

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: John S. Whitehead, Professor of History,
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" . . . the entire economy and wealth of Alaska today is based on the revenues from the Prudhoe Bay oil fields which are tied directly to statehood. . . . And so, Alaskans see the two tied together. . . there's a very positive link. Whereas, I think in Hawai'i, there is not any clear-cut connection. Hawai'i's economy is not based on the fact that it became a state in 1959. Hawai'i's population, the fact that people came to Hawai'i, is not based on the fact that it was admitted to the union. So, there's not that simple, clear link between the two in Hawai'i that there is in Alaska."

Professor John S. Whitehead, whose specialty is American history, is studying the statehood movements in Alaska and Hawai'i and their interrelationship. As part of the study, he is conducting oral history interviews with leaders of both movements.

Currently, Whitehead is examining the pre-statehood constitutional conventions and the effect these conventions had on eventual statehood for both territories.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

John S. Whitehead (JW)

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Mānoa, O'ahu

BY: Chris Conybeare (CC) and Warren Nishimoto (WN)

- CC: Why don't we just start out. Why don't you give us your name and a little bit about your background--why you're here.
- JW: Okay. I'm John Whitehead, and I'm professor of history at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. And the reason I'm here today is because this is the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hawai'i statehood and also the twenty-fifth anniversary of Alaska statehood. And over the last few years I've been engaged in an oral history of the Alaska statehood movement. And I discovered through talking with some people such as George Lehleitner that the Hawai'i and Alaska statehood movements were very heavily entwined together, but as they've been recorded over the last twenty-five years, Alaskans tend to write about their statehood movement oblivious to Hawai'i; and equally, Hawaiians tend to write about their statehood movement oblivious to Alaska's. So what I've been trying to do is to weave them together and see what effect both of the territories had on each other since they both entered the union within nine months of each other.
- CC: Do you have any preliminary assessment of that intertwining that you can report at this time?
- JW: Well, what had happened was, it turned out that though Hawai'i had always thought it would enter first because it was the more populated state--or the more populated territory; it was the area that had an economy which was supporting a territorial government. Alaska was, on the other hand, much more the underdeveloped area. It barely had enough money to have a government, a very small population, virtually no economy except the military in the years after the Second World War. But the impressions that Americans in what Alaskans call the "Lower Forty-eight," which you call the "Mainland," (had of the two) territories was quite different. And as a result, it really took both of the territories applying for statehood at the same time to get either one in.

The reasons for this: Hawai'i had the development, but its multi-racial population and, later, the fear that Communism was at work in Hawai'i led people in the Congress to have a negative impression

of Hawai'i. On the other hand, Alaska was seen by many Americans as the last frontier. It had basically an Anglo-Saxon population immigrated up from the United States, which by the time of the years after World War II was greater than the native Alaskan population. So Alaska was seen as sort of the last frontier of what would have been a popular view in the 1950s of 100 percent Americans. And so, Alaska had this sort of positive American last-frontier image, though it lacked the population and the economy. Hawai'i had the economy, had a population, but this multi-racial element and the Communist patina after the Second World War caused it, as I said earlier, to be looked on with a little bit of suspicion. But when the two got together, Alaska as one of the two territories could get a favorable view from people as, "Wow, well, here's the last frontier of Americans. They're still out of the union. We got to bring the Alaskans in." That's what the supporters would have said. On the other hand, there was Hawai'i, and people could say, well, it has a developed economy and a population. So eventually, both of the assets of each territory helped to counterbalance what might have been the deficits if either one had tried to enter alone. If just Alaska was the last territory, people might have said there's not enough people up there for it to become a state. If it had just been Hawai'i it might have, again, stood alone as this different off-shore territory with a different kind of population. But I think, working together, that the attributes which both of the territories had led to the eventual successful admission of both. And . . .

CC: Weren't some of the opposition, though, based on some factors that had nothing to do with either of those exactly. And that is, that it was viewed, and probably correctly so, that the admission of both states would bring into Congress votes in favor of things like the Civil Rights Act or that kind of thing? Even Alaska, as you say, had a basically Anglo-Saxon--White, Anglo-Saxon--population, but still it was a liberal Democrat state. And wasn't some of the opposition based on factors like that as opposed to the reasons you stated?

JW: Some of the opposition was based on those factors, particularly from Southern congressmen who feared that both Alaska and Hawai'i would sort of help lead the way to civil rights, which they wanted to stop. But the interesting thing was, by the time of the mid-1950s the Southern delegations started to become split, so that it wasn't a solid Southern opposition. Louisiana, which Mr. Lehleitner helped with, was almost 50 percent in favor of statehood. Both Alabama senators were in favor of statehood. And so, many of these Southerners, although having reservations about Alaska and Hawai'i, were starting to see that America was going to have a wider role in the world after the Second World War, and that Alaska and Hawai'i would be strategic positions in America's growing global involvement. And so, some of the same senators from the South who might have been opposed to Alaska and Hawai'i for racial reasons tended to favor bringing the two in because they were going to be, shall we say, the frontiers of America's new strategic position in the world. So many of the supporters of Alaska statehood in the Congress were

those you might view as internationalists, with one great exception. And that was J. William Fullbright of Arkansas, who was the liberal's liberal when it came to foreign policy but the conservative's conservative when it came to civil rights. So he opposed statehood for both Alaska and Hawai'i because in that one case, the civil rights or the racial issue outweighed in his mind the global aspects of foreign policy.

CC: There's some other, perhaps, myths, but I'm kind of taken by what you said in terms of the two states complementing each other. And yet, in fact, the bills for admission for both states were considered separately. Alaska, of course, came first, much to the surprise of many people in Hawai'i; and then Hawai'i, second. And I'm just wondering if, in fact, you give much credibility to the idea that this was part of a deal worked out between Jack Burns and Lyndon Johnson that was the magic formula for accepting statehood for Hawai'i, or in fact, would it have happened anyway?

JW: Well, let's put it this way, the two states--even though I've previously emphasized the positive things they had to contribute to each other--when you look at how a bill passes through Congress, you add up your supporters. You also try to split your detractors. Now, (there were) enough people in the Congress who had different reasons for opposing Alaska or Hawai'i--the people who opposed Alaska said it didn't have enough people; those who opposed Hawai'i, it was the Communism, the multi-racial population. If you combined those opposition forces, they could defeat both bills. And in fact, what had happened in 1954 was that the Alaska and Hawai'i statehood bills had been joined together in the Senate, and it became clear (that) this process led to--well, the Senate bill later died in the House--that joining the two states was a disaster. If the two bills came in together, everyone knew that both would be defeated. So as early as 1954 it was clear to anyone who was a friend of Alaska or Hawai'i that a joint bill would lead to the defeat of both. So it was clear a long time before John Burns entered Congress that if either were to get in, the two bills would have to be handled separately. So that scenario was clear by 1954.

When Burns entered the Congress or was elected in 1956--so actually wouldn't have held his seat until January of '57--by the time Burns arrived in Washington, Alaska had had its constitutional convention. Alaska had elected a so-called Tennessee Plan delegation which had arrived in Washington by December of '56. So, the ball of momentum had switched to Alaska, among other reasons, because there was still this lingering fear, which had been increasing over the years, that Communism was growing in Hawai'i. In fact, one of your governors Ingram Stainback reported in the mid-'50s that Communism was stronger in Hawai'i in '54 than it had been in 1950. So, rather than Communist at least what the Mainlanders were viewing Hawai'i as--that fear had been stoked up throughout the '50s. So that by the time Burns had arrived in Congress, it appeared that Alaska had the better chance to be admitted first for the simple reason that it had less going against it. And so, my view of Burns's contribution

was, if you're talking about a deal, what kind of deal could have been made? Since Burns had no vote, he couldn't have made a deal to vote for the Alaska statehood bill because he didn't have a vote. What I think he found out when he arrived in the Congress, since the Alaska delegate Bob Bartlett was a Democrat too, that to get Hawai'i in, what he needed to do was to let Alaska go forward first and support it, without saying to people, "If you go for Alaska, you'll have to go for Hawai'i." So, I think that what Burns's great contribution was, was to let the Alaska bill go through without tacking Hawai'i onto it at every step of the way. Because that took a great deal of restraint on his part. So, I tend to discount the deal for the simple reason there wasn't any need for a deal.

CC: But in the . . .

JW: The path was politically clear. And so, a wise man would have gone for that strategy if he wanted to get Hawai'i in. And I think that's probably what Burns's strategy was.

WN: Why do you think it took so long? If the momentum was already set in '54 and '55, what did it take until '58 to actually get the momentum for putting Alaska in first? Or, is it because, do you think, Burns making the suggestion and following through with it? Or why didn't Elizabeth Farrington, for example, suggest it?

JW: Well, let's see. Burns was elected (in) '56, if we can keep the date. The Alaskans had had their constitutional convention in the winter of '55 and '56. They elected the Tennessee Plan delegation in I believe it was (October) of '56. So the momentum had just passed, I would say, to Alaska just coincidentally at the time that Burns was elected the delegate from Hawai'i. So then, when you got into that Congress, which was the Eighty-fifth Congress, the question that then has arisen in many people's minds is, why was it not until May of '58 that the Alaska bill finally came forward? Poor Burns was having to hold back throughout most of his first term in the Congress. And why was the bill delayed? And the best I can find out from my conversations with George Lehleitner is that Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson were not really friends of statehood for either territory. And Rayburn had delayed letting the bill go forward in the House until late in the second session. The story that we have in Alaska is that Sam Rayburn, though not a proponent of statehood, said to Bob Bartlett, the delegate from Alaska, "I'm not for statehood, but I will let you have your day in court. I'll let---I'll make sure that the bill reaches the floor of the House and that it's voted on in this Congress." So, there are those who think that really, Johnson and Rayburn were doing their best to kill the bill by delaying it as long as possible.

CC: Or at least get through the next elections.

JW: Yes. And I'll tell you this story. The man who fathered--the champion or the quarterback of both statehood bills, Alaska and Hawai'i--was a

wonderful man from Albany, New York, named Leo O'Brien, who was chairman of the House Committee on Insular and Interior Affairs. He chaired both bills, floor managed them in the House. And I interviewed him in '81, right---a year before he died. And I said, "Leo, what do you think was the formula that got the Alaska bill through the Congress?"

And he said, "I don't know. To this day, I have no clue why that bill got through the Congress. I said to my wife the day before the vote came, 'It's going to fail. Let's pack our bags and go back to Albany. It's dead this session.'" "All I can tell you," said Leo, "is that Bill Egan, the Tennessee Plan senator from Alaska who was an Irishman like myself, gave me a shamrock tie tack. I wore it on the floor of the Congress when the bill came up, and the vote went through, and I threw up my hands and said it was a miracle."

And when the bill went to the Senate--and I would point out, when it went to the Senate, Lyndon Baines Johnson was not present for the vote--Mike Mansfield managed the bill. And Leo O'Brien gave him the shamrock tie tack and said, "Mike, I have no idea how the bill will pass the House. You take this shamrock tie tack and wear it and see if it brings you luck, too." And what most observers have said is miraculously, in the very short time that was left, the bill passed the House May 21. It went to the Senate. If the Senate had substituted its own bill with any changes from the House bill, then it would have had to go into conference and the session would have run out. Some people think that's what Sam and Lyndon were hoping for, who knows? But the Senate agreed to accept the House's bill without amendment. And this has been termed by many, I think including John Burns, as miraculous. And so, in all the interviews I've done, the only thing that asserts why the two got in or why Alaska got through both houses that summer of 1958 was a shamrock tie tack passed around among three Irishmen.

(Laughter)

WN: I've read that some of the Senate--one of the Senate tactics for anti-Statehood people was the filibuster. And they used it very well during the '50s. And I read where a possibility of a deal between Burns and Johnson was that Johnson will make sure that a filibuster does not occur.

JW: In the . . .

WN: On the floor.

JW: On the Alaska bill?

WN: Right.

JW: That, I have never come across in any document. From what I have read, the evidence is, it passed the Senate with a pretty good majority. I think it was a two-thirds majority. Something like

sixty-four to twenty, something like that. Those who were going to block it saw the cards turning against them. And probably what is the truth is if Rayburn or Johnson had wanted to stop the bills, they could have. Now, whether that's the kind of support that should be honored in the pantheon of heroes twenty-five years later or not, I don't know. But I think the best you can say about Rayburn and Johnson is that they didn't block it.

CC: Real quick, [Senator Henry] "Scoop" Jackson is also credited as a big hero of statehood.

JW: Oh, dear. "Scoop". . . . Well, he's dearly departed now. When we were having the Alaska statehood celebration last summer [of] the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bill passing the Congress, "Scoop" was lauded as "Mr. Alaska." Knowledgeable people tend to think that of the two Washington senators, Senator [Warren] Magnuson was the friend of statehood. Again, there's a thought that Jackson, because he represented Seattle interests who profited with Alaska remaining a territory, was at best lukewarm to Alaska's statehood, and that what his contribution was, was to let the bill reach the floor of the Senate. Again, his contribution was that he wasn't negative. You get this with a lot of people. Twenty-five years later, with Alaska producing most of the oil in the United States, people don't want to pretend that they weren't great friends of the state twenty-five years later. So, there's been a lot of jumping on the bandwagon after the fact--of "Was I a friend?" back at the time. There were many more dedicated friends of statehood for both Alaska and Hawai'i than Jackson, Rayburn, or Lyndon Johnson. I always think they ought to get the credit for sticking their neck out.

CC: Who do you think a couple of them were? Are we pau? Okay, let's just finish up with that. I'd like to hear your assessment of who the real friends were.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JW: . . . through just as well . . .

CC: Without all that.

JW: . . . without the myth. It took a lot of guts for him [John A. Burns] in his first session in Congress to sit back and just be criticized for doing nothing when he knew that was the only way to get the bill accepted.

CC: I think maybe that's a good thing to say. Because I think that's credit where credit is due. Why don't you go through that again, in terms of Jack Burns's contribution with a lot of pressure to be actively for Hawai'i's statehood.

JW: Okay. Keep in mind, Jack Burns was for Alaska statehood for one and one only reason: to get Hawai'i in. And so, Jack Burns often said, "I want Hawai'i statehood to be a successful bill, not just an

issue that I support." And to see statehood achieved, which meant to see a bill passed through Congress, I think Jack Burns's great contribution was to be able to sit back and let the Alaska bill go through the Congress without making pronouncements that the Hawai'i bill will follow. He didn't make public pronouncements like that. That's what he hoped for, but he didn't go around confusing the Alaska statehood bill with an Alaska-Hawai'i statehood bill. And if you consider that the Democrats had just come to power in Hawai'i in '54, Burns was the first Democrat to be a delegate [in 1956], it took an amazing amount, I guess you would call it, poise on his part to go to Washington, being the only representative of the people of Hawai'i, and basically to look like he was not supporting the issue he said he was in favor of, in order to get the bill passed if not in the Eighty-fifth Congress, in the Eighty-sixth Congress. And that took an amazing amount of guts on his part. And in fact, he later paid the price, getting severe criticism from the Republicans and then losing the first [gubernatorial] election after the bill had passed [in 1959]. So the man paid a price for the stand he took. But I think in that way, he should be credited for making sure that a Hawai'i statehood bill was passed after the Alaska one was completed. It was a strategy which seemed to be the only strategy that was going to work politically. And Burns should be credited for being able to step back. Because as you know, Hawai'i had wanted very much to be the forty-ninth state. In fact, quite frequently, when the bills had been introduced in the Congress for Hawai'i's statehood, there was a famous one, House Bill Forty-nine. And so, Burns was willing to be--in a way, you could say--Burns was willing to be the fiftieth state to make sure that Hawai'i would be a state.

CC: What about the reactions--you've done surveys now with people in Alaska your home state, and here in Hawai'i. You notice differences about how people regard statehood in those two places?

JW: Yeah. And I think the reason is simple and obvious. As I said earlier, Alaska had no economy except a fishing industry which was controlled by Seattle interests, a little bit of mining that had basically died out by the Second World War, and the military. As a result of statehood, the state of Alaska--remember when Alaska entered the union, only 2 percent of all the land was in private hands, the rest was owned by the federal government--Alaska was given a statehood grant of 105 million acres of land which it has yet to select all of it. But one of the first parcels selected in the statehood grant was what is today the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. So, the entire economy and wealth of Alaska today is based on the revenues from the Prudhoe Bay oil fields which are tied directly to statehood. So, for Alaskans, the style of life, the economy, their jobs, all come from oil directly or indirectly. And oil came directly from statehood. And so, Alaskans see the two tied together. In fact, when we did these oral history interviews asking the people who put together the state twenty-five years ago if they thought it was successful, even if they had been opposed to statehood twenty-five years ago, it was because they didn't think Alaska could ever support a state government. No one, I would say, with the exception of two or three

people, were predicting the kind of oil wealth twenty-five years ago which Alaska had today. So, the standard of living, the fact that there is a state government now which levies no taxes on the people, is all seen as coming from oil, and that came from statehood. So there's a very positive link. Whereas, I think, in Hawai'i, there is not any simple and clear-cut connection. Hawai'i's economy is not based on the fact that it became a state in 1959. Hawai'i's population, the fact that people come to Hawai'i, is not based on the fact that it was admitted to the union. So, there's not that simple, clear link between the two in Hawai'i that there is in Alaska.

WN: So, in other words, when you do interviews with Alaskans, they would see statehood as a very---turning point in the history of Alaska or a watershed event?

JW: Oh, yes. THE watershed. It created the economy. In fact, even those who were negative, the reason they said they were negative is that they didn't think there'd ever be enough money in Alaska to pay for keeping courts open. And so, the oil revenues, yeah, they see statehood as really the beginning of Alaska's history--in some ways.

CC: And in Hawai'i, people don't trace their history to that event.

JW: No. In fact, if you look at books on Hawai'ian history, statehood comes after about four or five hundred pages of something else, and usually occupies about two or three pages. So, it's not seen as the beginning which it is seen in Alaska.

WN: Seems like in Hawai'i, it's the war--World War II . . .

JW: Yeah.

WN: . . . was the watershed event.

JW: The similarities between the two in what statehood did as I've talked to some people in Hawai'i and people in Alaska--and this, I think, is sometimes why Hawaiians are a little bit ambivalent about statehood. Before statehood, investors in the United States or ~~Lower Forty-eight~~ viewed both Alaska and Hawai'i as territories as some type of strange, foreign places, not places you'd want to go and invest your money. The result of statehood for both has been that Mainland investors have been much more willing to invest capital in both Alaska and Hawai'i. So the Alaskans see this in a very positive step, that it created the economy. You know, it made it---literally, made it possible to have schools. I think sometimes in Hawai'i, people see this great influx of investment as something that has maybe changed the standard of life or the style of living . . .

CC: Well, there is, you know . . .

JW: . . . that existed before statehood.

CC: . . . two interesting things, I think. One is that in Alaska a few years ago, I know when I was---I traveled around up there a lot, there was a lot of people being madder than hell at the federal government and how these guys should---we should just go on our own because we now have all this oil and we can afford it. Who needs them anyway. And besides, they stop us from killing eagles and . . .

JW: Whales. . . (Chuckles)

CC: Whales, and whatever they were mad at at the time. And at the same time, in Hawai'i, you know, there is a growing sense of concern, and disappointment, and some outright advocates that independence and a return to the Hawai'i as a nation is something that could be favored. And they trace back to statehood things like the sudden influx of people . . .

JW: Tourists.

CC: . . . from the Mainland . . .

JW: Yeah.

CC: . . . tourists, all that kind of stuff. So you do have, in recent past, in both places some voices raised against statehood.

JW: Oh, yeah. In fact, there are still anti-statehooders in Alaska who are quite vocal. And from what I have been able to find out in talking to them, these were the old-line American frontiersmen types who came to Alaska to get away from government, and laws, and rules and regulations, and people. And so, you find a lot of people in Alaska who said, "I came up here to homestead. I came up here to get away from zoning, and plumbing permits, and electrical codes, and business licenses, and that's what I came to Alaska for. And what statehood has brought is government, whether it's municipal government or state government. And now if I want to build my trailer court, or my shopping center, I've got to go downtown and get a business license and a building permit. And some electrical inspector is going to come and observe it. And that's what I came to Alaska to get away from." And that is, in a way, the base--the hard-core mentality of the anti-statehooders.

WN: How about the native people of Alaska?

JW: The native people of Alaska have profited greatly from statehood for this reason. Before Alaska entered the union, the old outstanding claims of native Alaskans to their land had never been settled. When Alaska was bought from Russia in 1867, a final settlement of the land claims of Alaska natives had not been made and was just put on the boiler. Because, see, Alaska natives were never conquered nor did they ever sign any treaties with the United States. So

their land claims were in limbo all the way until the 1960s. And what happened, in a nutshell, was when the oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay, then a decision was made by the oil companies to build a pipeline 800 miles across Alaska to the port of Valdez. In order to build that pipeline which was to be built first as a private operation, the right of way for the pipeline had to be cleared. And so, as a result, that forced the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act on the Congress of the United States. And you got what seems in some way an unholy alliance of all the major oil companies in the United States and the Alaskan Federation of Natives suddenly joining together. You rarely find capitalists and minority groups petitioning the Congress together. Finally, the Congress had to settle the claims of Alaska natives. And so, the result of the pipeline was what's called the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act which created (twelve) regional corporations (and a thirteenth corporation for natives outside Alaska) and transferred to roughly 60,000 Alaska natives about forty million acres of land and almost a billion dollars in cash (\$962 million). So that today, these Alaskan native corporations are the major domestic corporations in Alaska. They're the largest businesses that are owned within the state, because obviously, the oil industry is owned outside the state. So as a result of this act, Alaska natives are now major economic forces within the state of Alaska.

CC: Matter of fact, there's some of them speculating in land here in Hawai'i.

JW: Yes. Yes, in fact, one of the---the corporation that serves the natives in the Fairbanks region where I'm from has refused to invest its money exclusively in Alaska and is famous for investing in hotels in Hawai'i. And in the city of Anchorage, many of the large---in fact, today, if you stay in one of the large hotels in Alaska, it's either owned by one of the White governors of Alaska or by a native corporation. Native corporations own the Hilton and the Sheraton. And two of our governors, Wally Hickey and Bill Sheffield, own the two other large hotels. So statehood, if you put it in this simple equation: statehood brought oil, oil brought the pipeline, the pipeline brought the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act. So, it's almost a textbook situation of everyone profiting. (By 1985-86, there is much commotion among Alaska natives over the potential effects of the Claims Act, and a fear that natives may lose their lands. Amendments to the Act are being proposed in Congress to save the land.)

CC: And here, we don't have that kind of land base, and the indigenous minority, of course, keeps getting pushed off, further off, and further alienated from its traditional claims and traditional rights. And I think that's another . . .

JW: Yeah.

CC: . . . difference.