

Retired Assessor Historical Questionnaire  
John Winner – El Dorado County

1. Describe your Career before becoming assessor.

I went to work for the Kern County Assessor's Officer in 1967. My interest in appraising was based upon a rural appraisal class that I had taken at Cal Poly Pomona during my undergraduate work.

I worked in Kern County for just under 10 years, working my way to a senior appraiser position. I was then offered the Assistant Assessor position in El Dorado County and moved to El Dorado County in 1976 where I worked for 16 years as the Assistant Assessor, prior to becoming the Assessor of El Dorado county.

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

My predecessor, John Thorne retired mid-term in December 1992 and at that time I was appointed to fill the unexpired term. I was re-elected twice in 1994 and 1998 and I retired on December 7, 2002.

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

My career after retiring has been dedicated to paying myself and my wife, doing some extensive traveling and being able to be away from the County and the office for extended periods of time.

4. What was your relationship with your predecessor?

I had an excellent relationship with my predecessor, John Thorne. John Thorne and I served on the National Board of Directors for the Society of Governmental Appraiser back in the early 70's. He and I had an opportunity to get to know one another and to see each others strength and weaknesses. When the Assistant Assessor position became available in El Dorado, I applied for it and had an opportunity to again to meet with John Thorne where we had been able to work very closely together on this National Board.

5. What was your relationship with your successor?

When I became Assessor in 1992 and needed to fill the Assistant Assessor position, there was one person currently within the El Dorado County Assessor's office that I felt strongly in regards to being able to fill that position, and that being Tim Holcomb. Tim served as the Assistant Assessor during my tenure as

Assessor. I therefore strongly supported Tim for election as the County Assessor and feel as though he will do an excellent job.

6. Why did you run for Assessor?

I felt the position of the Assessor was the natural progression. I had no difficulty in assuming that particular position of leadership.

7. What do you consider your greatest accomplishments?

Survival in any elected position is probably the greatest accomplishment. However, there were some milestones within the organization. Successfully litigating the issue of possessory interest on the American River in the Scott Free v. El Dorado County case was probably one of the milestones of El Dorado County. The case centered on the fact that the Board of Supervisors attempted to restrict commercial use of the American River for rafting purposes. That matter was litigated and the courts determined that the American River was a navigatable river and public property, which led to the private exclusive use of public property being a possessory interest.

The other primary accomplishments that I would say during the ten years of my assessors term was that the assessment roll was timely completed each year. The only year that we delayed the completion was 1978, the passage of Prop. 13, asked for an extension; however, the roll was timely completed but not delivered until after the extension expired.

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

As any department manager, having greater control over your department's destiny would probably been a maiden consideration. Working for the government, it is difficult to reward top achievers and it is also difficult to weed out poor performers.

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

In the later years of my term in office, I was blessed with some of the finest staff people that anyone could ask for. The Staff of the office made the environment within the office a pleasure to be around, a pleasure to work with and a pleasure to be associated with.

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

My first two years as Assessor were fairly difficult with serious personnel issues. The county was in a serious financial difficulty. The county administrative officer took it upon himself to attempt to dismantle the Assessor's Office since it was a fairly large drain on the general fund. The results of this was a loss of a

number of positions within the office and having to terminate several employees within the assessor's office.

11. What was your relationship with the CAA?

I had an excellent relationship with the California Assessor's Association. I served on many of their committees, chaired a number of their Adhoc Committees. Went through the officers chairs and served as President of the State Association in the year 2001.

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

I went to work for the Kern County Assessor's Office in 1967, a couple years after the primary scandals that occurred. These scandals centered around kick-backs and a few of the assessor's offices, principally San Francisco, Alameda, and San Diego Counties. The kick-backs eventually evolved into the conviction of the San Francisco County Assessor, the Alameda County Assessor and the suicide death of the San Diego County Assessor. As a result of these particular scandals, some major changes occurred in state government overseeing local county assessors. This bill was passed in 1968 requiring appraiser certification and monitoring and surveys and sampling of local county assessment rolls.

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

Prior to 1978, assessors appraised property on a cyclical basis. What this meant was that it could be 4, 5, 6 years between appraisals of properties, which meant that huge increases could have occurred. The atmosphere of the cyclical appraisal was traumatic to the taxpayer who would see substantial increases from one year to the next. With rising property values and appreciation of real estate, this precipitated the tax revolt of the 70's, which led to the passage of Proposition 13. I formally opposed Proposition 13 on the basis that it would eliminate equities among properties. The assessor could continually strive to see to it that all properties were assessed on an equitable basis. With the passage of Proposition 13 and the implementation of the base year concept, this would have eliminated this equity among properties relative to like properties being appraised and assessed at the same amounts. I fully supported the 1% tax rate concept; however, my opposition to Proposition 13 was the base year.

How do I feel about Proposition 13 now, again my primary objection to Proposition 13 was the inequities that would have occurred as a result of the base year concept. Early studies and hearings after the passage of Proposition 13 indicated that the taxpayer was not concerned about like properties being assessed at different levels. In El Dorado County the only complaints that the office received was from El Dorado Hills whereby the bond issue issued by the El Dorado Irrigation District was being paid off at a higher rate on properties that

had recently sold or that were assessed to their current base year. Other than that from a statewide basis, the general taxpayer did not seem to be overly concerned about the difference in property values from neighbor to neighbor. So in the long run, Proposition 13 has certainly been a benefit to the taxpayer of California.

Although Proposition 13 was a fairly short ballot initiative, including approximately 411 words, the 411 million words used to try to interpret, legislate and litigate created a whole new generation of paralegals within the California County Assessor's Offices. It required staff to become much more knowledgeable on property tax laws and a much greater awareness.

14. Were 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?

There was no other state or county offices that I ran for. I did serve on many local community committees and organizations, as well as appraisal organizations.

15. What kind of person do you think it takes to make a good county assessor? Should an assessor be required to have an appraisal or real estate background?

I think an assessor needs to be an academically skilled person, a good communicator, good public speaker, a problem solver and have a better than average ability with personnel management. Although a real estate background or an appraisal background is certainly an advantage, especially in the medium to smaller counties, I'm not sure it is an absolute requirement especially in the larger counties. A good administrator would probably be more advantageous than having the appraisal or real estate background especially in the larger counties.

In conclusion for the retired assessor historical questionnaire, I would only add that I am happy to see that the California Assessor's Association is continuing to place a great deal of emphasis on the historical nature of not only the assessors, but also property taxation and the roll of the assessor since the beginning. Much of the future can be predicated on experiences from the past and therefore it is important to have a permanent record of the historical aspects of the California County Assessor. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the passage of Proposition 13 in 1998, I spent a fair amount of time researching and putting together a chronological history of property taxation as it relates back to California even prior to California becoming a state, and it is interesting to follow that chronological order of progression of changes in the property tax laws and also California politics as we moved into the new millennium.