

Retired Assessor Historical Questionnaire
Tom Sigwart.

1. Describe your Career before becoming assessor.

I lived in Oakland in Northern California initially then we moved up to El Dorado County. I work for the Oakland Recreation Department. I ran their recreation programs and parks and managed personnel. I worked also for my father who had a jewelry store and the Oakland Recreation Department built a large building that was open until midnight for all kinds of sports and I ran that for about five (5) years then I was going to Cal Berkeley. After that I was a sheep herder. I had 1000 head of sheep. I owned them and my relatives owned a lot of land, 2000 acres and I fed them in the summer and I enjoyed it, I lived with the dog and a couple of horses and the sheep.

I worked for the county in the assessor's office as an appraiser also. I started out as an appraiser in the assessor's office and I was an appraiser for a time before I decided to run.

2. Give the milestones of your assessor career, your elected/appointed, re-election dates, date of retirement.

Elected in 1950 for the first time, and then re-elected again in 1966, and then I retired.

Well, I've lived in here in Crestview Mobile Home Park for 25 years. I retired in 1974.

I worked hard about the setting up different things for the Board of Equalization. I set up the parceling system for El Dorado County.

I was very thrilled about working with the State Board of Equalization and things like that during my career. And I got to know all the legislators.

I have awards on this wall from the State Legislature for my involvement with the legislative committees and the legislature. They use to call me quite often. Like Gene Chappie. He apprised me of what was primarily important. He would give talk about it, like agriculture, I would talk to him about this and that on what we were doing in El Dorado, and he would always talk to me with what was before the legislator, he as a fine man. I've been worried. I haven't heard from him, I think he must have died. He was a fine friend.

3. Describe your career, if any, after retiring.

Well, all I did was hunting, fishing and traveled. We took many trips. We traveled for 10 years.

4. What was your relationship with your predecessor?

It was one of mutual respect and admiration. It was a good relationship. Elmer Scott (Assessor from 1923 to 1950) was an old, old man. He was old when I became an appraiser. But he had no, no knowledge of values or anything.

5. What was your relationship with your successor?

Oh, very, very good. John Thorne was a fine man. I gave John Thorne my endorsement. I had a really good relationship with him and Myron. Myron was a dear friend of mine and we, to this day, are still in contact. I kept track of John Thorne because his granddaughter works at Dr. Silverman's office where I am a Patient. John's up in Oregon now.

6. Why did you run for Assessor?

I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed greeting people. I thought it was going to enhance my political career and help me to become a sheep herder.

7. What do you consider your greatest accomplishments?

Appraising Lake Tahoe in the winter time. Through the snow.

If you had had any money in those days, I could have bought the Lake Crest Property for a song. They were practically giving it away, you know.

Nobody ever assumed that I could have bought Cameron Park for \$500. It was for 50 cents an acre.

8. What do you wish you could have done differently?

I think I would program my life much as I did and it was, when I finished my term, I very seldom went back, only if they'd ask me to help them on something.

One of the reasons I retired was because of health problems.

And here I am 90 years old. I celebrated my 90th birthday July 12, 2004.

I talk to some of the members of the State Board and they would give me information on new equipment or sometimes they would get me values from big state construction real estate projects.

9. What do you remember most fondly about time in office?

The contact with public. I only had one bad day, I don't know if I told you about the time the man came in with a pistol. I decided I had some work to do, but they had a jury room with jurors in. Well, I was going up there to be alone so I could concentrate and my secretary who went with me and we did no more gotten in there then the door opened, came up and it spun all the way around and faced the door and I thought this is going to be a good one. He walked over and I could tell by the look on his face he reached in his pocket, pulled out what looked like naval gun, anyway laid it on the desk and he said "that's going to stay there and you're not going to leave the room until I finish talking to you." I said I will be happy to talk and discuss anything you have in mind. And, he said, "Well one thing, you don't know the law." I said, well, I'd be surprised, if you come up with something that I don't know; and he said, "you don't know that you can't put a value or tax a home until it's finished." And then he said, "I left the door off my closet, therefore you can't tax me." And I said, I hate to disillusion you, but regardless of the gun, I can't do anything about your taxes. I'll look on the worksheet and I said if there is a major flaw and your home wasn't completed on the tax day, I said I'll take care of that. I said, I'm sure your not going to get a rebate or your not going to change the amount of your assessment and he finally said, "At least you talked to me and told me the law. I came here to tell you the law." I said, am very cognizant of the law and I said you treated me as any other one that lives in El Dorado County who has taxable asset, and he said, "Thank you very much", broke camp and he left.

10. Where there any parts of your career you wished had not happened?

No.

11. What was your relationship with the CAA?

Well, I was a member of the CAA and attended all the meetings.

12. What is your recollection of the assessor scandals of the 60's?

I don't, I know there was one, well of course I have the overall memory of the scandal, I mean I don't know what it was. There was some favoritism going on in those days. People that were paying money to have their assessments put really, really low, but it didn't occur in this county but in larger urban counties.

13. Describe the pressure and stress of the assessor's job prior to the passage of Proposition 13.

I think that's after my time. Prop. 13 passed in 1978.

14. Where you involved in state or county politics other than the assessor's office? Were there other offices you ran for while in office as the assessor?

I did the granges quite a bit. I talked with Gene Chappie and the legislatures. Some of them would ask me to come to their county and give talk on taxes and I don't recall anymore about, I did it a few times and, but that was every, every other Friday night I would support some grange or somebody someplace, Gene Chappie generally at the grange.

- 15(a). What kind of person do you think it takes to make a good county assessor?

A person that would enjoy meeting people, a man that likes to read and study and know his job, I think it's a technical job and takes time to learn and I did that and I was an appraiser and so I was truly qualified to run the office as an elected.

- 15(b). Should an assessor be required to have an appraisal or real estate background?

It probably would aid some, but not necessarily. I don't think, it's not, it wouldn't be required I don't think, at any time.

16. Please add anything that we, we may have missed in the interview that you think would be interesting?

Well, the rapid growth of Lake Tahoe was a major effort and everything broke through up there and it was, some of it you had to have, get a boat and go cruise on the other side of the lake, it was easier to take a boat than drive cars around and then there was a lot of snow and cold, rain so your time was limited, although, we had an office, as you do now, I think we had 4 or 5 people, yeah.

The big estate, the people, they react just like everything else. You meet them cordially and explain what you're going to do and, I never did have anybody say get off my property, be irate and this and that. I had some that weren't very happy and they didn't, they must have been watching, I'd hear them say, cause you only finished this house yesterday (laughter), and so, it was some humor to it. And it was more than humor, in Tahoe there's a 1000's worth the lots, and now almost natural, knock on the door they opened many of them were naked.

Yeah, and a lot of them would say, come on in, they'd put on a komona, the first time I batted my eyes and said, what do I do now?!, you know. But I enjoyed people. Everybody is a little bit different, there's no two exactly alike and I was always really cordial. Sometimes if I seen they had several small children, I'd give them lollypops and go back and drive by place, I always go by first to see what they were doing, anyway, I give them some candy and lollypops for the kids and the parents were, a lot of the motel owners, they weren't happy to see me at all. But they, they always endorsed me.

I never had an office in the new government center. I was located in downtown Placerville, and then down at the corner of the muffler building. I went from the courthouse to the corner of the muffler building. In the muffler building, it was kind of working in a cave. Somebody would turn off that light and it was total darkness. You could hurt yourself and if you had a power outage, you'd be in the dark. Oh yeah, I had flashlights for everybody. It was quite often that there was a blackout.

17. How many people were working for you when you retired?

I don't know. I imagine 20 something, including Lake Tahoe. I only had 4 up there in South Lake Tahoe, two girls, if I recall correctly. But I didn't go up there, Myron was my assistant then he went, Myron Harrison and he went most of the time. I was getting old and tired. How it has changed though. Now everything is computerized. Before the growth, I remember before the freeway came in and I would wind around and wind around and went through all the dredging and I'd say, "Who in the world will every build on something like this? I used to take the family on picnics down to Bass Lake when they were kids. Now I am just amazed the way that that area has totally grown.

I mean you can talk about stupid. At one time in Rancho and a lot of land down here and he work in Sacramento County and he came in one day and said Tom you sent me all those, all those tops on your hill, I said I'm well aware that you own all that area down through where it's all built up now, and he said, this is earlier, when he came in and he said I'm getting tired paying taxes on that if you make out a deed I'll give you all those hill tops. I said no, no I don't think it's ethical, but somebody, could someday in front of you, valuable land, but I said I'll be dead before it is. But, surprise, surprise. Valuable land alright.

I was stuck up there, I said, I said I could run a few cows, but I really don't have any time. I don't think its going to be a lot longer than my lifetime that they would build all the way out to here on top of the knolls, Yeah, so, I couldn't have been a multi-millionaire a long time ago. But, nobody can accuse me of being too smart. But I enjoyed the work, I enjoyed people, I fraternized with my help and we had a good time, Myron was pretty straight laced. He did a major part of setting up, I did a lot of them too, he did a lot later on, then the county started growing it was too much for me. I did the outside work.

The office was a happy place. Yea, you'd never feel any tension and they were always laughing and if someone brought in a child, people lined up at that counter, the whole courthouse sets there, they never missed a beat. And it was just, it was a pleasure.

Well, I if, I attempted to hire people that were patient, no matter or issue would they be upset that they got angry at the taxpayer. Oh yes. I know some of the

assessor's, you know, they were really belligerent to them, you know, anybody came in they took it as an insult. They think they were questioned. People generally didn't like too many questions, but I just, I enjoyed people and I had small group for my birthday, but I enjoyed every one of them and I've got many of the cards from all over the country really, and one person has been dead for 2 or 3 years now. But, I really feel good, but my, my retention is bad, I forgot dates. Myron, Myron always was good, I wasn't too good with that until who was running for office, I'd call Myron, what happened, remember with this and that, Myron could remember the day, dates and what we did better than I can, and he still can. Myron was a very educated. He's a pretty quick man. I was fortunate, Johnny Thorne and he never, he's got good knowledge of the office, he's always the expert I admire, but he was a very political man. He understood politics. He lives up by Klamath Falls, Oregon. Johnny, he has built quite a ranch, you know and it's not far my Brother-in-law's place. He had quite a large acreage. I think he bought it for \$2.00 an acre, yep. It is real great what has been built now, talking about several 100 of these acres now, fish all he wants, pretty nice. I took my wife to the conventions and she was a lovely lady and I miss her terribly still and I have a boy here, my younger son and my wife they were dying, had two hospital beds and I, my oldest son he came every day he had off and would, so I could get some sleep, I had to get up every half hour to give morphine. It was a long night. But I've had some wonderful adventures. We went to New Zealand and Fiji, to Alaska on a cruise and through the Panama Canal on a cruise. I spent 14 days in a wheelchair, I fell in the bathtub, thought I broke my back. I got, look up the pictures solid mass of bruises, god it hurt, but I got rested the rest of the cruise, cause they, the guy was my friend but one of the sailors over it was, you know, called, pushed me around in the wheelchair all day and we'd go from one side of the ship to the other. Yeah, I just, sometimes I'd be a little brisk and I say, just don't be too rough with me cause you know I'm the boss.