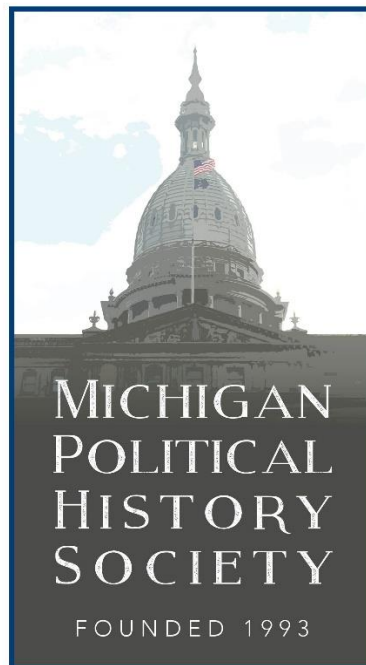


# **Bob Traxler**

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: Our interview today is with Bob Traxler, who has led one of the most interesting and eclectic political careers of anybody in public life in recent Michigan history. A former assistant prosecutor, a former state representative, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, an 18 year Congressman and finally piece de resistance, a Mackinac Island State Park Commissioner. Welcome to Michigan Political History Society.

Bob Traxler: Thank you very much, Bill and I wanna express my gratitude to the Michigan Political History Society, Dave Murley, yourself and all the supporters of this worthwhile cause. I'm very honored, very grateful to be here this morning.

Bill Ballenger: Bob Traxler, it's 1931, Kawkawlin Michigan, a rural Bay County community. What was life like in the 1930's and 1940's as you were growing up?

Bob Traxler: It was a small village on the Kawkawlin River. My father was a rural mailman and a small farmer. I lived, our farm was right on the edge of the village. I was probably about nine years old when my dad sold it, but it gave me an insight into the farm community of Michigan. And the crops and the people who were involved in agriculture. Really the life that I had was that of kind of a Huckleberry Finn. We built rafts for the river, we swam in the river. We skated there and played hockey in the winter. It was an idyllic existence. Bay City was five miles away.

Bob Traxler: Every Saturday, my father would load me and friends into his vehicle and take us to Bay City, the big city, for a movie. And the movie cost 10 cents. I went to a two-room country school until the grade of seven when the district, this little rural district, merged with, made a contract, with the Bay City system, whereby seventh grade, eighth grade students would be bused into Bay City. And so I attended high school.

Bob Traxler: Well, seventh, eighth grade at TL Handy High School, where I graduated the first graduating class from TL Handy High School, which is now a Middle School. A new high school having been built.

Bill Ballenger: And then you went to Bay City junior college, it was called in those days, for what two years?

Bob Traxler: Two years. I transferred to Michigan State, which I graduated in '53.

Bill Ballenger: And then Army duty?

Bob Traxler: And then the Army.

Bill Ballenger: The draft? Still had a draft, right?

Bob Traxler: Still had a draft.

Bill Ballenger: And then after that you got out and you decided to go to law school?

Bob Traxler: I came back to Michigan State and spent a year. I had decided to become a school teacher. And from one of many vocation, I was a graduate of political science and history minor. And while I was working towards a teaching certificate, my natural inclination towards politics ran over me and I filled out an application for law school to Wayne State and Detroit College of Law. And was accepted at both. Decided to go to DCL and did so, to graduate three years later and return to Bay City. There was an opening in the prosecutor's office as an assistant and enjoyed very much two years as assistant prosecutor before being elected to the state legislature.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, you ran for the state House of Representatives. This is the first time you sought political office in 1962 and that was a year that George Romney was challenging the incumbent governor, John Swainson for the governorship and the House and Senate were controlled by the republicans narrowly at that time. What was that first campaign like that you ran against a republican? I think his name was Mike Gilman.

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: How much did you spend? Did you have debates? What was a campaign like then compared to what you see today?

Bob Traxler: Very different. We were all amateurs. The total campaign costs were \$2,000.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Bob Traxler: Mike and I were acquaintances. We became friends during the campaign. He worked at the Bay City Times and they asked him to at least take a leave of absence and even consider whether he should resign from the paper.

Bill Ballenger: Did he continue to write stories on your campaign while he was at the Bay City Times. I don't think so.

Bob Traxler: Actually, they asked him to leave for the campaign and he was not affiliated with the newspaper in any way. And after the campaign, I don't recall if he went back to the paper or whether he came onto to Lansing as part of the George Romney administration. He became a Romney appointee. I believe it was to the workman's comp commission, even though he wasn't an attorney. And he did go to law school while he was in Lansing and he had a very successful career, specializing in workman's comp.

Bill Ballenger: It's 1962, George Romney is challenging incumbent Governor John Swainson. You are running for the state House of Representatives. First political office you

ever sought. What were the differences in campaigning in that year compared to what you see today? What did you go through?

Bob Traxler: Well, those are all very interesting questions. I think, it was totally different from today's atmosphere. And I developed friends on both sides of the aisle. Even though I was in my caucus rather aggressive, impatient and keenly involved with policy issues. And I sort of stirred up the cozy relationship that existed between republicans and democrats. The democrats had accepted a perpetual minority status. I believe that the philosophical differences, between the parties deserved to be thoroughly aired and considered. And I kept making that point with my friends in the democratic party and some of them agreed. Many of them were very comfortable with their committee assignments with people they'd worked with for a number of years, on the other side of the aisle.

Bob Traxler: I felt I was 'twixt and 'tween. I had many republican friends and the speaker at that time was a man by the name of Allison Green from, I think Sanilac County.

Bill Ballenger: Sanilac County, right.

Bob Traxler: And Allison Green was a farmer and a part-time banker. And because of my background and interest in agriculture, we got along very well. And I had many republican friends. The interesting thing was at that time, Baker vs. Carr was decided.

Bill Ballenger: One man, one vote.

Bob Traxler: One man, one vote changed the world politically.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: If, permanently. And lo and behold, as a consequence of that, plus a national political scene.

Bill Ballenger: LBJ killed Barry Goldwater figuratively speaking in the general election. That plus one man, one vote, all of a sudden you got what you wanted, a democratic majority for the first time since 1938. The democrats had majorities in both the House and Senate, overwhelming majorities. You still had the republican governor, because George Romney was reelected. So that changed everything and you were named by your caucus and by the chambers, the number two democrat, weren't you? You were the floor leader.

Bob Traxler: I was the majority floor leader. A tremendous challenge and fraught with some difficulties. And also great opportunities. I viewed these opportunities as a chance to modernize the state legislature. To bring professional types into the legislature and staff people and to insist that the legislative process be one that would be open, would be fair and that would be accessible to ordinary citizens

as well as provide both parties in the legislature with all of the information necessary to make the right decisions on behalf of the public good.

- Bob Traxler: We embarked upon that. Joe Kowalski was the speaker. He had an assistant, whose name was Dick Miller. Dick later went onto Central Michigan University in a capacity there that I don't recall what it was. It was not president, but he served many years there. But Dick was an individual who had a wide range of interests in the legislative area in terms of reform. In terms of change, in terms of staffing and out of those two years, we had a dual agenda. One dealt with legislation. The other one dealt with question of "How do you professionalize a legislature that really was a one horse affair?" And that became, for me, two very interesting challenges.
- Bill Ballenger: The legislature hadn't even had full time secretaries, really. Or if they did, they were in a pool of some sort. It would be one secretary for 20 legislators. They didn't even really have offices. They worked at their desk until not much longer before you got there, right?
- Bob Traxler: I didn't have a telephone number.
- Bill Ballenger: Right, exactly.
- Bob Traxler: I had a mailbox, that when we were in session, I daily went to my own mailbox, opened it up and too often, there'll be nothing in it. I felt very, very discouraged.
- Bill Ballenger: Were you on the judiciary committee from the beginning when you came to the House or not?
- Bob Traxler: No.
- Bill Ballenger: When did you get on the judiciary committee?
- Bob Traxler: After the majority floor leader. And as you recall, the democrats lost control the next election.
- Bill Ballenger: In 1966. Well, before we get into that, let's talk about the 1965, '66 session, which was historic, because for the first time since 1938, the democrats took over control of both houses of legislature by huge majorities and yet they had a republican governor, George Romney. How did you all get along, anyway?
- Bob Traxler: I think both sides were highly responsible to assist them, which they were determined to make work. And so there was an interchange of information constantly. Bob Danhoff was his ...
- Bill Ballenger: Legal counsel.
- Bob Traxler: Yes and we had Glen Allen.

Bill Ballenger:

Glen Allen.

Bob Traxler:

Both of these were quite professional people. And they loved politics. They loved politicians. And we weren't separated by some kind of high philosophical wall. And we could work together, we could exchange ideas, we could find means to accommodate each other's interests and desires. And I consider that to be quite an achievement. Romney himself was a moderate and he was committed to enacting a broad tax reform, including the establishment of the state's first income tax. And the only issue in that regard was not whether or not we'd have an income tax, but how it was to be implemented. What were going to be the advantages, if you want to call it that for the average Michigan citizen, with a new state income tax? How did you deal with income discrepancies when you had prohibition in this constitution as you recall, that prohibited a progressive income tax. Graduated income tax.

Bob Traxler:

So, I think there was a sense on both sides that fairness required some kind of progression that would not violate the constitution. I participated in discussions as majority floor leader, with the governor. Bill Ryan, who was the point person for the democratic caucus on taxes and Jim Karoub who was my seat mate and whom I had treasured his judgment and knowledge. He was just superb at numbers. He was a computer mind in terms of numbers and he later became a very well established lobbyist, of course. But, it became clear to me, that Ryan and the governor, were interesting from the standpoint that the governor had been as you recall, the president of American Motors.

Bob Traxler:

Ryan had been an activist in the UAW and had negotiated contracts with the automotive companies. So, I'm sitting at a table, with the former president of an automobile company, a former union negotiator, who loved detail. And as I sat there, after two days, I decided I really wasn't needed and that the two of them would ultimately come to an understanding and agreement, but to get there was going to take many days.

Bill Ballenger:

Right. Now, before Ryan became speaker in '69, was when he really first became speaker. He was minority leader in '67, '68. In that '65, '66 section, you mentioned Joe Kowalski. Now, Joe Kowalski, what kind of a speaker was he?

Bob Traxler:

I must say that when I got to the congress, which is another story, Tip O'Neill reminded me about Joe. Joe was a great storyteller. He had many friends from his years of service in the legislature on both sides of the aisles. We had a very progressive agenda and it sometimes put Joe in a difficult position because some of the lobbyists viewed him as a dear friend who could moderate perhaps, the democratic caucus. All of us freshmen, many of those 64, if I recall, 63, 64

Bill Ballenger:

It was 63/ 37, with your majority. 65, 66.

Bob Traxler:

Many, many, many of those 63 were new.

Bill Ballenger: Excuse me. 73. 73/37.

Bob Traxler: Okay.

Bill Ballenger: You were one vote short of an absolute two-thirds override majority. 73/ 37.

Bob Traxler: We would often discuss issues that were coming up on the agenda. Coming out of committee. And in fairness, Joe allowed the committee chairman to move legislation. That they felt and the caucus felt was important. And even though, as I said, some of his best friends had some strong opposition in view of the interest that they represented. But Joe, was totally agreeable to the concept of opening the legislature up to a new era and a process. I think he was an appropriate person for that time.

Bill Ballenger: It's early 1967 and the former speaker, Joe Kowalski, your caucus leader dies. Bill Ryan is elected to replace him and you have a 55/55 tied House, but one of your members E.D. O'Brien takes a walk or sits on his hands, or in any event, doesn't vote with you and the republicans organize the House and Bob Waldron, a republican is elected speaker. What about all that? What about E.D. O'Brien?

Bob Traxler: You certainly characterize it properly. E.D. was a legislator in search of recognition. And he's a contrary in many respects. He and Joe Kowalski did not at all get along.

Bill Ballenger: They were both from Detroit.

Bob Traxler: Both from Detroit. Joe represented the UAW Labor movement. E.D. was not at all enthralled with the UAW. They never supported him. He wasn't anti-labor. But he was, excuse me. He was not pro UAW. And he was more sensitive to the teamster movement than anything else. In those days there was a clash between the teamsters and the UAW, both in terms of organization and in terms, organizing workers. And in terms of legislative goals. And E.D. spent two years in the majority as unrecognized. And as a consequence of the opportunity to be a very decisive game player, he did not vote -

Bill Ballenger: At all. He sat on his hands.

Bob Traxler: Said nothing. And just did not vote.

Bill Ballenger: The republicans, they were allowed to organize by a 55, 54 vote. Then they won the special election.

Bob Traxler: There's another interesting point here, that should be said. And it was, as a consequence of that, several things happened to E.D. One, he was appointed chair by Bob Waldron, the then speaker.

Bill Ballenger: The republican speaker.

Bob Traxler: Yes. He was appointed as chairman of a special committee to implement the legislation necessary to implement the new constitution. The '63 constitution that had been approved in '64, I think. I don't recall.

Bill Ballenger: It was approved in the Spring of '63 and it took effect on January 1st '64. And you guys worked on implementing a lot of it in '65, '66 and still in '67, '68, we're gonna get into a few things that you had to clean up as chairman of the judiciary committee, in a minute. But, it's '67, '68, so you're back in the minority. How did your relationship change with your colleagues, both in '65, '66, when you suddenly were in the majority and they had been cast in the minority for the first time since 1938? And then, they get power back in '67, '68, you're back in the minority.

Bill Ballenger: Did your relationships change over that period of time compared to the first two years when you came in, back in '63, '64?

Bob Traxler: In a way, they held me accountable for the loss. I was a majority floor leader, and I was a slave driver and I recall saying to one of them on election night when it became clear that we were going to be the minority. I said, "Rusty. What happened? How come we did so much. We got unemployment, workman's comp, all kinds of things. Education, mental health." I said, "What happened?" And he, we're talking on the telephone, somewhere around 3:30 in the morning. And he said, "Bob, you did too damn much."

Bill Ballenger: Too much progress, huh. All at once.

Bob Traxler: As one of the members who came in, as a consequence of Baker vs. Carr, from the Tawas/Pinconning area. That was his district. He said to me, "I came in on a tidal wave

Bill Ballenger: Was he a republican?

Bob Traxler: Democrat.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, democrat. Okay.

Bob Traxler: Came in on a tidal wave and went out on another tidal wave.

Bill Ballenger: Another tidal wave.

Bob Traxler: On the back side.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah, there was kind of a swing of the pendulum in '66, nationally and in Michigan. Everything went wrong for the democrats in '66 that had gone right for them in '64. But okay. In '68, Nixon is running for president. Humphrey is the



democratic nominee. George Wallace is on the national ballot. And the democrats regain control of the House. You are back in the majority. You had been, as I believe is the case, the minority democratic leader on the judiciary committee, in '67, '68 with Donald Holbrook, a republican as chairman, is that correct?

Bob Traxler: Most of it, but with one exception. My memory is, that I ran for the minority floor leader. Bill Ryan was the speaker and the caucus took place in December and my opponent was George Montgomery, Jr.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: George and I were not the best of friends. George was very angry and perhaps rightfully so, because I had beat his father two years previously for the majority floor position.

Bill Ballenger: There were two Montgomery's in the House. There was George Montgomery, old George? We used to call him George F.

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: His son. They were both there and you beat the father for the majority floor leader and then his son comes back and challenges you for minority floor leader.

Bob Traxler: Correct. And he beat me.

Bill Ballenger: And he beat you.

Bob Traxler: And then that's where I asked several of my friends, "Why?" And they all said, "Well, you did too much."

Bill Ballenger: Too much.

Bob Traxler: They blamed that activist legislature for their defeat. So many of those temporary freshmen, lost the election.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well, then did Bill Ryan say to you or Joe Kowalski, "Well, look Bob, you fought the good fight. You're still a great member. We're gonna put you on the judiciary committee?"

Bob Traxler: I went to Ryan and said, "I want to change committee and I want to be appointed to the judiciary committee." And he did that. Time went by and when we came into the majority, the issue became who was going to be the chairman of the committee? And a dear friend, Dan Cooper was also on the committee.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, sure.

Bob Traxler: Dan, was seriously a candidate for chairman. They put Ryan in a very difficult position and I'm not sure why he decided on me. Maybe on the basis of I had two years, seniority. Maybe, I don't know. Didn't ask him. I just made it clear to him, I wanted to be the chairman. And he acquiesced to that. And I became the chairman. Dan was a little frustrated and I could understand that.

Bill Ballenger: The relationship between the ranking republican and democrat on the judiciary committee. The ranking republican was Don Holbrook who had been the chairman of the committee in '67, '68. And then beginning in '69, you take over as chairman, he's vice chairman, how did you two get along, anyway?

Bob Traxler: Very well. Very well. We both had an interest in judicial matters. We both could see things I think from a similar perspective. We would disagree in the details, as might be expected, but walk away generally quite pleased with whatever the issue was we worked on and the result.

Bob Traxler: Very different, I think. In fact, I think those days in the legislature unfortunately are long gone and the comradeship. The collegiality was there. We could disagree, strongly on the floor or in committee on issues. And at the same time, maintain our friendships which made service in the legislature really enjoyable. After several years in congress, unfortunately that similar model of collegiality begin to erode and go away. And the same thing happened in the state legislature. And I think it's still present today. As committee members, we would, for instance, we spent a week of the House judiciary committee members up at Petoskey as guests of the state bar.

Bill Ballenger: Kind of a retreat, almost.

Bob Traxler: It was. Exactly. House and Senate judiciary members working on a revised criminal code, which later failed in the Senate, but passed the House. Those are illustrations. We'd enjoy our dinners together, here. Lunches. Though, I don't know that's possible, today. I hope it is, but I don't believe so.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you this. Talking about working together and working with the bar, there was a big effort around that time to get the legal community of Michigan to clean up it's act. I think you were instrumental in the creation of the judicial tenure commission. Were you not?

Bob Traxler: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: How did that all evolve? What happened?

Bob Traxler: The constitution provided that judges could be removed by two-thirds vote of the state legislature. That's an impossible goal. And it came to my attention, in the course of my first two years in the state House, that we had a situation in Allison Green's district involving a probate judge. It was hard, very difficult to resolve the portly issue of whether the judge should be impeached or not.

Bob Traxler: And it struck me that the legislature was an imperfect venue for making these decisions, although that had been the history in Michigan since the founding of the state. So when I became chairman of the committee, there were several things that I thought were important. And first one was have a judicial tenure commission that could in an objective fashion, review the conduct of judges and, make recommendations to the Supreme Court concerning proper discipline. And that came about, we got a constitutional amendment, in fact, George Montgomery sponsored the amendment, which pleased me to no end.

Bill Ballenger: George Jr.?

Bob Traxler: George Jr.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: There was a peace offering. And I think it, ultimately it came out quite well and we're good friends now. The other

Bill Ballenger: So that had to go on the ballot?

Bob Traxler: Yes, it did.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. And so it had to be approved by a vote of the people?

Bob Traxler: Yes. It had to clear, both house and legislature by a two thirds vote. And it did. I think the other important reform in the judiciary, was to restore the constitutions 1908 language relative to the appointment by the governor to fill judicial vacancies.

Bill Ballenger: Because that had been taken out by the new constitution in '61, '62, which was a Republican dominated convention, with a democratic governor, and maybe they were worried that a Soapy Williams or John Swainson would pack the courts with their appointees. So they said, we're not going to let him appoint anything.

Bob Traxler: And here's George Romney, governor.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: Without the ability to fill judicial vacancies.

Bill Ballenger: All of a sudden they got one of their own in office and he's helpless because of what they did. Right?

Bob Traxler: And I discussed this with Holbrook and I said Don, the system would benefit immensely in my judgment from the governor filling vacancies, deaths,

resignations, if he had the power, I think that would benefit the people that stayed at worked extremely well in prior decades.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Because otherwise the vacancy would just stay that way until the next election?

Bob Traxler: Correct.

Bill Ballenger: Whereas this way the governor could make the appointment until the next election. At which point the appointee would have to stand for election, right?

Bob Traxler: Correct. Yes.

Bill Ballenger: What about advice and consent of the Senate? Like the US Senate has at the federal level, was there any discussion of that?

Bob Traxler: Well, thank heavens no. What we did, I talked again in conference with John, we thought that senatorial involvement on advice and consent would dilute the process and it would put the governor in a difficult position from the standpoint of having to bargain with the Senate over appointees. And we felt that that would not enhance the judiciary, which was our intent in returning to gubernatorial appointments. I think we felt that if we established a judicial commission to review the judicial article, that it would surely come to the same conclusions, especially if we could influence who the appointees were going to be.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: So we got both houses of legislature approved the resolution appropriating \$50,000 to a commission to review the judicial article in its entirety.

Bob Traxler: They were appointed. The executive director was a fellow by the name of Bill Boos, who had been a legislator, had been on the judiciary committee. He was a democrat. I think maybe Tom Downs was on that commission, maybe, very prominent Republican lawyer, Larry Lindemer.

Bill Ballenger: Larry Lindemer, former republican state chairman.

Bob Traxler: Yes. And a wonderful gentleman in a very good friend. He and Tom Downs were by the way, were election experts and represented their respective candidates right across Michigan and various recounts.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And, I had the pleasure of chairing a recount in the house in which they both participated. And by the way, the difference going into the election was six votes between the Republican and the Democrat. This was in the Charlotte

district. And for the first time in modern memory or anybody's memory the Democrat was elected there by six votes.

Bill Ballenger: That was Claude Burton and Eaton County farmer. The Squire of Squash Hill.

Bob Traxler: Yes, indeed.

Bill Ballenger: Yes. Okay.

Bob Traxler: Wonderful, wonderful old Farmer.

Bill Ballenger: Right exactly.

Bob Traxler: Who wasn't sure why he was here. And provided a lot of humor to both sides of the aisle. He lost by six votes in the recount.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. And Carol Newton, who was the incumbent Republican.

Bob Traxler: And a very fine legislator by the way.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Then they had the recount.

Bob Traxler: Carol won by six. We had the recount, I chaired the elections, that recount, and Claude Burton was the recount winner by six votes.

Bill Ballenger: By six votes. So it was a swing of 12 votes.

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Bob Traxler: We came back with our report, Carl Newton got up, thanked the recount committee and the two council and the director of elections for the fairness. And he said, there's no question in my mind that I lost this election.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Bob Traxler: What an outstanding gentleman he was.

Bill Ballenger: I was going to say, you don't hear that anymore.

Bob Traxler: No.

Bill Ballenger: Even when they know they've lost in a recount, nobody gets up in admits it.

Bob Traxler: But there was a standard of conduct that he had developed over the years and there was a certain sense of honor and integrity. And the most important thing was not winning, but how you conducted yourself.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And so it was still that gentlemanly approach.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Let me ask you one other question. Did the state bar pushed to give themselves or the legal community the power to submit a list of candidates to a governor, from which he was supposed to pick people to appoint, to fill vacancies as judges? Was there an attempt to do that, rather than give him a totally free hand? Because that's what they have in a lot of other states.

Bob Traxler: That's true. And that was a strongly supported by the American Judiciary Committee, a jurisprudence coming.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And it was promoted nationwide. You know, it didn't fly. I don't know that anyone even proposed it.

Bill Ballenger: It wasn't even a big issue.

Bob Traxler: No, it wasn't.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: The whole focus was getting this back to the governor.

Bill Ballenger: Right. You also had to create, wasn't it a 150 new district court judge ships in 1968? So, I mean, that was a huge undertaking.

Bob Traxler: Yes, yes. Now Holbrook insisted in the proposed amendment that it preclude the governor from filling newly created judge ships. He worried, and by way of hindsight, I think it was, I wasn't at first enthused about that. I wanted to give the governor as much authority in this area, even if it was Romney appointing 150 judges. Don's point was, that's too much power for any one governor, and we ought not to do that. And so we included at his request and in persuasive reasoning and also to get two thirds vote, we included language that precluded the governor from filling newly created vacancies and the governor, under the 1908 language, the governor could do that.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: So that's how all district judges had to stand for election.

Bill Ballenger: Had to stand for election. Also that phased out the old justice of the peace didn't it?

Bob Traxler: It did indeed.

Bill Ballenger: It brought them in. I mean, if they were lawyers and they wanted to be district judges, they had to run for office, right?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: To be district judges.

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Here's another issue that is with us still today, and that is compensation for legislators.

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: The whole issue of legislative compensation found politicians between a rock and a hard place. They wanted to hike their salaries, but they didn't want criticism from the news media and from the public if they did. And so you put a proposal on the ballot in 1968 to change that, the state officer's compensation commission. Tell us about all that.

Bob Traxler: Well, I was in charge on the Democrat side of the aisle, the good and welfare program, and it was my responsibility to look after as part of the quote unquote modern legislature, at what paid level should be established for the legislature. And, when I was first elected, I think our pay was \$5,000 plus \$2,500, expenses for total 7,500. My memory is you did not have to file an accounting of the \$2,500, which seems kind of strange, but \$7,500, even in 1963, was not very much money. And so one of my objectives was to increase legislative compensation, and one of the things that happened was we had a legislative pay raise and we increased it by \$5,000 in the house, sent it over to the Senate. And they promptly pigeonholed it because the governor said that was too much, even though they promised me they take it up and pass it.

Bob Traxler: And, we began at that point to negotiate with Bob Danhoff on a weekly basis. What the would the governor do, well, Danhoff made it clear that if the legislature would give careful thought to some of his legislative proposals that, that there could be an accommodation on pay, which he would support. And, so we met first, this was in the spring, and we met for several weeks on a weekly basis, over in the old Roosevelt hotel. And, we came to an accommodation, and the governor would support \$2,500. We made certain accommodations in terms of some legislation, and I felt that that gave an unfair advantage to the governor in terms of legislation and that kind of a hammer was absolutely inamicable to the legislation being considered in a normal process.

Bob Traxler: And I thought we must find a way around this issue. And also the newspapers, all the media instantly pounced on the legislature as quote, raising their own salaries, fixing their own salaries, well there was no other way to do it. And, I checked on the history of legislative pay raises and every one of them was strongly opposed by the media. So a little bit of time went by and in giving it consideration, how do we fix this?

Bob Traxler: It became clear to me, you need a commission. Get some people who could hold hearings, listened to every aspect of this view what the legislature did, take it into consideration. The relationship what other public servants got, whether it was a school superintendent, school principal, whether it was a judge, and do the right thing in terms of what a legislator actually was entitled to without regard to politics. Who was in control of the legislature, who was the governor who would gain advantage by being opposed to pay raises, blah, blah.

Bob Traxler: So we came up with this, Roy Spencer, a Republican.

Bill Ballenger: Republican legislature, poultry farmer from the thumb again, like Allison Green.

Bob Traxler: Yeah he was from Lapeer.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And he always looked after agriculture. We got along famously well, he was also an expert on taxation and he later was appointed to the state tax commission.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And I've lost track of him since then, but in any event, in discussions with Roy and Roy always had supported a pay raise for the legislature. He was for it. And I said, well, would you be willing to consider sponsoring this resolution? He said, absolutely. So we went over it carefully. He had some ideas, we incorporated that into it. And that became a constitutional proposal and put on the ballot. The newspapers were on strike and it came up in the primary election.

Bill Ballenger: Right in August of 1968.

Bob Traxler: It passed.

Bill Ballenger: And it passed. But even the newspapers that weren't on strikeouts state they supported it. They basically said they thought, this sounds like a very reasonable idea.

Bob Traxler: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: The idea that the newspapers would have all opposed it, you know, if they hadn't all, or the major ones in Detroit been on strike. I don't think that's true. I



think there's a very, you think that they might've smelled a rat or something and thought this is a way to circumvent

Bob Traxler: Surreptitiously.

Bill Ballenger: Surreptitiously? Well, I don't know. Whatever. But anyway, it passed. So that's how it got on. How do you think it's worked over time?

Bob Traxler: Poorly.

Bill Ballenger: Why has it worked poorly though?

Bob Traxler: Because the legislature wouldn't let the process work and they were the first ones to bad mouth it. And, I mean for political gain, you know, if anybody who opposed to pay raise was a hero.

Bill Ballenger: Right. So the legislature would say, well, our hands are tied. We can't do anything about it. It shouldn't exist this way, but we can't do anything. Our salaries are being hiked and we can't stop the salaries from being hiked and don't hold us responsible.

Bob Traxler: Right. Correct.

Bill Ballenger: Somebody back decades ago did this.

Bob Traxler: Yes, I take credit for that.

Bill Ballenger: Well they did do one adjustment to it. Now they have to have an affirmative vote on whatever the recommendations are. That's the only thing that's been done. And that was just done in the last decade or so, as a public reaction. Let me ask you one other thing, part time versus full time legislature, you mentioned that one of the things that you pushed for in '65, '66 was to modernize the legislative branch of government compared to the executive and to beef up staff. One of the things that the majority Democrats did was say, look, we think really we deserve to be in session, maybe a full year, if we have to be.

Bill Ballenger: Before that, I mean, you could have been in session a full year, but no legislature in the previous 130 had ever done that. They all disbanded in the spring. They only got paid \$5,000, and they'd go back to plant seed, or you know, have their regular jobs. You guys started to professionalize the legislature and you also didn't want the governor to be able to call you into special session at his beck and call on whatever issue he wanted to call you into session on. And so you basically started to go full time. And we have had a full time legislature ever since in some way, shape or form. Now, of course, there are two ballot proposal initiative petition drives to try and convert us back by Constitutional

Fiat or by statute to a part time legislature, making the legislature stop being full time. How do you look at this whole issue?

Bob Traxler: I think that the legislature of a '65, '66 didn't consciously say we're going to be here full time, most of the year. What happened was we had an immense agenda. I can recall walking out of the Capitol on the 4th of July morning watching the sun come up thinking, gee, I've got to get back home. Uh, we're having a family picnic, starting at eleven o'clock. And, I can't miss that and my children. And so it wasn't, it wasn't so much that we sat both sides of the aisle and said, we're going to work this thing into a full time job. It was a full time job given the backup that was perceived in the legislature to, enacting what was considered to be a legislation that had been installed, never considered, for several decades.

Bill Ballenger: And also you had to reorganize all of state government as a result of the enactment of the new constitution. So you had an enormous responsibility thrust on you that you hadn't even asked for.

Bob Traxler: No. And frankly when I was elected, I wasn't aware of, had no idea of the dimensions of a new constitution in terms of authorizing legislation.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: 20 agencies of government whittled down a mammoth structure into 20 compartments, an illustration.

Bill Ballenger: Right, absolutely.

Bob Traxler: E.D. O'Brien did a superb job in that regard. Really.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. Let's talk about another controversial issue of the early 1970's, no fault divorce. You were chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. When that legislation went through, what happened? How controversial was it?

Bob Traxler: Jason Honeyman was the chairman of it for many, many years. It was established by statute I believe. And it, law revision commission.

Bill Ballenger: Law revision commission, right.

Bob Traxler: And Jason Honeyman was the chairman.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: They sent all kinds of legislation, coming out of the uniform state law commissioners, some of it was necessary business legislation, some of it dealt with simply judicial questions. The issue of no fault divorce came to the legislature from them. And Jason had discussed it when they said, what do you

think if we were to recommend to the legislature, to statute creating a no fault divorce? And I thought that divorce was a fact of life in America, that you can't stick your head in the sand and say, we'll make it go away.

Bob Traxler: And that the fault divorce where the accusations, created amenity that carried over into custody of children, care for children, split families permanently in terms of the children following divorce created situations that were just unbeatable and unbearable. And even the best of judges could not reconcile the couples sometimes filing a divorce in relationship to their relationship with children because of the animosity that existed between the two parties. So there were all kinds of arguments for it.

Bob Traxler: My more conservative friends would say, oh, you made divorce easy, that psychologists and sociologists would say, it's not made easy. No divorce is easy. And you recognize the fact of life that sometimes in people's lives, it's time to part rather than live together in a marital relationship that's nonexistent. And the fault system worked to the benefit of attorneys, sometimes to the parties themselves, too often, in fact. So we caused that to be introduced. We brought it out on the floor. It met with, I think approval. We didn't have an immense backlash.

Bill Ballenger: And there wasn't a strong partisan division?

Bob Traxler: No.

Bill Ballenger: In the House and Senate on it when it finally passed. Got a lot of republican votes as well?

Bob Traxler: That's correct.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. Okay. Let's move to one of the most exciting aspects of your tenure as chairman of the Judiciary Committee. And that is the nickname and the accomplishments that go with being Bingo Bob. Bingo Bob, tell us all about that and the lottery and everything that happened. This is the early 1970's?

Bob Traxler: Well, before I came to the legislature, where there always an effort on behalf of many members of the house, especially Democrats, that bingo would be authorized, legalized, and it couldn't be done by statute because the constitution prohibited, my memory is games of chance is, is the term used. And, I ran on a pro bingo platform and felt very strongly committed to fulfilling that plank. And there was a lot of sentiment in the house towards getting that done and with the governor, who did not oppose it. And with a legislature that became more sympathetic.

Bill Ballenger: This is Milliken?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah okay.

Bob Traxler: And became more sympathetic, also in connection with that was these, if there was no prohibition against games of chance, we could establish a state lottery and which had great financial appeal and it would produce a considerable amount of money for the benefit of the state.

Bill Ballenger: Because schools were having a lot of trouble financing their operations, at this time, right?

Bob Traxler: Even in those days.

Bill Ballenger: Even in those days.

Bob Traxler: With the newly created income tax a few years before and blah, blah. So the issue went forward. We got the constitutional amendment through the house and the Senate it was going to go on the ballot. And at the same time we put forward a legislation that would create a state lottery. Now obviously it couldn't become law because there was a constitutional prohibition against it, but nothing precluded the legislature from considering it in anticipation, shall we say. So we invited from the state of New York, which had recently adopted a state lottery, their executive director to visit us and he came to Lansing and spoke to the judiciary committee about how a system should be created to handle the lottery. And one of his key points was do have one person accountable and responsible don't establish a commission to govern the lottery, which I'm not sure I think New York has. I think Massachusetts has.

Bob Traxler: And we followed that advice.

Bill Ballenger: You wanted a single commissioner?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: And you fought for that?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: And appointed by the governor, and we thought that would be an accountable system. And so that was opposed by my Democrat colleagues who wanted a commission so they could have a Democrat on the commission, not unlike the liquor control commission. That was their model. I felt that with the huge amounts of money going to be involved here and knowing that people always seek money wherever it is. The ideal approach would be to have a single individual whom you could ask the question, how did this happen? Why did this happen? How did you allow it to happen? And we were with a coalition of some

Democrats and most Republicans, we were able to keep the legislation pure, straight forward and moved it over to the Senate.

Bob Traxler: Now subsequently with the adoption of the, and they took it up and considered it, and we put it in my memory as we had it in conference. The constitutional amendment was adopted in August. And we came back, and I don't recall precisely.

Bill Ballenger: 1972.

Bob Traxler: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Bob Traxler: We came back promptly and passed the legislation and the first lottery drawing took place that fall in Bay City.

Bill Ballenger: Just by coincidence?

Bob Traxler: I told the commissioner, if you do nothing for me, I don't mind asking you to, but if you were to hold the first drawing in Bay City, I'd be grateful.

Bill Ballenger: We'd really appreciate it. So tell me what it meant to be Bingo Bob?

Bob Traxler: Well, I didn't seek the title but it's a recognition I suspect started in my district. And, for my constituents of badge of honor. Some of my well-educated friends and colleagues saw it as kind of a stigma. The importance to nonprofit organizations, veteran's organizations, churches, even state or political parties, of Bingo cannot be underestimated. And, a year or two after its passage, a friend of mine, a faithful churchgoer commented to me that I had built more churches than the Pope.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. It's 1973 and all of a sudden there's a vacancy in the congressional district in which Bay City is located. What happened?

Bob Traxler: Here's the story.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: I'm sitting in a saloon with some my newspaper friends on a Friday, late afternoon, which was typical. We'd solve all the world's problems, Republicans, Democrats and assorted hanger-on-ers. There would be about 10 or 12 of us. One of my old friends from the local newspaper came in and he said, "You can't believe what just came across on the ticker." This is before computers. We were all immediately interested, maybe atomic bomb somewhere. He said, Jim Harvey is announcing that he's accepting the appointment to the Federal Court by Dick Nixon and he will be resigning as a congressman.

Bob Traxler: Well that created an immediate stir among our group and one of the people present said, "You gotta run." I said, "I really am very happy where I am." "Oh, this is a great opportunity. You have to do this." A little bit later, one of my mentors said, "You know, this is not something that you can take days to think about. This is an opportunity and you must accept this responsibility and make an announcement. So what's your answer, yes or no?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Good. We're leaving here. We're putting together a statement. You're calling the television stations and we're gonna try and make the 6:00 news. You'll announce Harvey's impending resignation." I said, "That's incredible. What a scoop that is. We'll do it." And we did. We called the news station, we called channel five and said, "Here's a story." They said, "Are you sure on this?"

Bill Ballenger: In other words, you were breaking the story of Harvey leaving to become a judge. They hadn't even done it yet.

Bob Traxler: No.

Bill Ballenger: Simultaneously you're announcing.

Bob Traxler: The Republican Party felt that he had informed me to make the announcement. He was moderate but he wasn't that moderate.

Bill Ballenger: No. Yeah, yeah.

Bob Traxler: Furthermore, his former administrative assistant who worked and switched over to the White House.

Bill Ballenger: Jim Sparling.

Bob Traxler: Harvey fully expected him to announce and wanted him to. In any event, we did that and the people throughout the whole area on the 6:00, 11:00 news found out their congressman was going to be resigning to accept a judgeship.

Bill Ballenger: Wow. Tell us about the campaign.

Bob Traxler: I wouldn't want to do it again. It was totally a committed campaign physically, mentally. It started Labor Day of 1973 in Lapeer County.

Bill Ballenger: This is a special election.

Bob Traxler: Special election.

Bill Ballenger: In the thumb.

Bob Traxler: Right. That was the district, Bay, parts of Saginaw, Lapeer, thumb counties, and Arenac County. We kicked it off. I hired a full-time campaign manager who came on board late August and instantly began to organize.

Bill Ballenger: This was thought to be a pretty solidly Republican district. Maybe not solidly, but better than marginally.

Bob Traxler: Absolutely.

Bill Ballenger: Pretty solidly. It had Republican representation all these years. So you were on a partisan basis, the underdog in the race.

Bob Traxler: It's a long shot.

Bill Ballenger: Sparling, even though he was not an elected official and a lot of people didn't know who he was, had been down in Washington, he was really the favorite in the sense that he represented the Republicans.

Bob Traxler: Yes. He had a strong base in Saginaw. I mean he was a local person. He had worked for the Saginaw News as a sports writer. He was personable, knowledgeable, had worked for the congressman, had gone down to the White House as a legislative representative to the congress. He was a formidable opponent.

Bill Ballenger: Didn't President Richard Nixon himself come into the district to campaign for the Republican nominee?

Bob Traxler: My opponent wanted to make sort of me the issue. How come you're not in Lansing taking care of business? I was full-time campaigning. Late in the campaign, late winter, early spring and the election was April, I'm gonna say 17th, it could have been the 16th, maybe even the 15th, I'm trying to forget it, I think. Late in the campaign, Nixon announced that he was coming to the district at the request of the Republican candidate. Now, at that point in time, you recall Watergate was a major, major issue for Republicans. Nixon's popularity and approval ratings dropped dramatically.

Bob Traxler: We tied Jim to Nixon's coattails. While he didn't say that he did not invite Nixon, he didn't want to precisely say that he had invited him, and we made much ado about Nixon history and that Sparling was one of his hirelings and would do his will in Congress.

Bill Ballenger: You were basically turning this election into a referendum on Nixon.

Bob Traxler: Exactly.

Bill Ballenger: And Jim Sparling was just a surrogate for Nixon is what you were saying.

Bob Traxler: Precisely. Just by way of history, my pollster was a man by the name of Peter Hart.

Bill Ballenger: Sure.

Bob Traxler: Well-known pollster now.

Bill Ballenger: Sure.

Bob Traxler: The media consultant, the guru, was a fellow by the name of Squires.

Bill Ballenger: Bob Squires.

Bob Traxler: Bob Squires, who is now deceased.

Bill Ballenger: Right. He was a very colorful guy.

Bob Traxler: Oh.

Bill Ballenger: He was a real character.

Bob Traxler: I would say five out of seven of his ideas were excellent. The other two you had to sort of draw a line through. I insisted on vetting every one of his ideas. It was a fascinating experience. We worked so hard. The only time I had off was Sunday mornings and we would work 12 to 14 hours a day.

Bill Ballenger: It was like a six-month campaign almost from the time the announcement you made in the fall until the election.

Bob Traxler: It was. I never understood why the process of his being confirmed by the Senate or even his name being submitted took so long.

Bill Ballenger: Took so long.

Bob Traxler: Yeah. It was extremely unusual.

Bill Ballenger: It dragged everything out. Okay, so you won by about what?

Bob Traxler: I think it was 1.5%.

Bill Ballenger: One and a half percent. Wow. So you get in, you're a congressman. You go to Washington. What did you find?

Bob Traxler: A different environment. A bigger ball game, more complex, perhaps more serious issues. A Congress that was preoccupied with the question of to impeach or not to impeach. Judiciary hearings were going forward. The then Speaker, Carl Albert, asked if I wanted to go on the judiciary committee. I said no and thank you. I want a committee that's relevant to my district, but with not too much visibility or work at this point because I have to go home and campaign. The election was of course following immediately in November.

Bill Ballenger: Right.



Bob Traxler: I had from mid-April until the first Tuesday in November to firmly establish myself. We took advantage of the timeframe, mailed out hundreds of thousands of pieces of mail wherever two or three gathered together. In other words, the first campaign for the special election never ended and it went right on through until election day in November.

Bill Ballenger: Did Sparling run again?

Bob Traxler: He did run again and was severely defeated.

Bill Ballenger: Right, because in November it was a huge Democratic sweep nationally and so you won by a very substantial margin.

Bob Traxler: I had firmly established myself in the district. My rural roots did not fail me. I had a wonderful relationship with the farmers.

Bill Ballenger: The days as Huck Finn paid off.

Bob Traxler: Absolutely.

Bill Ballenger: There you go. Okay, so it's November 1974, you're elected to your first full term in the Congress. You go on to serve two years under Jerry Ford, four years under Jimmy Carter, eight years under Ronald Reagan, four years under George H.W. Bush. That entire tenure, 18 years, what do you look back on as your signal accomplishments during that time?

Bob Traxler: Good question. I was not on a legislative committee. By that, I was not on a committee that wrote bills and engaged in lots of debate, both within the committee and on the floor relative to these very substantive issues confronting the nation over those years. I was on the appropriation committee.

Bill Ballenger: You were a cardinal.

Bob Traxler: Eventually.

Bill Ballenger: Tell people what a cardinal is.

Bob Traxler: Appropriation committee in the House, had 13 subcommittees and I served on three of those. The cardinals were the chairmen of the subcommittees. My last four years in the Congress, I was chairman of the subcommittee.

Bill Ballenger: That was HUD, right?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Housing and Urban Development.

Bob Traxler: I had two cabinet agencies, HUD and Veterans Administration. The rest of the committees of our jurisdiction consisted of independent agencies like NASA, National Science Foundation, EPA. Very interesting, and then a bunch of smaller ones like we'd spend no more than two or three hours reviewing their budget.

Bill Ballenger: Were you on agriculture subcommittee?

Bob Traxler: Yes I was. I had two major committees, HUD, VA, and Agriculture, and Agriculture fit in very well with my rural constituency. HUD, VA fit in very well with the urban areas, Saginaw, Bay City, and as a cardinal, I had command of not just me, but working with my committee members and with my counterpart on the Senate. We had immense amounts of money that we were responsible for.

Bill Ballenger: So what were you able to do for your congressional district by dint of being a cardinal?

Bob Traxler: Well, I took a leaf out of the Southerner's book. The Southerners believe that their purpose in Washington was to fill their carpetbag with as much gold for their districts as they could possibly carry. I felt that coming from a state that was always at a disadvantage in the apportionment of federal funds, that it was my responsibility as a Michigan member of the appropriations committee to do whatever I could to right what I perceived to be a great injustice.

Bob Traxler: The committees presented themselves, because I was on them, gave me an opportunity to direct monies back to the state of Michigan and my district. There were some interesting projects, good things happened.

Bill Ballenger: What specifically?

Bob Traxler: Well, the food toxicology laboratory building at MSU, which incidentally was built in my term at MSU, so I had spent 10 years in the Congress working towards that appropriation, got it done, left the Congress, got elected to the MSU board of trustees and watched the design and the construction of the building.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Bob Traxler: The president and the provost wanted to name the building after me when we went around on that point and I told them, no, you don't. I didn't do this to have building named after me. I have no interest in that. At the same time, they wanted to name a building after the governor, John Engler. They said the governor has some reservations about this as well. This was I think the livestock exhibition building, very beautiful facility.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: They said, "Look. You're interested in history. What happened here is history. Can we put a plaque up inside the building? We'd like to do the same thing for the governor there."

Bill Ballenger: Sure.

Bob Traxler: I said, "Well, I think it's appropriate. He's done a wonderful, a lot of things on behalf of the university and he deserves recognition and I think that's appropriate." "What about you? We can't do it for him unless we do it for you." I said, "Okay, you can do it. Don't make a big deal about this." They did and the plaque is in the building, in the lobby.

Bill Ballenger: What about other accomplishments by you as an appropriations committee member for your district up in Bay County?

Bob Traxler: Okay. One other project that wasn't in my district is the new VA hospital in the city of Detroit.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: That was 300 and some million dollars at that time. It took me another 10 years to get that done.

Bill Ballenger: So you were doing things not just for your district, but for the state of Michigan, wherever it was located.

Bob Traxler: That's correct.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah.

Bob Traxler: Veteran's cemetery in Battle Creek. I told the then congressman, I said, "This is yours, you take the credit for that." The hospital in Detroit. The veterans organizations worked hard for that from this state, and incidentally it got held up for a year by two good friends of mine, John Dingell, Bill Ford. They both complained to me that this new hospital was gonna take some of their constituents, move them from Allen Park into the city of Detroit, maybe even some of them would lose their jobs. I told them not so. Yes, they will have to commute, but they're not gonna lose their job. They will be hired at the new facility. Well, no, no. You can't do that, Traxler, we don't want this.

Bob Traxler: I said, "Think about it, now. Every veterans organization has worked for this for years. Under the administration rules, it has to be near a teaching hospital, Wayne State. We can't do it at Allen Park." Finally they said, "Okay, just let it ride for a year." Well, you're slowing the program down and Dingell said, "Unless you do it that way, I'm gonna complain to the legislative chairman that you haven't followed the house rules on this one." I said, "Okay, John."

Bill Ballenger: Let me change it slightly, how did you get along with all the Republicans in the Congress? Think about the relationship between members of the parties in Congress in those days, from 1974 to 1992, compared to relationships let's say between Republicans and Democrats in the Michigan legislature back in the '60's?

Bob Traxler: I'm gonna answer. That's an important question. One of the things I do, just in concluding on the VA hospital issue. There's an interesting twist here.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: After the hospital is built, within a matter of a year or two, Congress passed a resolution naming it the John Dingell VA Medical Facility. I was thrilled with that.

Bill Ballenger: That's a classic.

Bob Traxler: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: That's great.

Bob Traxler: Incidentally, also out of the EPA budget we put in many, many millions of dollars to Wayne County to take care of the River Rouge issues, to build holding tanks and so forth. I gave both Dingell and Ford the information so they could claim credit. I didn't have any voters in that area and it was the right thing to do.

Bob Traxler: Just the relationship between the Republicans and Democrats.

Bob Traxler: Oh yeah. When I first got to the Congress, especially on the appropriations committee, and even in the years later, there was a particularly close, personal relationship. It was one of those things where you could vote yes or you could vote no but at the end of the day, like when I was in the state legislature, you still could be friends, still could be friends, which didn't mean every Democrat had many Republican friends. It didn't mean every Republican had many Democrat friends. It meant that there was still a sense of collegiality and decency and courtesies. In the Congress, committees would sometimes take domestic trips, sometimes foreign trips and wives would accompany them on those situations. You became well acquainted with each other. You knew about their families, you knew about their spouses. It was an honorable place.

Bob Traxler: Unfortunately, Bill, as time went by and win at any cost became the norm, there developed a schism in the relationship to having friends in the opposite party. That saddened me greatly. On the subcommittee that I chaired, a Republican asked me to examine a situation in his district and see if we couldn't provide some aid and assistance for a project there. I told him I'd certainly look at that and I did. We're going to be having a meeting in a few days to take the bill up and I wanted him to know that the problem that he had was taken care of.

Bob Traxler: He was coming off the elevator, we were having a vote, he was coming off, I was going on and I said, "Jerry, Jerry, just a minute. I gotta talk to you." He said, "No, no. Not now. I'll call you," and he brushed right past me. He called me and he said, "I couldn't talk to you because I'm a candidate in my Caucus for office."

Bill Ballenger: Party leadership position?

Bob Traxler: It was. I think it was policy, to head up the policy committee. He said, "My opponent, if he saw me talking to you would use that against me." It was Newt Gingrich. Gingrich beat him by one vote.

Bill Ballenger: Bob Madigan, wasn't it? Madigan, the congressman from Illinois.

Bob Traxler: This was Jerry Lewis.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, it was Jerry Lewis.

Bob Traxler: From San Diego.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, okay.

Bob Traxler: Yeah, he won the sewage treatment plant.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, I'll be darned. That's a heck of a story. Well, look. You had a great career in Congress, 18 years, you come up on reapportionment in 1992. You're only about 60 years old and you decide, "I'm not gonna run again." Why?

Bob Traxler: That's a very difficult question and it's a very personal one and it had to do with personal considerations. I had spent my virtual entire life, adult life, in politics, and I loved it. I really believed in public service. My father had always told me as a mailman that public service was a very honorable career and below only the clergy in his hierarchy of values and vocations. I had got to a point where I began to question who I was and what life was all about and how important in my life was not having my hand out all the time to shake a hand, not having to attend meetings.

Bill Ballenger: Raise money?

Bob Traxler: Raise money, especially in those later years, money became very important.

Bill Ballenger: In contrast to 1962 and your \$2,000 campaign?

Bob Traxler: Exactly. It was very different. I wanted to explore the self. I don't want to sound like a 1968 hippie.

Bill Ballenger: Like you're going existential on us or something?

Bob Traxler: Yeah, yeah.

Bill Ballenger: But you just decided there might be other things in life.

Bob Traxler: Precisely. I wanted to be able to go to the supermarket and nobody would know me. That sounds like a strange goal.

Bill Ballenger: It sounds normal.

Bob Traxler: Precisely. I wanted to find out what it was to be normal. I wanted to put my own gas in my car. I wanted to take my shirts to the laundry. I never had time for that in the Congress. Some staff person would say, "You got any shirts at the laundry?" "Yeah." "I'll pick them up." They were going during their lunch hour or whatever.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And they do this. I would say, "I gotta get to the airport this afternoon. I don't know if I've got enough gas. Take care of it. Give them 20 bucks or whatever."

Bill Ballenger: So once you left, you had no regrets?

Bob Traxler: None.

Bill Ballenger: None. Now it was 1992, you decided not to run again for Congress but you're still a politician so you run for the MSU board of trustees. You're elected. What did you find when you got to be a member of that board? What was your reaction?

Bob Traxler: First of all, I understood what trusteeship was and what it meant. I also understood the constitution and the duties and responsibilities placed upon boards, governing boards of universities and colleges, public that is. My first acquaintanceship came right after I was sworn in with the university and one of the administrators said, "You need to be scheduled for a photograph for our archives and to hang in the hallway with the other trustees and the president. I scheduled you for Saturday." I said, "Gee, I can't do that. I can't do Saturday." The answer was, "Well, that's when the photographer is available." It came to me that this was indeed a different world and that I was working for them. The administrators, them, and they weren't working for me.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. They weren't working for you.

Bob Traxler: I was supposed to do what I was told, and that's the way higher education is, with some exceptions. I'm talking about public now. I have no comment on private. I think it's run quite differently. I think U of M is run differently as well. I instantly began to question why am I here and what do I do here? I had seven colleagues and we're right in the middle of a presidential search. This was a

whole new experience for me, but very exciting and I saw great opportunities for reform. Frankly, a reform of the system.

Bill Ballenger:

Sure.

Bob Traxler:

Like, let's have a conflict of interest resolution. I wanted that for the legislature. I still do. If I could take the time and command the resources, I'd seek a Constitutional amendment providing for a conflict of interest. That's desperately needed in this state. Not that I'm saying anyone is a crook, I'm simply saying I feel vastly more comfortable when I know a process is in place that assures accountability on financial matters for elected officials, and some appointed as well.

Bill Ballenger:

You're in the middle of a presidential search. How did Peter McPherson come to be named president of Michigan State University?

Bob Traxler:

You want the popular version or do you want the facts?

Bill Ballenger:

I want the facts and the Traxler perspective.

Bob Traxler:

Well, this is kind of like the difference between watching a legislative process and also watching sausage being made. We're gonna talk about sausage. We have a search committee, they made me chairman of it. I'm not sure how that happened, but they did. I just got there.

Bill Ballenger:

You'd given them their building.

Bob Traxler:

Well, my colleagues weren't impressed with that. I think it was they couldn't decide among themselves who it should be, so I'm the kid, just the fresh kid off the trolley and okay, you're in.

Bill Ballenger:

You command respect. Go ahead. Chairman of the search committee.

Bob Traxler:

So there we are and how do we go about this? We establish the process, we were very inclusive with all the competing interests on the campus, blacks, feminists, white males. etc. It was a very difficult task. Everybody wanted their candidate based on what their special interest was, and we thought by clearly defining how this process should be conducted it would result in a successful search. I began to question and worry about some of my Democrat friends on the committee, I mean on the board in terms of their commitment to finding a highly qualified professional educator administrator to chair Michigan State. I felt a national search was necessary. Some of them wanted to go in-house. The Republicans felt we should do a national search. So there were three Republicans and me and four Democrats. I thought the four of us would be able eventually.

Bob Traxler: to come up with a candidate that even my Democrat friends and colleagues would accept. A national figure, so to speak.

Bob Traxler: Well, some time went by and it became clear that that wasn't going to happen, and I began to sense that my Republican colleagues were drifting off, and I was standing alone and so I resigned as a Chairman of the Search Committee.

Bill Ballenger: Wow.

Bob Traxler: Because I was a distinct minority.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. So then what?

Bob Traxler: The process went forward, and there was sort of universal agreement to select Peter McPherson. I looked at Peter's resume and I wasn't particularly impressed with his academic qualifications, which is not to speak, in any way, derogatory towards Peter as an individual.

Bob Traxler: He and I, while we differed in the role of President versus the board, which there always should be, should be, a sense of dynamic tension there. I wanted the board to pick its own Secretary of the Board. That was opposed by all administrators, and then by board members.

Bill Ballenger: Didn't Joel Ferguson have an important role in the selection of Peter McPherson? Tell us the truth.

Bob Traxler: Well, Joel would tell you this himself, he manipulated everyone to his satisfaction.

Bill Ballenger: Well, how did he do it in this respect?

Bob Traxler: In this respect? He understood that the Governor was supportive, would be supportive of McPherson. They were colleagues and friends at Michigan State University as undergraduates, and had remained so. Joel seized on that as an opportunity to work a deal that would be to his advantage. He was keenly interested in putting up a State Office Building for the State House. Joel will tell you that that fell through when the Democrats lost control.

Bob Traxler: He knew in order to achieve this goal, he would need the Governor to get on board. He would need the Republicans in the House on board, since they now control the legislature. He felt that a respectable deal could be made where he would assist the Governor in getting McPherson appointed.

Bob Traxler: In return, the Governor would assist him in making sure that the legislature had adequate space and quarters, an admirable goal.

Bill Ballenger: Leading to the Anderson House Office Building?



Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Okay.

Bob Traxler: Yeah, yeah. The Governor had one caveat, that was that Joel had to have a Republican partner. So Joel immediately advised the Governor that that would be the case and he'd be back with him very shortly with a name, and that happened. They discussed certain, according to Joel, he told me all of this, they discussed various alternatives and came up with a partner for Joel.

Bill Ballenger: Then everything fell in place with all the other Trustees, the Democrats and Republicans on the board?

Bob Traxler: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: But you were looking at a way maybe to not run again for the board. You decided you'd had enough, or maybe to even leave it prematurely, and if so, how did that lead to your resignation from the board in return for an appointment by the Governor? What happened?

Bob Traxler: That's interesting, because I was on the board about three months, Bill, and I realized that the world of academia was quite different from the one that I came from. Not that it wasn't political, it surely was, but the responsibilities of a board member are not carefully adhered to all the time by board members. They have perhaps individual agendas with the university, that the administration is always happy to accommodate in return for fidelity and loyalty, and a yes vote.

Bob Traxler: I had been there only about three months, and at a board session, it wasn't a session, it was dinner at the President's house after. This would've been about March, April. I just casually said to the board, "I will not be seeking reelection. I want to assure you of that."

Bob Traxler: Well, of course, they didn't believe me. They couldn't imagine anyone not running for re-election to the Board of MSU, whom I dearly love and had graduated from, and was closely affiliated with in different ways. They sort of pushed that aside.

Bill Ballenger: But John Engler heard about it?

Bob Traxler: He knew I wasn't going to be a candidate. John called me in my last year there and indicated that he had an interest in filling a vacancy on the board, should there be a vacancy, and that it was necessary for him to make an appointment prior to the Republican State Convention because he didn't want a self starter coming out of the Convention for the MSU Board. John was very loyal to MSU, and he had a nominee in mind that was very talented and had widespread support among Republicans, in many ways. He suggested that we could reach

an accommodation. If I wanted to leave the board early, he'd find a suitable appointment, and something I'd be pleased with.

Bob Traxler: I told him, "I don't want to leave the board in March, I would prefer to do so in early July." He said, "We'll keep that as a deadline, because I got to get this done before the August Republican Convention." I said, "Okay."

Bob Traxler: In the meantime, he suggested that his Appointment Secretary would be in touch with me, and she was, and we talked. She came up with an interesting proposal. She suggested the State Gaming Commission, which was in the midst of licensing the Detroit casinos.

Bill Ballenger: Now, if it had been a Gaming Commissioner, a single person like the Lottery Commissioner, which you fought for, you might have liked that.

Bob Traxler: If it had any power.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: It didn't have any power.

Bill Ballenger: It didn't have any power.

Bob Traxler: And it doesn't have any power.

Bill Ballenger: No.

Bob Traxler: The initiative which set up the casinos in Detroit, the three casinos, was written by the proponents of the casinos. So they intentionally wrote in a very weak oversight commission, and that's the law we got today. And since it was an initiative, it takes about a two thirds vote of the legislature to change a period in it, let alone establish strong oversight of the gaming in this state.

Bill Ballenger: So you said, "Thanks, but no thanks?"

Bob Traxler: I thanked her, and she understood why.

Bill Ballenger: Then she came up with what, a Judgeship?

Bob Traxler: A Judgeship, which was interesting. Again, it was a Judgeship that was terminal. And the same point that I was here in Lansing, and there was a vacancy. I believe, a judge had perhaps died, I'm not familiar with that detail, and the legislature then agreed with the Supreme Court to abolish that position. And they did, but there was a six months period from the death until the next election, and I would be appointed for six months.

Bill Ballenger: You were offered a Judgeship, and you basically said, "There's a problem here in terms of the end date for the Judgeship and my pension qualifications here?"

Bob Traxler: Yes, absolutely. First off, I really wasn't looking for a full-time job. I briefly considered the Judgeship. I called the Judicial Retirement System, and I asked them if it's possible to tack on my legislative onto my judicial. They indicated, no, it was not. I'd have to serve as a Judge for four years before that would be permitted under the law. I really didn't have a keen interest in commuting to Lansing. I didn't have a keen interest, frankly, in working five days a week, eight or nine hours a day. That sort of was the game stopper on that one. So I advised her, thank you,

Bill Ballenger: But no thank you.

Bob Traxler: But no thank you.

Bill Ballenger: Then what? She reversed things and said, "Okay, you tell us what you might be interested in serving on?"

Bob Traxler: That's correct.

Bill Ballenger: What happened?

Bob Traxler: Well, I was at a dinner on Mackinac Island and the Governor was present, and I told his State Police detail, I'd like to talk to the Governor and just give him that message. It's a matter of mutual interest.

Bob Traxler: We found one another after the dinner, and I said, "John, what about the State Park Commission?" He said, "Well, you don't have a vacancy." And I said, "Well, if you can find one, I'm available." And he said, "You know, that could be arranged. I'll call you and advise you how this is going to work."

Bob Traxler: He talked with a very dear friend of his, who was a member of the Commission, and with the idea that she could resign, I would take her spot, and he subsequently at the first opportunity, would reappoint her. She was an outstanding Commissioner. That's what happened.

Bill Ballenger: Who was that, do you remember? That's all right.

Bob Traxler: Anyhow, I'll tell you.

Bill Ballenger: It's okay. Anyway.

Bob Traxler: In any event, when we were having this phone conversation, he said, "Do you want me to send you a letter to this effect?" I said, "No, no, don't do that. That's not necessary. I've known you for years. We don't deal with one another on a

put in writing basis." He said, "Well, when can you have your resignation?" I said, "I'll put it in the mail tomorrow. You'll have it on Friday."

Bill Ballenger: Why was Governor Engler so interested in having you resign from the board, and being able to make an appointment to that commission?

Bob Traxler: For two reasons. I think that his appointee, Mr. Romney.

Bill Ballenger: Scott Romney.

Bob Traxler: Scott Romney.

Bill Ballenger: Brother of Mitt Romney, son of the former Governor.

Bob Traxler: Correct, was a very dear friend of the Governor's, personally. He had been a candidate for Attorney General at the Republican Convention. I don't know if he got the nomination.

Bill Ballenger: No, he lost the nomination.

Bob Traxler: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: But Engler had backed him for the nomination, was severely embarrassed when he didn't get it and felt he owed it to Scott Romney to do something for him.

Bob Traxler: And this was it.

Bill Ballenger: Scott Romney was an MSU grad, like you. Apparently he said, "Well Governor, boy, this would be great if I could be on the MSU Board.

Bob Traxler: I think that's the case, absolutely, and that happened. He got my resignation on Friday, or excuse me, from the board, yes. Then he also had the resignation of his dear friend who was on the Park Commission.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: And on Monday, he appointed me. And it was bang, bang, and I served there almost six years.

Bill Ballenger: What was your tenure like on the Mackinaw Island State Park Commission?

Bob Traxler: Very enjoyable. Fine people. The Chairman of the Commission was Dennis Cawthorne. Dennis and I served, of course, in the legislature together, as I did with you. Dennis was a member of the Judiciary Committee. Very respected, very hardworking, and was the author of legislation on child custody. A very fine piece of work, by the way.

Bob Traxler: It was ironic, when we were in the legislature, I was Mr. Chairman to him, and when we were on the Park Commission, he was Mr. Chairman to me. Sort of reversal of roles, very funny.

Bill Ballenger: How often did the Commission meet?

Bob Traxler: Once a month. Not every month. This was really a part-time job, no heavy lifting. Perfect cap, in my mind, for a political career.

Bill Ballenger: Did the Commission meetings shift around from city to city? Did you meet on the island? Where did you meet?

Bob Traxler: Typically, we would meet principally on the island. But we had two alternative meetings, one would be in Lansing at that time, in the winter. Also, we would hold one meeting in Mackinaw City to demonstrate to the city our concern for the fort there.

Bill Ballenger: The Park Commission has always been considered one of the crown jewel appointments for any Governor. Why do you think that is?

Bob Traxler: Well, I think it's a prestigious place. I have a home on the island, a cottage, and I wish I were there right now. But for political appointees, people who have served the Governor well and are well known to the Governor, this is an alternative to some kind of a political position that requires a lot of time, considerable effort, and perhaps it even pays or maybe it doesn't pay. The Park Commission doesn't pay.

Bob Traxler: The benefit of the Park Commission is you get to use a cottage during the summer months, for a week or a two week period. The Commissioners pick their weeks based on availability. That's, by most of them, considered enough of a gratification for paying attention to what's going on in the island.

Bob Traxler: What I must also say, Bill, I'd spent five summers there working, right out of high school, right through college.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Bob Traxler: I had many friends, very happy with my relationship to the community.

Bill Ballenger: One more question. Jim Blanchard, his entire tenure in Congress, eight years, you served with him. Then he was elected Governor in 1992. You were still in Congress, he was Governor. What was your impression of Jim Blanchard during the time you knew him?

Bob Traxler: He was a total political animal. I never knew anyone who could assimilate election data better than he could. He'd spend hours looking over polling data. He was a good friend. When he was in the Congress, we used to take a break

during nights sessions, sit in his office with the TV on the session, and have a drink, smoke a cigar and tell stories. Just the two of us.

Bill Ballenger: You probably worked on the Chrysler bailout legislation together?

Bob Traxler: Oh yes, he really deserves credit for that, really does. That was his child. He moved it through the House, and was very persuasive with the Senators, along with Carl Levin of course. But it was his major contribution, legislatively.

Bill Ballenger: Do you have any other overall impressions of major political figures, either in Washington or in Lansing, that just really pop out in your mind when you look back over nearly half a century of public service, think of that?

Bob Traxler: That's painful. I can't think of another vocation that anyone could enjoy more than what I have as a public servant. The people that, all the way from constituents through Presidency to foreign potentates, it was incredible times. For most, I should have been paying for this. Instead, I got paid for it. Not that that was critical or important.

Bob Traxler: The real thing was the impressions, the experiences. It's kind of like the places I had been, the people I have known, and I couldn't begin to nearly recite these individuals because it would take up too much of our time.

Bill Ballenger: Bob Traxler, it's been a great pleasure conducting this interview. I really enjoyed our time together here this morning.