young, or if you weren't a Conservative when you were older, then something was wrong with you. But, my family had grown a full size. There's only so much intensity after 20 years of picking grapes in the Social Service Civil Rights field.

Bill Ballenger: And as you say, the window had kind of closed on the world that you had.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Right.

Bill Ballenger: So, it was time for a new direction and you had all these contacts and these relationships.

Jerry Coomes: Yep.

Bill Ballenger: So, you start the firm. Just tell us a few war stories from your years lobbying.

Jerry Coomes: Okay. Reflectorized license plate.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Jerry Coomes: Well, in the beginning lobbyist's that formed firms are not that confident that they're gonna make it. So, they're not that stringent about who they let in their client door. So, we had some early mistakes that didn't serve the quality kind of blue chip firm that we wanted to be. I won't say three of them fell into that category but the issue was one that was so deeply resented by the Secretary of State's office. That issue was Reflectorized License Plate. 3M claimed it was an issue of safety and they made films and all these scientific studies on how it could save lives by being brighter and the Secretary of State's office just, I mean, it was intense.

Bill Ballenger: They claimed it should not be mandatory, to have reflectorized plates.

Jerry Coomes: Correct. So, we ended up compromising and passing legislation that permitted a trial. So, that's what happened. They did a trial but the resentment in the bureaucracy was such that we never got it into law. The issue of Pigeon River was probably outside procreate.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, explain what was going on there. This is the Pigeon River National State Forest. Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: In Northeast Michigan, lower Peninsula.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Yeah. Basically a little below the Gaylord area, but the sequence of events were this. In 1968, the Department of Natural Resources issued some drilling permits to Shell Oil, Nomeco Oil, which is a subsidiary of Consumer's Power, and Amoco. Now, it's 1979, the environmental movement is in full bloom and Mrs. Milliken and the Free Press, and the Governor, became great advocates for not wishing the department to honor those permits. It became quite a public issue.

Bill Ballenger: The Free Press was opposed.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Well, the Free Press loved the north for its employees and it's staff and it's editors, but it didn't like it for any resource development. I'll tell ya. Close the door. So, no drilling by the Free Press in the pristine North. So, along comes 1979 and Iran, Iraq war is in force. Long lines at the gas stations. Well, if there's any time to open up drilling and to honor those permits, it's now. So, I was hired to do that.

Bill Ballenger: Hired by the Oil and Gas Association? Or by the company's?

Jerry Coomes: I was hired by Shell Oil, and by Nomeco, and by Amoco.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Jerry Coomes: The Supreme Court had ruled that those DNR permits were not to be honored. It would be illegal to honor them because it would disturb the ecological environment of the Rocky Mountain Elk herd, imported sometime earlier.

Bill Ballenger: So, you have the Supreme Court, the Governor,

Jerry Coomes: And the Free Press.

Bill Ballenger: And the news media Free Press all against you.

Jerry Coomes: And the environmental movement.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Jerry Coomes: All except Tom Washington in MUCC and Tom Anderson, Chairman of the Conservation Committee. So, we start our work in the house convincing Washington and Anderson that there was some long term interest here with respect to funding the land development for park and hunting purposes, which royalties from this drilling would do.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: So, we basically tied that down and then went to the Senate. Senator Faust was a believer that the environment has somewhat changed and agreed to put this into Senator Miller's Conservation Committee to avoid the Environment Committee headed by Senator John Hertel.

Bill Ballenger: Hertel would have been very much against it.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. We would have been history.

Bill Ballenger: So, you got Faust to put it in the right committee.

Jerry Coomes: Well, Faust agreed to put it in the right committee. So, we opened the Senate hearing in 1980. No. Yeah. 1980 with a film that Mort Neff narrated.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: And he ended that film by saying "And if this passes, we might be lucky enough to have the gas to drive up to Pigeon River." It was, I don't know if ever we had opened up a Senate Committee hearing with a movie, but Rick Cole and David Hayhow did that.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: And it worked and we got it out of the Senate and we went over to the House. Then, we said, "Okay, let's sit down with the Environmental Movement, the

Governor's office, and the Oil Industry, and let's do this right. And out of that effort came an agreement to amend the Consent Agreement to allow drilling to be done, but only after extreme precautionary safe guard were put into play to protect the environment when they did drilling. And they broke new ground in doing that in Pigeon River.

Bill Ballenger: You know, it's almost like an early version of the debate today about off shore drilling, or drilling up in ANWR, or whatever.

Jerry Coomes: Yep. Yep.

Bill Ballenger: You're drilling in this fragile area and you have to satisfy Environmentalists.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. Exactly. And you have to work with everybody.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: With both sides. Anyway, that was one of my fun issues. I loved it.

Bill Ballenger: What about the battle of the movie theaters?

Jerry Coomes: That was a great one, too. That involved Jimmy Karoub. They had hired Jimmy. NATO had hired.

Bill Ballenger: Who was they?

Jerry Coomes: NATO, National Association of Theater Owners, to pass a bill called blind bidding. Blind bidding was a practice that the movie producers, the big movie producers, Columbia, United Artists, etc,

Bill Ballenger: It was in place. It was being utilized. The theaters had to accept everything the motion picture company's sent them, even some bad stuff.

Jerry Coomes: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: They didn't have a chance to turn it down.

Jerry Coomes: They didn't have a chance to view the whole product. Now, that sounds unfair until Senator Basil Brown took the floor, Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and pointed out when you invest in an Oil Well, you do it before they drill. When you go to a publisher with an outline for a book and they give you an advance, you do it before the book is written. There are no guarantees, here. Oh, this was a bitter battle fought over several years in the House and Senate. By the way, Basil's defense of the practice of blind bidding was so impressive. We had to go get the tape from the Secretary of the Senate, have it transcribed, send it to the Motion Picture Association in New York City, and they said he developed arguments that we have never heard before.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Jerry Coomes: And we've been doing this in 28 states of the United States.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. He was a brilliant man.

Jerry Coomes: He was so, and off the top of his head.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Very impressive.

Bill Ballenger: But you were battling Jimmy Karoub and his clients, the motion picture theater owners, right? Here in Michigan that wanted to end this practice.

Jerry Coomes: And it was an unfair fight because we had local theaters versus Hollywood. Local theater owners in the State Legislator's hometown.

Jerry Coomes: But we were successful and it hasn't been passed, to my knowledge, in the state of Michigan.

Bill Ballenger: Good. Let me ask you about another famous, colorful character, flashing back a little bit. But, he was still, I think, a judge at the time we're talking about now and that was T. John Lesinski.

Jerry Coomes: Oh, T. John.

Bill Ballenger: T. John Lesinski, who was Lieutenant Governor of Michigan for four years in the early 60's and then became Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals. What can you tell me about T. John Lesinski? Did you know him?

Jerry Coomes: Not well. I just knew that he was one of those larger than life characters. He was actually a movie character, a character of a big city boss politician. First time I encountered him, he is presiding over the Senate. It's 1963, February or March. I come across, asked him to come out, because the Fair School Bus Law was on the calendar and I needed a clarification. So, I said, I didn't call him T. John, "Lieutenant Governor Lesinski, can you tell me about this bill?" Well, Senator Vanderlaan has sponsored.

Bill Ballenger: And he was a Republican from Grand Rapids.

Jerry Coomes: Republican. Yeah. Future Senate Majority Leader from Grand Rapids. So, he thought the bill was going to be a Republican effort and he said to me, "Let me tell you son." He said, "Don't you trust those Republicans. They will blank you every time."

Bill Ballenger: Blank.

Jerry Coomes: I said, "Okay." And then another time I have a slight memory of him, I think, being stopped in the Governor's limo. Romney was out of the State and T. John was Governor and he borrowed the limo to go to Detroit and he stopped at a stop street and a guy came by, a pedestrian, looked in. T. John was smoking a cigar and he said, "Al Capone could have a really big cigar" and took off. But he was a colorful guy but highly respected.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: As the Chief Judge.

Bill Ballenger: He had a very keen mind. Yeah.

Jerry Coomes: Ran a very tight Court of Appeals.

Bill Ballenger: Right. That was in the days before the present constitution when you're a Lieutenant Governor could actually be of a different party than the Governor.

Jerry Coomes: Correct. Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: So, when Romney, a tee-totaling non-smoking Mormon would leave the State, T. John would get in the limo as the acting Governor and go around with his huge stogie. Right?

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. And Romney never stayed very long.

Bill Ballenger: Well, in conclusion, you and Emil build up a very successful firm. Although, I don't think Emil was as enthusiastic about lobbying as you were, and he left after a few years.

Jerry Coomes: He left in 77. After six years.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Jerry Coomes: Got involved in business down there, but he was on my Board. On our board at PAA and extremely valuable. I stayed on until 1993 and in which we sold it to Tom Hoisington and the other partners. And Tom, by the way has just done a marvelous job building the firm.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I can't believe you have been retired for 15 years.

Jerry Coomes: Yeah. I can't either.

Bill Ballenger: I don't think you have been retired. You've been doing some other things. I know you spend a lot of time out of state. But, look, Jerry Coomes, I want to thank you so much for appearing before the Michigan Political History Society.

You are a treasure trove of antidotes and war stories that will stand the test of times.

Jerry Coomes:

And I'd like to thank, in closing, Jim Blanchard for his generosity, and David Murley for his leadership here in the Michigan Political History Society for this project. It's going to be a great boon to present and future Historians. Thank you, Bill, too. Wonderful.