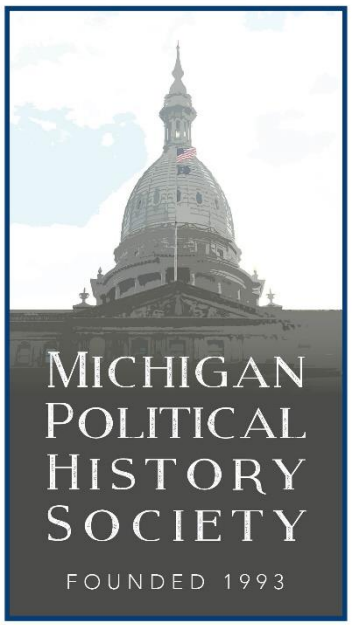
# WILLIAM (BILL) S. BALLENGER

**Interviewed by Susan Steiner Bolhouse and Kyle Melinn**

**November 19, 2019**

**Sponsored by the**
**Michigan Political History Society**
**P.O. Box 4684**
**East Lansing, MI 48826-4684**



Kyle Melinn: This conversation is part of the James J. Blanchard living library of Michigan Political History, a project of the Michigan Political History society. Hello, I'm Kyle Melinn, editor of the MIRS newsletter, joined by Susan Bolhouseolhouse. Today we're going to have a conversation with Bill Ballenger, former state legislators, state department director, racing commissioner, editor of two publications, including the Ballenger Report, a well-read political newsletter online. Bill, thanks for joining us today.

Bill Ballenger: My pleasure, Kyle and Susan Bolhouse.

Kyle Melinn: So I went through a lot of things that people may recognize your name and attach you to, but what do you attach yourself to, if you were to put your name on the tombstone, what would you want it to say?

Bill Ballenger: Terminal political junkie.

Kyle Melinn: Terminal political junkie. Explain that.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I mean, I started out in politics, if you want to call it that, back in the 1960's working for the Republican state central committee in the fall of 1965 when Ellie Peterson was the first female state party chairman for either major political party in the entire country. And two years later I found myself in the Michigan legislature in the state house at the age of 27. In 1968, served one two-year term and then one four-year term in the Senate, and we were off to the races. There's a lot more I can tell you about what I did and how that happened in the 1960's, and I never would have thought growing up in Flint, Michigan that I would've ended up in that place.

Bill Ballenger: I wanted to write, I wanted to be either an author or a novelist or short story writer or maybe a journalist. And strangely enough, I started out writing when I got out of college and then I got into politics, and then some 20 years later I end up where I really wanted to begin: Journalism. But it was about politics again, Michigan politics. So terminal, political junkie, it covers the waterfront, a lot of different avenues to arrive at that particular destination.

Susan Bolhouse: What was the one particular item that made you switch from wanting to be a writer to go into politics? I know that you were overseas in Ireland for a while where you did do writing, then you came back here. So what made you decide to go from journalism into politics?

Bill Ballenger: It was really odd. I had a strange choice in the fall of 1965. I had an interview set up with Time magazine coming back from Ireland. I could have had that. I might've been hired, would have gone into journalism, would not have been in politics in any way, shape or form, but also there were connections I had back in Michigan through my wife at the time, the former Virginia Lee Woodard, nicknamed "Bunny" in Owosso. She had a very good friend who was on the Republican state central committee, who was very close to Ellie Peterson and

she said, "I've got this guy with a somewhat sketchy journalistic writing background coming over from Ireland. He might want to remain in Michigan rather than take some exotic job with a national magazine in New York. Do you have anything for him down in Lansing?"

Bill Ballenger: Well, she was looking for somebody in public relations, if you can believe it. And I had never been involved in the Republican party in any way, shape or form. And Ellie Peterson hired me on the spot as an assistant director of public relations. And after a year she made me director of research at the Republican state central committee headquarters.

Kyle Melinn: In Lansing?

Bill Ballenger: In Lansing. And we were living on a farm, Bunny and I, between Ovid and Laingsburg, and I would commute down for seven straight years. I commuted from the farm down to Lansing the first three years to the Republican state party headquarters where Ellie Peterson presided. And then the next four years as a member of the legislature, that's another story, but in any event, that's how I got into politics. It could have happened very easily I never got into it. I only took one political science course in my entire college career ever. I was an English major.

Bill Ballenger: I never thought about going into politics. I'd always had an interest in politics. I kind of followed it in the newspapers, but really in a very casual way, I thought. And so it's amazing that literally six years after I graduated from college, never having really done anything. I was not a political activist. I was not a member of any political organizations until I took a job with Ellie Peterson. I found myself the youngest Republican legislator in 1968.

Susan Bolhouse: Did she ask you to run? Did somebody ask you to run? Did it come from yourself?

Bill Ballenger: No. You know that is another thing. There was a very colorful character that many people in Michigan politics will remember and he just died recently. Jerry Roe, who was the executive director, became the executive director for the Republican party. He had been brought up by Ellie Peterson from Washington when she was a national vice chairman for the Republican party. She discovered him down there. He said to me, when I started working at the Republican headquarters, he said, "Ballenger, what are you doing at night when you go home?"

Susan Bolhouse: That's a loaded question.

Bill Ballenger: I was living in Shiawassee County. And he said, "You got to get started. Form a young Republican club up there." And so I did. And in the space of like four months it was the third biggest young Republican club in the entire state. Next thing I knew, the County Republican party, which had been through a bloodbath

in 1964 with Barry Goldwater as the party's nominee getting shellacked by Lyndon Johnson. Now remember we're talking about early 1966 at this point, they were looking for a party chairman, a party chairman. They said, "Ballenger you did such a good job with young Republicans we'll make you party chairman." So I became the youngest party chairman of the state. I was only 25 years old, and I had just come back after a year in Ireland to begin working for the Republican party. And I found myself as a Republican chairman.

Kyle Melinn: That's really interesting. In your background, your family background, was there anybody involved in politics there?

Bill Ballenger: You know, there actually was way back in the 19th century. If you dig into any family tree of anybody who's lived in this country very long, then you're going to find politicians somewhere. My family on both sides came to this country in the 18th century. I have antecedents who fought in the American revolution in Virginia and in Connecticut regimens. So I go back a long way. So I had a great-grandfather. He was the first William Sylvester Ballenger born in 1833, and he was an elected a state representative in Indiana, and he was a small town lawyer, and he died at the age of only 39. And then his son, my grandfather, came to Flint in 1888 at the age of 22 as a bookkeeper for the Flint wagon works, which was a horse and buggy manufacturer before the so called horseless carriage had really taken root. And he became the first treasurer of Buick and Chevrolet and he became one of the original investors in general motors with Billy Duran in 1906, 1908. He was not a politician, although he once was elected, I think, to the Flint school board.

Bill Ballenger: He served on that for six years, but he wasn't a politician. So in recent vintage, there was nobody in my family. My father, again, served on the Flint school board. He was elected to the Flint school board. But my father as a politician, I don't think so. He was a banker. He was a trust officer, the farthest thing from a politician. So I don't know where my interest came other than just being an avid reader of newspapers and magazines when I was growing up, when I was in my forties and in the 1940's and 1950's, but all of a sudden I decided this looks like fun, and I think I could actually use my writing ability to my advantage in politics. And I wrote a weekly newspaper column every year, every week. I was in the legislature for six years. So I drew on my journalism there.

Susan Bolhouse: You mentioned Flint, that your grandfather, I believe was the first Ballenger to come to Flint.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Susan Bolhouse: Ballenger is a very prominent name in Flint. You were born in Flint, and take us from your birth, your schooling in Flint through college, what it is you learned, what it is that you aspired to going through school.

Bill Ballenger: Well, it was very interesting. I grew up in a well-to-do neighborhood in the Southwest Flint. I was born before Pearl Harbor, March 28th, 1941. My next door neighbors were the son and grandchildren of C.S. Mott of the Mott foundation, very prominent Flint family, well known nationally. There were wealthy people living all around me. The president of general motors, Harlow Curtis, who was Time magazine's man of the year in 1954 lived just two blocks away.

Susan Bolhouse: And didn't Summerfield?

Bill Ballenger: Arthur Summerfield was the postmaster general for Dwight Eisenhower, lived just a couple of streets away. And you know what? Everybody went to public school. Everybody. We walked up to a public school on Corona road half a mile away every single day in the same building for 10 straight years. Kindergarten through ninth grade, totally different today in Flint. We won't go into that.

Susan Bolhouse: No buses that will take you for half a mile.

Bill Ballenger: No way. What's going on in the Flint public school system is not a pretty picture. So let's not go there, but back in the day, we were all egalitarians. We all went to public school and then I went away to secondary school, a boarding school in New Jersey, Lawrenceville seven miles away from Princeton. My father was a Princeton graduate class of 1929, so I always aspired to go to Princeton. I got in Princeton, I went to Princeton four years, graduated in 1962. So that was my life growing up in Flint, but I still have strong connections with people I went to school with. There are even high school reunions for Flint central high school, now closed, and Flint tech closed since 1959. And I go to those reunions, and they all look at each other, say, "Was Ballenger in our class?" And I wasn't, but the reason I go there is because my classmates at Zimmerman junior high school went on to Flint tech and Flint central. So I go to their reunions. So I still have a strong connection with Flint today. And I lived there most of the time.

Kyle Melinn: So as far as your time in Princeton, do you still keep in touch with the folks that you went to Princeton with and how influential was that in your life?

Bill Ballenger: I think it was very influential, yes. I mean, my closest friends at Princeton, I'm still in close touch with. None of them are in Michigan. There were very few people who went to Princeton or to the Ivy league from Michigan at that time. There's still not that many proportionately, but in those days it was really a sparse group. My best friends at Princeton were from Tennessee, Baltimore, New Orleans, a lot of southerners at Princeton, more than any other Ivy league school. I was in a club that had a lot of southerners in it, so I'm very close friends with all those people. Keep in touch with them over time.

Bill Ballenger: The English department at Princeton was staggeringly brilliant. We had Carlos Baker, who was the biographer of Ernest Hemingway. We had Lawrence Thompson who was a biographer of Melville and Robert Frost. These were

people who not only lectured us, but Princeton always had and still has a system called the precept system, preceptorial. Founded by Woodrow Wilson when he was president of Princeton in the early 20th century in which once a week small groups, literally six, eight, ten students, have an hour seminar with the greatest minds in English literature, in the academic world at that time. People like Baker and Lawrence Thompson and Dudley Johnson and Willard Thorpe. These people were giants. So I mean I had a huge positive experience as an English major. And you write a senior thesis at Princeton. I wrote it on H.L. Mencken, the legendary journalist from the early 20th century. And so this was part of my reasoning about wanting to become a writer. And that led to where I talked about in the beginning.

Susan Bolhouse: You spoke about having been in Ireland, and then how you got into the house, the state house, and then the state Senate. After serving one term each in both the house and the Senate, what made you decide to go beyond that for bigger and better?

Bill Ballenger: Well, first of all, when I was in the Senate at the end of my one term, four-year term there in 1974, I ran for Congress to succeed Charles Chamberlain, who was a long time a Republican member of Congress from mid-Michigan. There was a primary with three candidates on the Republican side. On the democratic side, there was a candidate named Bob Carr, M. Robert Carr. And by the way, he's my Facebook friend today and we exchanged notes all the time, and everything else. I never got to face Bob Carr in the general election, because in the primary I got upset. And I think that's probably the best word for it, by none other than Clifford Taylor, whose campaign was run by Spencer Abraham. And they were very conservative. I was a very moderate, Milliken moderate Republican, astoundingly so. The things I voted for today have made modern Republicans' hair stand on it when they see it.

Bill Ballenger: So I think it came back to haunt me in the primary, and I finished second out of three candidates. And so that was the end. I'd given up my Senate seat. So the Ford administration, and Jerry Ford by that time was president, Richard Nixon had just resigned in August of 1974. I lost the primary about that time, and later in the year the Ford administration appointed me to go to the old department of health education and welfare in Washington. So we move kit and caboodle all the way to Washington. Lived in old town Alexandria for two years.

Bill Ballenger: I became deputy assistant secretary of HEW while I was there in the Ford administration. I think I'm the last remaining person in Michigan alive who served in the Ford administration. Spencer Johnson, who used to be the head of the Michigan health and hospital association just died about two weeks ago. He was the last before me, so I'm the only one left. And then of course in November of 1976 Jerry Ford lost to Jimmy Carter. So then what? I had to leave. But anyway, that's how I got to Washington.

Kyle Melinn: You've mentioned that you were a moderate Republican back in the 70's, and we're filming in 2019, there's hardly any moderate publicans left. Take us back

to that time and what being a moderate Republican meant, and kind of the evaporation and the extinction of that brand of Republican.

Bill Ballenger: I got to tell you, Kyle, moderate Republicans today are chicken feed compared to the kind of moderates we were back in the day. In fact, there were people called liberal Republicans like John V Lindsay, the mayor of New York, former Congressman. There were U.S. Senators like Jacob Javits of New York, Tom Kiko in California, US Senator, Clifford Case in New Jersey. Nelson Rockefeller was viewed as a liberal Republican. So, I mean, when I was in the Michigan legislature, now get this, kind of fasten your seat belt. I mean, I was pro-choice on abortion. I voted for a huge hike in the state income tax from 2.6 to 3.9%. That's the level that everybody talks about. Going back to now as a nice sane level, 3.9. Heck we hiked it from 2.6, which was the original level.

Bill Ballenger: I voted for no fault auto-insurance, no fault divorce. I got a perfect voting record, 100% from an environmental group. I don't know whether it was the Michigan environmental council, whether it was Sierra club, whatever. I was one of like three Republicans, had a perfect record, no Democrat had a better record than I did. I was the sponsor, the prime sponsor in the Senate of the equal rights amendment. My name is on the equal rights amendment at the time we passed it. We were one of the first States to do it, and of course it came within an ace of being approved.

Kyle Melinn: So it was just different back then. I mean today you equate party with ideology. You're a Republican, you're conservative, you're a Democrat, you're a liberal. Was there more mingling back in the 70's than there is now?

Bill Ballenger: Mingling ideologically?

Kyle Melinn: Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: There was more mingling. I mean you do these roll-call analyses. I know MIRS does this, in which you evaluate voting records, who's the most vote able.

Kyle Melinn: Well, you champion that inside Michigan politics.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah, and I did inside Michigan politics. And I'm saying today the gulf is cavernous between the two sides. I mean there's hardly any meeting in the middle. I'm just saying at the time you could be more moderate or liberal or to Republican and still be considered a Republican. The Democrats had no illusions about me being a Republican. They didn't think, "Oh, we could recruit this guy Ballenger. He's going to maybe switch parties, or he's going to join us, or we can always count on him for."

Bill Ballenger: No, they couldn't. I had Democrats say to me, "You're the worst kind of Republican because you don't vote like the extreme right wing Republicans do, and yet you're very partisan." And so it was a totally different situation, a totally

different ballgame. There were a couple of other legislators Gil Bursley, a state Senator from Ann Arbor. Can you believe the entire Washtenaw legislative delegation was Republican?

Kyle Melinn: No.

Bill Ballenger: They were all Republicans. And Carl Purcell, who was from Plymouth, later became a Congressman. He was pretty liberal, so we were moderate to liberal, much more liberal than so-called moderates today. These guys and gals today who call themselves moderates or are called moderates, they look like right wingers to me.

Susan Bolhouse: You have covered your races for the Michigan house and the Senate and Congress, there was one other race that you undertook and that you've put a lot of shoe leather into.

Bill Ballenger: Whoa. Yeah, I know. We're leaping ahead here and this is 1982.

Susan Bolhouse: I want to get all of the races taken care of.

Bill Ballenger: Okay, all the races. Well, that really was a race to remember, because I did a walk through Michigan. I decided as a strategy and Jerry Roe was one of the inspirations for this. He said, "This would be a great idea." So I started out in mid to late January of 1982. Now let me set the stage here. Don Riegle was the US Senator and he was completing his first six-year term. He was running for reelection, and there were four Republicans running for the nomination for the right to oppose him. Me and a former Congressman from the upper peninsula named Phil Ruppe, and Bob Huber, a former state Senator, former mayor of Troy, and Dean Baker, who was a region of the university of Michigan. We were the four.

Bill Ballenger: And I decided I'm going to walk through Michigan, walk through Michigan, the length of Michigan and, well, it turned out the breadth of Michigan as well. I can explain why, but this was not a freakish strategy. Lamar Alexander in Tennessee, who is a US Senator today, a former governor of Tennessee. He did this in Tennessee. He walked through Tennessee. Lawton Chiles, a Democrat in Florida call it walking lot. He walked through Florida, became governor of Florida. This was done in some other States, so what I did was I started out in mid to late January 1982. I will never forget it. It was one of the coldest winters on record. It was 19 below zero at the international bridge in the Sault when I started my walk. Jerry Roe went up with me.

Kyle Melinn: We started in the Upper Peninsula?

Bill Ballenger: Started in Sault Ste. Marie.

Kyle Melinn: Why didn't you do that?

Bill Ballenger: Because you want to come down state when you're way down state, and get down to where all the action is and the population is as you get near the primary in August, okay? And so I decided, well maybe starting in iron mountain is a little too far away, and maybe Marquette is even a little too far away. I think I'll just kind of cheat a little bit and get over here on the East edge. I'll start in Sault Ste. Marie, do you realize I covered, in two days, the walk from Sault Ste. Marie down to the Mackinac bridge.

Kyle Melinn: You had to keep warm. That's probably why.

Bill Ballenger: You know what? I had frostbite on my face at the end of that day. I mean it was really bad. When I got to the Mackinac bridge, we were staying with Walt and Sally North. Walt was the executive director of the Mackinac bridge authority at the time. He was later a state Senator and they had a beautiful home overlooking the straits from the upper peninsula. And Walt reminded me, he said, "You know, Bill, you're not going to be able to walk across the Mackinac bridge. Nobody walks across the Mackinac bridge except on one day of the year. And you know what it is. The labor day walk." Well, obviously this wasn't labor day, but he said, "I got an idea. Why don't you walk over to Mackinac Island on the ice bridge?" Because you got to remember, this was one of the most frigid winters in Michigan history.

Bill Ballenger: I mean, it was 19 below zero at the Sault, and it was still 19 below zero when I'd got to the Mackinac bridge. So there was an ice bridge. The entire straights were absolutely yards deep in an ice cap. And so my motor bus driver and I set out from the Southern shore of the upper peninsula and we walked toward Mackinac Island. Now we could have been blown off course by a blizzard to Marquette Island or Les Cheneaux, but the yoopers had made a trail of tiny Christmas trees all the way from the UP to the Island. And we followed that.

Bill Ballenger: I'll never forget. It was a cloudy, windy day, very gloomy. We were all alone, had no guide, but we did have the trees and what we did was, the ice was very clear on top. There wasn't snow. It had blown off to a great extent. And we made like seals, and we literally were barking, and we would try to run. It was slippery, but we would belly flop, and we would coast 30 to 40 feet. I mean, it was unbelievable. And we just had fun. And I remember lying on my tummy, peering down into the dark ice and seeing cracks and fissures as far as the eye could see. Kind of like Jules Verne, 20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea, and there was no chance the ice was going to break. I mean, it was rock thick. So it took us about an hour and a half, as I remember, to get to the island.

Bill Ballenger: It was about three to four miles. We got there, and the entire island was socked in. I mean, it was blanketed with snow, and it was deadly calm, a ghostly silence over everything. No sign of human habitation, but we knew that there was a meeting of the village council down in the Mackinac Island town, so we made our way there shouldering and struggling our way through the drifts, and we got there. And these were the only people we ever saw in the island, the village council, and they looked at me with bemusement and some laughter as I

reported to them how I happened to be there and why I was there. And a Sheriff's deputy, Mackinac County Sheriff's deputy was there, and he said, "You know what? If you want a ride on my snowmobile, I'll take you to the mainland, the lower peninsula if you want to."

Bill Ballenger: Well, we took him up on it, and that was a thrill. That was a lot of fun, but we got worrying, "You know what? Maybe this violates the integrity of our walk because the whole idea was this was going to be an unbroken walk from the International Bridge at the Sault all the way to the Detroit River. Even though it was interrupted in time by my having to leave periodically and go downstate, we always came back to exactly the spot we had left and picked up, but we remembered, "Okay, we've already walked from the U.P. to the Island. It's about three or four miles, about as long, maybe a little longer than the Mackinac Bridge, so in fact we have covered it. We got it covered. Even if we get a little freebie ride here to the lower peninsula, to Mackinaw City, which is what we did, and then I must say we never faced a challenge like that again in the over 1000 miles southward that I went over the next half year.

Bill Ballenger: What I would do is I'd walk for about four days. I had a trailer follow me. I'd stay in it overnight. I had a driver, and I'd get up the next day. I'd pick up where I left off walking. I'd walk for another seven, eight miles. I know the farthest walk I ever had in a single day was 20 miles, and it was in Northern Kent County. I remember that. But in any event, I would leave and go downstate. I would do fundraising. I would give speeches, whatever, do the usual stuff that candidates do. And then I turned around, I'd go back up to my trailer, get in it, start where I left off, and keep going. The problem, Kyle, was, by March I had reached Genesee County. And this thing was supposed to end in August, and we were literally five months away. And I'm almost there in just two months. I'd come all the way downstate.

Bill Ballenger: So what did I do? I decided, "Okay, I'm going to go across state. I'm just going to stop right here, and I'm going to go through Owosso, St. Johns. Ionia, Grand Rapids, Muskegon. I'm going to go down the coast. I'm going to go to Berrien County. I'm going to come up through Cassopolis. I'm going to go to Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Jackson. I did all these things. I came all the way up to Oakland County, Pontiac, picked up Woodward Avenue, walked down Woodward Avenue from the middle of Oakland County all the way to the Detroit River.

Kyle Melinn: Wow.

Bill Ballenger: And when I got to the Troy River, I'll never forget, we had a rally planned at Grand Circus Park or something in Detroit. Everybody marched down the Woodward Avenue to the river where I was going to jump in the river, and I had news media trailing me, TV cameras, newspapers, and I had people coming up and saying, "Don't jump in the river. There's an undertow. You're going to be sucked into the river if you do that."

Bill Ballenger: I decided, "Well, I'm sucked in the river. I'm sucked in the river. I promised I'm going to dive in the river, and that's what I'm going to do." I had to do it. If that was the last you saw me, I'm going down fighting. So I got there, we got to the banks, and I went in the river. That was cool. I just bobbed to the surface like a cork, and I clambered up. There was a ladder. We made sure there was a ladder in the seawall, and I got up. And a TV camera came rushing up to me. He said, "Mr. Ballenger, we missed that. Would you do it again for us?" So I did. I jumped in again, and I clambered back up.

Bill Ballenger: So this was in early August, and by that time I had walked over 1,100 miles.

Kyle Melinn: How many shoes did you go through?

Bill Ballenger: One pair, and I've still got them today. They're Herman Survivors. They're indestructible. I got great advice from a conservationist and a hiker starting out, said, "Get Herman survivors. They'll never wear out. And they keep you warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and they are great." And I still got them.

Susan Bolhouse: Your Senate race came after your time in Washington with President Ford.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Susan Bolhouse: The 60s were a really strange decade here in the States.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Bolhouse: You first of all had Nixon with Agnew. Agnew resigned, then Ford was appointed vice president. Then Nixon resigns. What was your connection to Ford before he became vice president, and how were you able to be one of the first appointees, if I recall correctly, you were appointed within the first week of Ford's administration? You were one of the first to be appointed within the first week of his administration?

Bill Ballenger: I don't know whether it was one of the first. From Michigan maybe.

Susan Bolhouse: Yes. Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. You're probably right. No, that's a very good question. I actually had very little personal interaction with Gerald Ford. The one thing we had in common was our districts actually overlapped. My state Senate district overlapped with the eastern part of his old congressional district before he became vice president.

Kyle Melinn: What did your district look like?

Bill Ballenger: Ionia County. Well, mine was a huge district. It was kind of like an extended version of what is the 24 Senate district today. I'll tell you what it was. It was

Shiawassee County, Clinton County, Gratiot County, almost all of Montcalm County, almost all of Eaton County and the northeastern corner of Ingham County. I mean, it was bigger than many States, and it had 350,000 people in it, roughly. It had small towns that were a fairly modest size, like Owosso, St. Johns, Alma, Greenville, Charlotte, Grand Ledge, Williamston. Those were the biggest towns. It was mainly farmland.

Susan Bolhouse: Excuse me. Wasn't this the time when you also shared office space with John Engler?

Bill Ballenger: It was. It was something else.

Susan Bolhouse: Okay. That's another story. That's another story. I'm sorry.

Bill Ballenger: That's another story.

Susan Bolhouse: Let's get back on track.

Bill Ballenger: John Engler and I did something that nobody else really has ever done. When I see allusions to it, they're always doing it kind of at taxpayer expense, it seems to me. We did it out of our own pocket, and that is we opened a joint office in Greenville, which we shared in calendar year 1971. He had just been elected to the House. He was one of the youngest elected state representatives in the history of Michigan. I was only 29. We used to bill ourselves as the youngest pair of legislators in the entire country.

Bill Ballenger: He was 21, and I was 29, so our average age was 25 between the two of us. And we would go in, we would alternate weeks, and we'd go up on a Friday, and we'd sit in that office for four hours so citizens could come in and talk to us and ask questions. Now, John Engler later said, "I felt like the Maytag repairman," because he said, "Hardly anybody ever came," and this despite the fact that there was all this bellyaching and whining and moaning from people in Montcalm County that they had nobody from Montcalm County in the legislature. Well, not living there, they didn't. They were represented, but they hadn't had anybody in, I don't know, 20 years. So they felt left out. So we said, "Okay, we'll open an office so you can all come and talk to us." And then they never really came.

Bill Ballenger: But back to the story about Gerald Ford. Gerald Ford's district was mainly Kent County, but it slopped over into part of Montcalm, and that was my territory, and part of Clinton. I think he even had a little bit of Clinton, believe it or not. So the real connection for me was Charles Chamberlain. Chuck Chamberlain, who was a former Ingham County prosecuting attorney and then a long time congressman. He was on the cover of Time Magazine. I'll never forget. Back in the day, '56. That was it. He was on the cover of Time Magazine because he was in a very tight marginal district race in Michigan at that time, which he won, and he was a really great guy, and we had a very close relationship. I was a County

chairman in Shiawassee, which was part of his district. And so he said, "Bill, I will get you a job in HEW." And he did. And Ford appointed me. Ford and I didn't really know each other that well.

Kyle Melinn: So when you were in the legislature, I want to ask, what memory is more clear: Your first bill that you put in or your first public act?

Bill Ballenger: Wow. I would say the first public act, because the bills I put in in the House were really pretty minor stuff. I can barely even remember them. They involved things like fishing stuff. I was on the Conservation and Recreation Committee. I don't think I got anything passed and signed into law as a representative. I only served one two-year term, and then in 1970 there was an open state Senate seat, and I won that, and I got in the Senate. Once I got in the Senate, then I got legislation passed, and probably my biggest bill was called the Wierzbicki Ballenger Pesticide Control Act.

Kyle Melinn: Oh my goodness.

Bill Ballenger: Highly, highly venerated by the Michigan Farm Bureau.

Bill Ballenger: And I got the Farm Bureau's Agriculture Legislator of the Year award. When I was in the legislature, I was chairman in the Senate of the Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee. I later became chairman of Health and Social Services, and I sponsored all the bills that added public members to licensing boards. And ironically I became, later, the director of the State Department of Licensing and Regulations, which had 38 different licensing boards within it. It's kind of like LARA is today, Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, an early version. And I was the one who sponsored all the public member legislation on all of these boards. So there was a lot of stuff I did in the Senate that got signed into law that I remember. But in the House, my record, voting record, I'll defend, but accomplishment in terms of public acts, no way. No.

Susan Bolhouse: You just referenced Licensing and Regulation.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Susan Bolhouse: Would you like to cover that era, which also very strongly includes Governor Milliken?

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well, it was really interesting. After President Ford lost in 1976, I went to Harvard to get a master's degree in public administration. So I was up at Harvard getting this master's degree in public administration, and it's March of 1977, and I get a call from Joyce Braithwaite, the famous dragon lady who was Governor Milliken's right hand hatchet woman and managed his campaign in 1978, saying, "The governor wants you to come back and become director of the State Department of Licensing and Regulation." Well, here I am in the middle of this master's degree program at Harvard, and I mean, I'm three

months away from the end of the academic year. And I said, "Okay, I'll take it." And so I came back to Michigan, but then I kept flying out to Boston every weekend, and I actually managed to finesse it. I'm confessing this for the first time. Nobody really knows it. I managed to pull it off. I'd go out to Harvard, I was like Brian Calley, Lieutenant Governor. I did the same thing way before Brian Calley. I would go out there for five or six days, go to all these classes, write papers, and I'd race back to Michigan, and I'd spend a week as director of the State Department of Licensing. And then I'd race off. And I did this for three months.

Kyle Melinn: Wow.

Bill Ballenger: And so then in June, I was free from Harvard. I got my master's in public administration. I could be a full time Director of Licensing and Regulation. And I served in that capacity for four and a half years. And at the time I left, I was the longest serving director, I believe, in the history of the department up to that time.

Kyle Melinn: Wow. So before, and this probably dovetails into when you were a director, but when you were a legislator, what was kind of your philosophy in representing constituents? Were you more of the type who thought that you should represent the views of your constituents? Or did you feel like you should do what you felt was in the best interest of your constituents, which sometimes is not the same thing?

Bill Ballenger: You're absolutely right. That's a very good question. It's always a balancing act, and I think it is for every legislator. There's no question about it. Some legislators take the tack that you just described. They consider themselves trustees on behalf of the people who elected them, said, "Okay, they put us in office to exercise our best judgment. We're going to do that. We're not going to go back and take their pulse every weekend and say, 'Well, how do you feel about this issue? How do you feel about that issue?'" But that's very important, taking the pulse, because if you lose contact with your constituents, if you get the feeling that, "You know what? These people had enough confidence to elect me. I'm going to exercise my judgment and devil take the hindmost in terms of the reaction to it or anything else."

Bill Ballenger: If you have that attitude, you can get yourself in real electoral trouble. Now, I will say this: I never ran for reelection, you'll notice, ever. I was moving to another office to run for it. So there was never a real true test where people could say, "Ballenger, we sent you down to Washington or to Lansing to do something, and it doesn't look to us like you're doing that. You're voting differently, and you're out of here." You know? So I never really had a true test, but I had a reputation and a voting record that had been built up over time as I described earlier. And no matter whether I was running for reelection or for a new office, that record was part of my persona that was perceived by the voters.

Susan Bolhouse: When Governor Milliken called you back from Harvard or had you jump back and forth. What had your relationship been with the governor or with Mr. Milliken, which might have been before that, earlier, and what did it continue to be?

Bill Ballenger: Well, I always had a good relationship with governor Milliken, and my wife, Bunny, became very good friends with Helen Milliken, and Helen Milliken was more liberal than Governor Milliken, particularly on women's rights and abortion. And many people suspect that, frankly, she was an influence on him as time went on to the point where he was endorsing Democrats in the 21st century that probably never would have happened earlier, although the party did definitely drift dramatically to the right during his lifetime. But Bunny was close to Helen Milliken. I had a very good relationship with Governor Milliken, but we weren't pals. I mean, he was an older man. He was governor. I met him very early. I still remember him coming in with his aide, Don Gordon, to the Republican state headquarters when I was a puny little 25 or 26-year-old staffer for Elly Peterson.

Bill Ballenger: I still remember meeting him when he was completely overlooked, submerged in the giant shadow of George Romney between '64 and '68. Those were the four years that Milliken and Romney served together as Governor and Lieutenant Governor. And then I would say this. I think more than whether I had a personal relationship with Governor Milliken, ideologically, we were pretty much on the same page on about everything. I mean, if anything, I was probably more liberal than he was, if you could believe that. Everybody nowadays thinks of me as..

Susan Bolhouse: As a conservative Republican.

Bill Ballenger: Well no, I mean they think nowadays, Milliken as being almost a communist if you're a Republican. And I'm saying, he was looking conservative and right wing compared to me on a lot of issues. He really was.

Susan Bolhouse: What was your last appointed position before you went into publication of Inside Michigan Politics?

Bill Ballenger: Well, after we get through Licensing and Regulation. So I quit that to run for the U.S. Senate to start walking through Michigan. And we've covered that. So when the race is over, now what happened in the race? In the primary, Ruppe won the primary. He was a former Congressman. He had a lot of built up support and sympathy for him because four years before, he'd wanted to run, and he kind of got stabbed in the back. And so he won. I was second, Huber was third, and Baker was fourth. But close doesn't count. You got to win the nomination. So Ruppe had the honor of challenging or being the Republican nominee against Don Riegle in November, and he got smoked. It was a terrible year for the Republicans. The Republicans lost everything in 1982, and so it probably was just as well that I lost the primary, although I argue that I probably would have run a more interesting race against Riegle.

Bill Ballenger: I might've gone off on another walk. I don't know what I would've done, but I would have caused some excitement, let's put it that way.

Kyle Melinn: Maybe you would have started in Ironwood this time, since it was August.

Bill Ballenger: I could have done that. I missed part of the state. I'm going to go back and cover it. But anyway, the point was after that, what? About a month went by, and Governor Milliken appointed me State Racing Commissioner, Horse Racing Commissioner. Now, honestly, today, people say, "What? Was there such a thing?" There was such a thing, and at one time, it was a very coveted post. Michigan was the third state in the country in 1933 to legalize pari-mutuel horse racing. At one time, remember, the only way you could gamble in Michigan legally was horse racing. There was no lottery. There were no casinos. There wasn't any other way that you could legally gamble other than at the race track.

Kyle Melinn: Did you have a background in racing? I mean, why did Milliken pick you for that?

Bill Ballenger: Absolutely none.

Kyle Melinn: Had you ever been on ponies before?

Bill Ballenger: No. None. I came from a family where my mother and two sisters like dressage, show jumping on horses. They had horses, but they weren't race trackers. They weren't touts. They weren't rail birds. But again, I always had followed horse racing. Milliken didn't ask me, "Do you know anything about horse racing?" He never said anything. I think he thought, "Ballenger didn't really screw up too badly when he was Director of Licensing and Regulation. I might trust him with another appointment even if he doesn't know anything about the subject, and he does know the legislature, and he knows state government, so yeah, I'll put him in there, and let's see how he does."

Bill Ballenger: Well, I loved it. In fact, I almost think of all the jobs in politics I ever had, including the legislature, including in Washington, State Racing Commissioner was my favorite job. And let me tell you, when you were State Racing Commissioner, Michigan is the only state in the country with a single commissioner, and it's a full time salary position. You're a czar, and in fact, I call myself today, the czar. When I called, when I talked to these people that I dealt with 40 years ago in racing, I sign off as a czar, and they say czar. They refer to me as czar. That's what they call me. They don't call me commissioner, Senator, director, anything else. They call me czar. And Michigan was the only state that had that. The rest of the states all had multi-member commissioners that were part-time, boring stuff. They'd appoint an executive director in Michigan. You were everything.

Bill Ballenger: And I did a lot of promotion for horse racing, and I actually improve the situation marginally. But let's face it, horse racing was already dying in Michigan because the lottery had already been in place for a dozen years, and the casino

started to kick off about that time. You had the Indian casinos, and then in 1996, well, you got the three Detroit casinos on the ballot, and they passed. And ever since that, it was down, down, down. And finally you get to the 21st century, and Jennifer Granholm issued an executive order, which she really deep-sixed the office of racing commissioner and folded it into the State Gaming Board, which I think is an abomination, and I think it could be challenged in court. But the point is, even if you resurrected racing commissioner, what would he be able to do today? Hardly anything. We're down to one track.

Kyle Melinn: It's like Northville. That's it, right?

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. I had seven tracks, seven tracks. I licensed three new tracks while I was commissioner. I came in with four. I licensed three more, and they're all gone except one, Northville. That's it.

Susan Bolhouse: Your transition between racing commissioner and giving up your crown as czar.

Bill Ballenger: Right. That was painful.

Susan Bolhouse: I'm sure it was. To then later take up your pen and typewriter and later computer to ultimately regain the title of Crown Prince of Pundits by the late Charlie Cain.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Bolhouse: How did that transition go from horse racing back to writing and doing it the old fashioned way, mailing it?

Bill Ballenger: Yeah, no, that is a really good question, and actually there is a connection. What I started, as soon as I was done being racing commissioner, I went to the sports editor of the Free Press, and I said, "You know what? I want to start writing a racing column for you every week." So for six years, Kyle, I wrote a horse racing column. I've got it all.

Kyle Melinn: Once a week?

Bill Ballenger: Once a week. I wrote a horse racing column about Michigan horse racing, what was going on at the tracks, harness racing, thoroughbred racing, the whole shooting match. And I did this for six years, but it was a part-time thing. I'm writing one column a week. You know, how much you write today is so much, so voluminous, compared to the piddle little effort I was making. But all during that time, I was thinking, "How can I capitalize on an idea that I've had for a long time?" And that is, start some kind of a subscription, very short, brief newsletter, political newsletter, like existed in some other states. There's one in Tennessee, which I still think not only was the best then, it's still the best, called The Tennessee Journal.

Bill Ballenger: And you may know what it is. You may know the editor; Brad Forrester has been the guy who's been the head of it. I decided, "Okay, I'm going to start a biweekly newsletter." I decided I'm going to make it once every two weeks. I started in March of 1987. So, I was still writing a racing column and I wrote it, I think, until like 19, I'm saying maybe, 91, and then I stopped it and I went full-time with Inside Michigan Politics. That was the name of the newsletter. I started out very modestly charging $125 a year, and just tried to build the circulation up as a paid subscription newsletter. So, that was the transition.

Kyle Melinn: What was your idea behind Inside Michigan Politics? What did you hope to share with people? And what was the universe of people you're trying to sell the newsletter to?

Bill Ballenger: Remember, at the time, you had Gongwer and you had MIRS, Michigan Information Research Service. Gongwer was going pretty strong. Both of those had been founded during the constitutional convention. Gongwer had already existed previously in Ohio, and MIRS was started up by a local lobbyist who was a pretty strong figure in Lansing at one time, but it had kind of fallen on hard times and wasn't doing very well by the late 80's. And until The Reurinks and Steve Linder bought it in the mid-90's, it was floundering. And then they've turned it around, and now you're here, and things are really firing in all cylinders. That's another story.

Bill Ballenger: But my point was, I always felt when I was in the legislature and when I was in state government that the Capitol Press Corps that covered the legislature didn't understand what the hell was going on back at the grassroots, at the local level in the various districts. They didn't know. And people at the local level who could cover their local state senator or representative, they didn't totally understand everything that was happening in Lansing other than what they read in the wire service or something like that.

Bill Ballenger: And I thought, "You know what? I can bridge the gap. I can come up with something that's going to make people think a little more about the absolutely, inextricably bound together connection between what's going on in Lansing and what's going on at the grassroots and the various districts." Also, picking up on what Susan Bolhouse BolhouseBolhousejust mentioned about horse racing, I'm going to start picking winners. I'm going to handicap. You go to the race track and some guy comes up to you with his cards, "Hey, buddy, here's who's going to win the seventh race. I got it right here." That kind of stuff.

Bill Ballenger: So, start picking races, and actually, start picking judicial races, not just legislative races or whatever, but judicial races. Never been done before. So, I started doing it, and I made fearless calls. Many of them dead wrong, but so what? I was doing it. I was actually getting them right a pretty high percentage of the time. So, I figured, people would like something like that. I'm not going to try and be MIRS or Gongwer and do a daily compilation of bills, a bill analysis of what's being reported. I'm not going there. This is going to be a simple little

four-page newsletter put out every two weeks, but it's going to have all sorts of spicy stuff in it.

Bill Ballenger: I had quotes, I did a lot. I started doing the lobbyist survey where I sent out questionnaires all over state government and got people to say who's the greatest lobbyist, who's terrible? And they would put quotes, and I would print the quotes in the newsletter. Some of them were scabrous. They were terrible.

Kyle Melinn: I do remember that.

Bill Ballenger: People were furious at some of the stuff was in there, had never been done before. But a lot of people said, "Hey, you know what? These lobbyists are making a hell of a lot of money, and who the hell is holding their feet to the fire? Isn't it right that public can comment on this?" I did that. I did a lot of breakthrough-first-ever things in the newsletter. My idea was just to see if I can get enough people.

Bill Ballenger: And you say who was my audience? It was everybody. Well, I mean it was anybody who had any interest in state government, or in Michigan politics. Obviously it could be legislators. For several years, I had the entire Senate Democratic Caucus subscribe to my newsletter. I had a lot of legislators, a lot of lobbyists. I had trade association executives, unions, I had PACs, political action committees.

Kyle Melinn: You must have had a huge staff.

Bill Ballenger: Me. That was it. I never had bylines, never had bylines. I wrote it all myself, or sometimes I had people write stuff for me, or people would volunteer to write stuff for me. And very often, they would want to give me stuff to write, which they were too gutless to publish over their own byline, or they didn't want anybody to know who it was. And so, I would rewrite it and I'd package it.

Bill Ballenger: The whole idea was for people to look at the newsletter and it was a seamless series of stories with no byline, and you just had to either accept or reject what was in front of you. It wasn't attributable to anybody. In fact, at one time, I took to interviewing myself.

Kyle Melinn: Oh, yes, I remember. Yes.

Bill Ballenger: People used to say, "Well, this is ridiculous. You're interviewing yourself." I said, "Who could ask me better questions than me? And so, I'm going to interview myself." I'd put that in there. Anyway, it worked. And so, it was very successful.

Kyle Melinn: I'm really interested in here, Bill, is that after you had already been in politics for so many years and you had already been labeled as a moderate Republican, and then you get into journalism. One of the dangers that happens when you jump fields like that is that you're already labeled as something. In this case, people

already knew you as a Republican, so how hard was it to get Inside Michigan Politics out there and be seen as a straight shooter, somebody who was nonpartisan when you had been a partisan for so many years?

Bill Ballenger: That was a major challenge from the very beginning, and I'm not going to say haunted me, but it always was hovering over me as a major hurdle that I had to surmount because I wanted to be seen as objective and nonpartisan even though I had this very partisan path. But remember I said that I made a lot of my reputation writing the newsletter as a handicapper picking races. Now, you can't be a partisan and be a handicapper with any objectivity and success, it seems to me, simultaneously. People are going to get very suspicious. They're going to say, "Are you kidding me? Ballenger the Republican is picking races. He's going to skew things the Republicans' way every time."

Bill Ballenger: I picked a lot of races where I'd pick a Democrat to beat a Republican. I think I build up a reputation, Susan Bolhouse BolhouseBolhouseknows this, over time where a lot of people would come up to me, or they'd come up to Susan Bolhouse, or they'd come up to other people. They'd say, "What are you really? What do you really believe? What's your background?" You've got to remember, a lot of people didn't have the great history in politics or government that I did and other people did. And they didn't know. They just knew the stuff I was putting out.

Bill Ballenger: And that, of course, made me burst my buttons with pride. Like, "My God, I've done it. They're convinced that I'm objective and I'm nonpartisan." So, yeah, it was always a challenge. I think the fact that I was, as you have observed, a so-called Milliken moderate, or a liberal Republican, or whatever you want to say, made it easier for me to be accepted by Democrats and independence as being pretty much down the middle. I wasn't some flame throwing right-winger either in the past or when I was doing the newsletter, and they could see that. It was pretty obvious.

Susan Bolhouse: You seem to enjoy writing Inside Michigan Politics. You, I believe, enjoyed interviewing yourself. You enjoyed recreating yourself. In 2013, you decided to sell it. What prompted you after all those years to sell it? Was it partly because things were all going online, and this was hard copy, and the transition might've been difficult? Were you already thinking, in 2013, that ultimately you wanted to pursue something, which ended up being The Ballenger Report?

Bill Ballenger: I think it was everything you just said. I think the pace of technological change was becoming more and more alarming. I fought and resisted putting any part of Inside Michigan Politics online for years. I had people pleading with me saying, "You can't have this primitive blue paper, four-page newsletter, hard copy forever. Get with it." We're in the late 1990s, and I still wasn't doing it.

Bill Ballenger: And so finally, I decided, "Okay, I'm going to offer it online as well as hard copy." And so, by the time 2013 came around, when I decided to sell it, I gave people a choice. You can get it hard copy, you can get it online, or you can get both. And I

was offering at the same price or whatever. Now there are various different ways you could market that, and how you price it and so forth. I won't go into the details.

Bill Ballenger: But I could see that the way things were going, and remember, I'm a solo person doing this. I had no help. I had no staff. I could've hired somebody, but why would I do that? I wanted to keep all the money and revenue myself. So, I just decided, "I've gotten to a point where it's too hard to do this indefinitely." I'd done it for 27 years. There were times during that 27-year period when I thought, "Do I want to really keep doing this?" Honestly, I had thoughts even back when it was going really well, after maybe 10 or 15 years when I thought maybe I want to get out, or I want to do something else, or I want to change this in some major way. But I always resisted.

Bill Ballenger: Until finally in 2013, I decided, "Okay, that's enough. There are other things I want to do and do it in a different way, and I could still continue to maybe write." And frankly, I haven't even gotten to first base as far as I'm concerned with The Ballenger Report. I could make so much more of that. I'm doing a terrible job. But I'm lurching ahead and I'm still trying to improve it, and I swear I'm going to get it to the point where it's where I want it to be.

Susan Bolhouse: Well, not only has The Ballenger Report gotten some traction, but also since selling Inside Michigan Politics, you have also started a weekly podcast. And within the last two years, you now have a singleton, if you will, radio program, The Political Insider. What a perfect name for somebody who does know the inside of politics.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah, it's a syndicated program on the Michigan Talk Network. I was asked to do it, and I've done it for almost a year and a half, the podcast, which is fun. I never would've thought of the podcast except Dennis Denno, who was a local former legislative aid and a pollster, and a political consultant, asked me, "Hey, would you like to do a podcast with me?" And I said, "I barely know what a podcast is, but whatever." Obviously, podcasts have become huge.

New Speaker: You're listening to the Friday Morning Podcast with host Bill Ballenger and Dennis Denno, discussing Michigan politics and political history. The Friday Morning Podcast has you covered.

Dennis Denno: Thank you, Jim Carter for that introduction. Bill Ballenger, the governor's got what she wanted. She has budgets. The Michigan house, Michigan Senate, earlier this week, passed 16 departmental budgets. She can veto them. She can line item veto them. What do you think about all this?

Bill Ballenger: She could sign them.

Dennis Denno: She could also sign them, of course.

Bill Ballenger: Actually, I'm busy all the time. I'm still going around giving talks to groups. I got to do one tomorrow. I'm really doing pretty much the same thing I always did with the Inside Michigan Politics newsletter, I just don't have to meet a deadline every two weeks for a four-page newsletter. And so, I'm pretty pleased with where I am, but I can be doing a lot better and a lot more, and I intend to.

Kyle Melinn: Bill, you're also one of the very few people to have been both a guest and a panelist on the public television program, Off the Record, how far back do you go with that show?

Bill Ballenger: I was on it when I was a legislator. I remember that, a state senator in the early '70's. I think the program started in 1972. Tim Skubick deserves an incredible amount of credit for what he's been able to pull off. Could you imagine 47 straight years, one week after the other, never missing a week?

Kyle Melinn: I'm not even 47.

Bill Ballenger: I know! It's unbelievable. It's the longest running state-based televised political show in the entire country. There is no other state that has anything like it. And I was on it when I was a state senator in the early '70s. I remember I was on it when governor Milliken appointed me director of licensing and regulation in March of 1977. I went on at that spring. I've got the transcript of it then. Later, of course, I became a member of the panel of journalists on the program.

Bill Ballenger: Now, the four people that I can think of out of thousands, Kyle, thousands of guests that Tim has had over 47 years. Think about it. He hasn't missed a week in 47 years. He's had a guest almost every week. Sometimes he skips. He's had thousands of guests. Only four have served on both sides of the table. George Weeks, Bob Berg, Matt McLogan, and me. In other words, they were on it as guests and they were on it as journalists, but only one of the four has gone in the direction I went, who started out as a public figure and elected official and went to be a journalist. The other three started out as journalists, Weeks, Baird, and McLogan, and became public officials. And so, those are the four out of thousands.

Kyle Melinn: What side is more fun?

Bill Ballenger: Oh, I would say definitely journalists.

Kyle Melinn: Being a panelist is more fun, I can imagine. Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Being a panelist, you're on the hot seat there, you just hope you don't screw up. It takes some courage to get on that program. You can tell a lot of the guests are a little nervous when they get there and they make nervous jokes.

Susan Bolhouse: Being on Off the Record, having the radio program, the podcast, you have the opportunity to do something that you are exceptional at, interviewing people. I

would like to think that your ability to interview also was able to translate into your years of teaching. You've taught at several universities and colleges. How would you equate interviewing individuals and trying to get information to and from your students?

Bill Ballenger: Yeah. Honestly, I think the biggest challenge is trying to get information to students, really getting them really to care and to really understand what you're trying to impart. I was a visiting professor and an endowed chair at Central Michigan University between 2003 and 2007, and I had some very interesting students in the class. Some of them have gone on to serve as legislative aids in the legislature. One of them became a state representative, Andrea LaFontaine, Republican, was one of my students.

Bill Ballenger: But you know what? It's really tough, unless you're a total political junkie. A lot of students take these courses and they're just not as engaged as I would think they should be, and I feel a little frustrated trying to connect with them. I also felt they had a little too much knowledge from the academic ivory tower about political science and not enough from the kind of information and knowledge that I held in high esteem, that I've described earlier as what is really going on in politics at the grass roots? Why are people being elected? What are the issues? What's the difference in public opinion? How do people comport themselves once they're elected to the legislature?

Bill Ballenger: I didn't feel there was enough. So, I spent a lot of my time teaching, trying to make the students realize how tough it was to get elected, what they had to do to get elected. And maybe that inspired somebody like Andrea LaFontaine because she was a human cyclone as a candidate. I never would have guessed it from the girl I knew in the classroom, but that is what she did. She outworked all her opponents.

Bill Ballenger: I think that was tougher than interviewing people on radio. Guess what? I love to interview people on the radio. That is the easiest thing to do in the world. You just ask people questions, you get them talking, and get them to tell a story. And you know what, all this hostile journalism, got-you stuff, blindsiding people, trying to embarrass. Why? Why do that? There is so much stuff out there that should be coming from individuals that they should be glad to talk about, are eager to talk about, and anything I can do to get them to open up. I try and make everybody feel, for instance, in my syndicated radio show, just completely relaxed. We do a lot of laughing. There's a lot of humor in politics, and more of that ought to come out in interviews, and it just doesn't. Everything is so grim, and dour, and intense, and threatening both at the national and state level. It doesn't have to be that way.

Susan Bolhouse: Bill, you have two children, if I'm correct.

Bill Ballenger: Yes.

Susan Bolhouse: What piece of advice are you most proud of as far as extending to them about their future or their lives in general?

Bill Ballenger: Boy, that's a great question. I've got two very different children who are very close to each other personally, and yet they're really different. I've got a daughter who is ideologically, I would say. She likes to think, a moderate. She works for the federal government. She works for the Government Accountability Office, the GAO, out of her home, in Traverse City, even though the GAO is the auditing arm of Congress in Washington. She has to go down there once a month for about a week every month. Her husband is the superintendent of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. I didn't give her any advice about that. He's a national park ranger. They met on their own in Washington DC two decades ago. I think she's like me in the sense she was on the Michigan Daily Newspaper. She liked journalism. That's what she does for the GAO right now. She is a writer, researcher, investigator for the GAO, the auditing arm of Congress.

Bill Ballenger: Now, I never pushed her in that direction. I didn't know that's where she was going to end up. She worked as a journalist in South Africa for three years. She worked on an environmental newsletter in Washington for a couple of years before she got the job at GAO. I would just say this, somehow by osmosis, my interest in journalism and writing rubbed off on her without me consciously trying to direct her or teach her.

Bill Ballenger: Now, my son is a history teacher, chairman of the history department at the Kings Academy in Amman, Jordan, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Kings Academy, founded by the King. He went over there three years ago. And before that, 14 years, he was a history teacher at a private secondary school in Boca Raton, Florida called St. Andrews. He's a fanatic on the subject of history. He loves history. I love history. That rubbed off.

Bill Ballenger: He's much better on history that his sister. She's a great writer, researcher, investigator, but she's not really that into history. He's a fanatic, but he also is involved doing other things that I never would have dreamed of, except one thing. I walked through Michigan, right? He's ended up as being this incredible bicyclist and hiker. He's hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. He's hiked the entire Pacific Rim Trail. He has pedaled coast to coast on a bike solo with everything on its back from Maine to Oregon, and another time from Washington to Virginia. Now, would I have ever done that? No, but he might not have ever walked through Michigan either. But there's something genetic going on there. I don't know what it is, but there's some connection between the two and yet they're both doing completely separate and different things.

Susan Bolhouse: You have such a busy schedule even though you are at an age where a lot of people would consider, "It's about time to retire." But you seem to have some wonderful balance in your life. What is it that keeps you balanced and maybe away from politics, away from writing? Do you have interests such as maybe sports, or pets, or hobbies?

Bill Ballenger: Well, sports and pets. As you know well, I'm a sports fan, big sports fan, so I watch a lot of sports on TV. Pets, I've always loved cats and dogs. I grew up with cats. Now we've got a dog, and we had a great dog before that, Norwegian Elkhound, greatest breed in the history of canine world. So, pets and sports.

Bill Ballenger: But in terms of getting me to stop and retire, I don't even know what retirement means. I'm doing what I really like to do and I just think I've got so much to offer. Still, I've got big enough ego to say, "In politics, I'm going to make people listen to what I say, and if they want to pay me for it or hire me to come in and talk to them, I'll do that." And I'm still doing it.

Susan Bolhouse: I have a feeling that your idea of retirement would be like your retirement, quote unquote, from Inside Michigan Politics, an adjustment into something new, an adjustment into something different, an adjustment into a different use of your time and your schedule.

Bill Ballenger: I think that's absolutely right. Yeah, I mean I think there are different ways you could do things. I feel, for instance, like right now with the podcast and the talk radio program, I'm actually doing something that's easier to do and more natural for me to do and actually may be better for me to do than writing. I mean, I don't necessarily think I've ever really made of myself as a writer what I dreamed when I majored in English literature back at Princeton, I could become, but when I talk on radio or on TV, I feel I can pretty much do it right or do it near to the standard that I aspire to.

Kyle Melinn: You are considered the expert pundit when it comes to Michigan history and Michigan government. Do you view yourself as that, or is that just a label that I guess the rest of the political world has kind of dubbed you with?

Susan Bolhouse: What is a pundit?

Bill Ballenger: Well, a pundit is a really a predictor, a commentator, an analyst. It's beyond simply being a reporter, a journalist, a scrivener, somebody who gives you the facts. You go to a pundit to ask his or her opinion in addition to plumbing the depths of his or her knowledge. I would say I think the title has been conferred upon me by others mainly because of longevity. I've just been around so long and people look and they say everybody else is gone. They're either dead or retired or resigned. This anomaly, this holdover from a bygone era, from the Paleolithic age is still with us walking the Earth like a Tyrannosaurus Rex. And so we've got to view him as something unique.

Bill Ballenger: But I will say, when you talk about a historical political pundit, there are a lot of people here in the state who are fantastic historians, but how much about politics do they really know? And there are a lot of people who know a lot about politics in Michigan, but how much political history do they really know? I mean, I noticed for instance, there's been a lot of talk recently about the state administrative board. And the governor has said, "Look, this has been around

for 98 years." And I thought, yeah, in 1921 Alexander Jay Groesbeck founded it. He was the Republican governor. And guess what? It existed at that time, and nobody has pointed this out. People who were almost entirely elected officials, on their own, individual. We had a new constitution come in at '60, '61. Now most of the people, except for the Attorney General and Secretary of State, are appointed by the Governor.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah. We used to elect our superintendent and our treasurer.

Bill Ballenger: Absolutely. Every one of those people, transportation, you know, auditor general, everybody. They were all elected, and they were elected independent of Governor. You had many years in Michigan's past when you had totally split government. You'd have a Governor of one party. You could have a lieutenant governor of a different party. We had a different lieutenant governor from the Governor's party as recently as 1963, '64, T. John Lesinski and George Romney, famous stories about them. That was the last time we had it. So I mean, the point is, when people make these comments like, "98 years, I'm not going to give this power up." Well, I wouldn't give it up either if I were the Governor at this point, and I wonder if she really knows how far she has deviated in using that power now from what Groesbeck thought it was going to be used as in 1921, and as the officials elected at that time thought it would be.

Kyle Melinn: That's interesting because now it's a tool of the governor, whereas back then it was not necessarily a tool of the governor.

Bill Ballenger: No, not necessarily, and used for a completely different purpose.

Kyle Melinn: How interesting. I wanted to go back to something that you said a while ago about the 1982 walk around the state. I just really find this extremely fascinating. What do you think you could have done differently in that race to have won? To actually have won because what you did is so different than what you could possibly do today. But I'm curious if there was anything you could've done there to have actually won while still doing what you did.

Bill Ballenger: One word, money. Raise more money. When Lamar Alexander did this in Tennessee, Lawton Chiles in Florida, they were able to get off the hiking trail, walking trail, and raise money. It was a little easier for Alexander, for instance. He was older than I was at the time. He had run for governor once. He was a lawyer. He'd worked for Howard Baker, the US Senator. He had a lot of connections. So he was able to raise a lot of money. You've got to reinforce the message from the walk. You've got to remember, the people who knew about the walk were just reading about it in the newspaper from reporters. There were no ads. I had no ads. I mean, I ran the lowest budget U.S. Senate campaign, it's got to be in the last 40 years. I mean, I really only raised and spent about $50,000.

Kyle Melinn: And you finished in second place.

Bill Ballenger: I finished in second place. And so, I mean, I basically had no money. I'll say one other thing I forgot to mention earlier that was really intriguing about the walk, was the people who followed the walk cared about it so much that they would actually come up to me on the road, total strangers. The car would stop on a shoulder as I'm walking down the highway. I always walked facing traffic on the shoulder. And somebody would get out of the car and I thought, "Uh oh," but they would come up to me and they'd say, "I'm Joe Blow from Howard City and nice to meet you." I'd say, "Oh great. Great to meet you, Joe." He'd say, "Are you coming to Howard City?" I'd say, "Well, yeah, I might. I actually think I'll get through there, but it'll be another month or two." "Well, when you do just give me a ring. Here's my card, here's my number. Give me a ring. You can stay at my house. You can stay overnight. I'll put you up when you get there."

Bill Ballenger: 44 times. I stayed in 44 different houses with total strangers during the, on this walk going through the state.

Kyle Melinn: What an experience.

Bill Ballenger: I mean people were coming up. It was unbelievable. So I mean, I had all sorts of experiences like that I'll never forget. And I can't go anywhere in Michigan nowadays driving without crossing some intersection saying, "Oh my God, I remember when I was there." I remember the walk, you know, in 1982, you remember it.

Susan Bolhouse: You have many vignettes, so many stories. You've known so many people, so many interesting little sidebars. You just mentioned some about your hike. Can you just list some of the wonderful people, stories, important people not so important people who have just kind of formed the fun of all of this or maybe they've been extraordinarily-

Bill Ballenger: You mean overall in politics?

Susan Bolhouse: Overall in politics, the constituents.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I mean, yeah, there are certain people you remember. I mean, John Engler we've talked about previously. John Engler was only like 21 years old when he was first elected, and he had me actually come up and speak to his Beal City commencement, give the Beal City commencement address, and go over to the Engler farm and have dinner afterwards. I still remember it back in, I think it was like '71 when I was a Senator and he was a freshman state representative and then we had the district office together in Greenville for a year where he was the Maytag repairman. And I obviously have always had a good relationship with John Engler during the years.

Bill Ballenger: I remember him calling me up when he was governor, years after I was racing commissioner, and saying, "I'm thinking about making so and so my racing commissioner." The guy he was considering was named Nelson Western. He

was my legal counsel. And I said, "You know what, governor? That would be an inspired choice. Appoint him." And he did. And Nelson Western was a great racing commissioner. He's the late, unfortunately Nelson Western now since he passed on, but he was great. So I mean, I remember John Engler and his family. I went to his wedding in San Antonio when he married Michelle DeMunbrun.

Bill Ballenger: And other people, obviously Milliken I remember a lot. I remember a lot about George Romney. I went to George Romney's funeral. Does anybody know where George Romney is buried?

Kyle Melinn: Canada.

Bill Ballenger: No, he's buried in Brighton. Why Brighton? Remember I mentioned Jerry Rowe? Lenore Romney, George's wife, came to Jerry Rowe and said, "Where should we bury George?" And Jerry Roe said, "Well, he presided over American Motors as president, living in Bloomfield Hills. And then he spent a great time in Lansing as governor of the state. How about halfway in between, Brighton?" And they picked out a cemetery in Brighton they had no connection with, and he was buried there. And I remember, I was at the grave site and everybody had left. And Jerry Roe and I watched his casket being lowered into the ground. We were the last two people there when it was lowered into the ground.

Bill Ballenger: So I mean, there are things like that you remember. I still remember George Romney lying in state in the rotunda, in the Capitol, and it was an open casket. And he had this long hair that he had let grow. He looked like some kind of Old Testament patriarch, a Mormon patriarch, which is really what he was. He was a Mormon. And so, I mean there are incredible stories like that. Other figures, major figures over time, some of them reporters. I remember some of the great old reporters, Bob Longstaff, Glenn Engle, Roger Lane, Hugh McDiarmid, people think of as old time. He retired nearly 20 years ago. He was recent for me. He came to Michigan for the first time when I was in Washington in the Ford administration. I'd already served all my time in elective office by the time he got here. So the reporters I knew were ancient, going way back in time.

Bill Ballenger: And obviously the news media has changed dramatically over time. It's downsized substantially. And I would say Kyle, that your newsletter, the Michigan Information and Research Service, MIRS, and Gongwer. I mean really you are today to me what the old time really great newspapers like the free press and news were when they were fully staffed in Lansing with a full time bureau and so-called. You have the influence and the knowledge base, and what you impart to people who read you is really what journalism was for 150 years before you came on the scene in the last two decades.

Kyle Melinn: Well, I appreciate that, Bill. I appreciate that compliment. Why do you think that is? Why do you think that we have shied away, as far as a country, away from covering state or even local government? What's happening?

Bill Ballenger: I think it's economics. I mean, look, it's the internet. It's social media. I mean, you can't have a successful financial economic model as a newspaper, which depended on advertising. Why do people have to necessarily pay for anything they can get free online? And so, finding the economic model for journalism is what will save journalism. The real question is can it be saved? Can that model ever really be saved? I mean, journalism is doing everything it can. For instance, like right now, if one of my motives is in the Ballenger Report to actually make some money on it, I'm going to have to do some things that I have been considering for some time that I haven't done yet. Whether they will work or not, I don't know, but it's a constant struggle. And if you don't have the money to afford the staff, then you have to downsize.

Bill Ballenger: And I think you've got the right model at MIRS and Gongwer. I mean, you get a fairly high priced commodity that people have to have. I mean, there was one bit of advice I got from a Tennessee journal publisher back in the 1980's before I started Inside Michigan Politics. He said, "If you're going to start this newsletter, never overestimate the number of people who are going to subscribe to it, but never underestimate those who feel they have to have it are willing to pay." Now that combination, if you think about it, that is a successful model, and that is whether you've put it in those words or not, what you have done at MIRS and what Gongwer has done. And no other newspaper publication out there covering politics and government has been able to do that.

Kyle Melinn: I also wanted to ask about how politics has changed. We hear in 2019 about how this is the most divisive time in politics, and considering the entire history of this country, it's just kind of hard to believe. It just kind of seems like hyperbole. But compare politics of today, 2019, to politics from back when you were involved in the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, the ought's.

Bill Ballenger: Well, look, the biggest thing is obviously money and term limits. Everybody talks about those two things because when I first ran for office in 1968, I've got to tell you, you won't believe this. I was ashamed to be seen as raising too much money in the race. Yeah. I had seven opponents in a Republican primary in the summer of 1968. Seven opponents. It was the biggest Republican primary in the state. And I think more votes were cast in that primary in my district than all but one other district in the state. And I remember, I desperately wanted one or more of my opponents to outspend me. Definitely. I mean, I did not want the stigma of being seen as buying the race. And in fact, two of my opponents did outspend me, and I was really proud of that because I finished first in an eight-member primary with 27% of the vote.

Bill Ballenger: So nearly three out of every four voters voted against me. But I still won easily because three guys tied for second at about 18% apiece, and another guy got like 12% and another, etc., etc. So I mean, contrast that to today, Kyle. I mean, you read any story about somebody setting out to run for anything, and the first thing you see is how much money have they raised and what is the financial report? I mean, there's so much that's happened, going back to the U.S. Supreme Court decision, Buckley versus Valeo in 1976, campaign financing, you

know, decisions that have been made since then, the rise of political action committees, independent expenditures, the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court in 2010. I mean, spending is off the charts. Well, I mean that has just, I'm not going to say ruined things, but it just totally changed the dynamics.

Bill Ballenger: And then the other thing is term limits. Everybody talks about it. And I'm not going to dump on term limits. Okay. I'm not as down on term limits, although I always voted against it. I always said it was a terrible idea and all these people who come around cringing and moaning now saying, "Oh my God, I voted for term limits. I made a mistake." I said, "Well you dummy, I told you at the time." I said, "What do you expect?" And they said, "Well, you're right. How can we get rid of them?" I said, "Guess what? You're probably not going to get rid of it." But the point is, it does cut off the possibility of legislators, particularly legislators getting to know each other, really spending time with each other, building up relationships. So I think that's really important.

Bill Ballenger: But I'm going to say one other thing, kind of contrary to what I just said. All this idea that I hear nowadays about, oh my God, back in the good old days, everybody got along. We reached across the aisle. We all went out and drank together afterwards and everything was amicable, and I mean whatever differences we had on the House and Senate floor, we left them behind and we went off and we caroused together. We were colleagues, we were buddies. That is BS. That was not true. There was more of it then, yes. More camaraderie then, but not that much more than there is now.

Bill Ballenger: I think one of the things that's changed is people used to live in Lansing more and not go home as much as they do now. You know, when people do stay here, they kind of room in these boys' dorms for two nights or three nights and then they drive back home and so forth. That is a totally different dynamic than it used to be. But the idea that everything was sweetness and light between Republicans and Democrats in the so-called good old days, that isn't true, Kyle. There was a lot of animosity. There was a lot of mean-spiritedness. There were a lot of dirty tricks. Politics has not changed that much and it will not ever change that much.

Kyle Melinn: You got anything else?

Susan Bolhouse: No, I don't. I was going to say on that note of political wisdom, are there any last questions?

Kyle Melinn: No, I think I'm good.

Susan Bolhouse: Bill, we would like to thank you for your candor, for your memory, your history, for projecting all that you have, for your contributions in the last, what, half century and more to the state of Michigan and elsewhere. And thank you for this time with us.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I thank the two of you. I mean, this is the first time the Michigan Political History Society has ever had two interviewers. That's a first. Probably it will never happen again. And Susan Bolhouse, congratulations to you. You are the first female interviewer ever in the history of MPHS.

Susan Bolhouse: Thank you.

Kyle Melinn: All right. Well, thank you, Bill. Thanks for the time.