BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Thomas P. Gill, 62, attorney and former Lieutenant Governor of Hawai'i

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Tom Gill was born and raised in Honolulu and is a product of the public school system. He began his political career in 1954 when he was elected chairman of the O'ahu Democratic County Committee. In 1959, the year Hawai'i became a state, he was elected to the legislature and became majority floor leader.

In 1962, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Two years later, he ran for a U.S. Senate seat but was defeated by Hiram Fong.

Gill was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1966, serving under Governor John A. Burns. In 1970, he was defeated by Burns in a race for the governorship.

Gill today is an attorney in private practice.

Tape No. 12-7-1-85

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Thomas P. Gill (TG)

April 19, 1985

Downtown Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: Okay, Mr. Gill, in 1954, people have said that it was a Democratic revolution. Do you agree with that term? If not, what was it? What happened in '54 in your opinion?

TG: Oh, something that was on the way for a good many years before that, but came to a head in '54, and probably happened a couple of years sooner than it should have. It was the collapse of one political mechanism and the beginning, perhaps, of another--brought on by a lot of things. Everything is brought on by something else, of course; but in the chain of Hawaiian history, I guess it would be a result, not necessarily an expected result, of an aging plantation economy that had been considered modestly repressive up to World War II, at least. And then, of course, the events of World War II brought a lot of people to the fore who would not normally have been there, perhaps; at least, not at that stage in their lives. Changed the economy and switched things around, and the net result was a political change. And I think that that's all perfectly explainable, perhaps not foreseeable.

WN: What was your role in it? How were you involved in this change?

TG: Oh, I suppose in a normal sense, being born here and having been raised here, and not necessarily in any way, shape, or form, part of the plantation hierarchy at all. One of those free-floaters who had their own connections.

(Equipment difficulties. Taping stops, then resumes.)

WN: How were you involved in this change in 1954?

TG: Well, I was involved as a person who was a local resident who had come back from law school after having served during the war and gotten the G.I. Bill like so many other people of my particular generation did. I was interested in politics, so we found that the Democratic party was, perhaps, the only mechanism available. The Republicans, of course, were being about as standoffish as the Democratic party is today and telling everybody they didn't need

them. So, those who were not members of that establishment obviously gravitated to the other side, which was the Democrats. And I think we worked for several years, starting, in my case, in 1951, and attempting to get precincts organized and get people together into groups and get them to think that they could do something. By 1954, it was the second election we wrestled with, '52 being the first. The dam broke, and perhaps before people were really ready for it. They didn't know what they were going to do, and that was part of their problem.

WN: You want to elaborate a little more on that? "Before people were ready for it"--what do you mean by that?

TG: Well, I have a rather different view, perhaps, of what a political party is supposed to be. Many of us thought that if you were going to win elections, which of course is the aim of going into them, you should win it with some kind of group that had a philosophy, that knew what it wanted to do, and knew what changes that should be made, what they would promote, what they would oppose, and so forth. And we had made a fairly good start at this in the early '50s and, I think, were doing reasonably well, considering the lack of experience and background. But the election in 1954 was probably about two years early in terms of beginning to educate people and solidify them into groups which could act effectively on these items. As it turns out, we were saved by happenstance and various mistakes of the opposition, which is usually the way history works.

WN: You were elected O'ahu Democratic County Committee chairman in 1954.

TG: Well, we needed a political mechanism. The central committee, which is supposed to be statewide, which was controlled by Mr. Burns and his people, had a sort of antipathy towards ideas or program. They were interested only in political power, so to speak, in putting together voting blocs that could come up with the winning combinations in the elections, which is very important but I think only part of the picture. Most of the people who were interested in program were on O'ahu--perhaps to some extent, clustered around the University or they were young professionals, or whatever. And the O'ahu County Committee was a very good mechanism to put this together. So we did, over the opposition of Burns.

WN: Do you feel you succeeded in your goals?

TG: Depends what the goals are. Goals are short-range and long-range. If you're talking about getting some legislation put together before the legislature and passed, yes, I think we did a fair amount in the '50s and the early '60s. As far as having some of those goals carried out, it requires the effective administration of the State. I would say, perhaps, have been less successful in that for obvious reasons.

WN: What would you say are the contributions that the John Burns administration has made to the history of Hawai'i?

TG: Oh, I think, he, in a great, very positive sense, brought many people into the political sphere who might not have been there otherwise, and served as sort of a catalyst in a sense. Not that those people would not have been there in one form or another in any case because they were the political moving force at that time, but he, I think, presided over it reasonably well. That is one of the things that leads to change. But perhaps in the long run, his contribution was one more of presiding than leading. Not that that's bad, it's just a different way of doing things.

WN: People like Dan Aoki have--getting to the issue of statehood--Dan Aoki has really given John Burns a lot of credit, and I think a lot of the press have done so. Do you think it's deserved?

TG: Oh, I think so, certainly. Burns finally made it to Congress as a representative in whatever year it was. Fifty-seven, I think?

WN: Delegate, '56.

TG: Yeah, '56 election, '57 session. The non-voting delegate, so to speak. And I think at that stage, was in a position, particularly since he was friends with Brother Johnson and various others who were influential, to help steer the bill through Congress. Now, the bill for statehood seems very important to people in Hawai'i, but probably was looked down with less than great anxiety by most of the rest of the Congress. They were interested in it, I'm sure, but I don't think it was a world-shaking event from their viewpoint. They might have been more interested in the tobacco quotas than whether statehood went to Hawai'i. But it was a very important thing from our standpoint and he was certainly in a position to do quite a bit for it and did.

I think, however, you have to be careful not to overlook the fact that the basis for statehood and the agitation for it had been going on since the '20s at least, and many, many people contributed a great deal towards creating the idea in people's minds that statehood was possible for Hawai'i. And even though I don't claim to be any great fan of the Republican predecessors, I think Joe Farrington certainly contributed and I think his wife did too when she served. And there were many others, of course. But it came to a head, of course, after the war, and Burns was there and did his thing.

WN: One of the main--in Congress, anyway--one of the main drawbacks or one of the reasons why Hawai'i was looked down in getting statehood was the Japanese population. There were a lot of Japanese there. The fact that the threat of sending two Japanese or Oriental representatives to Congress. Any comment on that?

TG: I don't know that it was a threat necessarily. If it was, it's certainly been carried out since. But I think there was a certain amount of nervousness about the fact that Hawai'i was way out there in the middle of the ocean someplace. And probably many people,

including members of Congress, weren't even quite sure what it was or even where it was. I used to get interesting questions from people on the Mainland, particularly in the Midwest whose orientation is perhaps a little limited, sort of equating Pearl Harbor with the Philippines because it was out west someplace. Of course, they perhaps had other ideas, too. Now, as far as being concerned about the voting population, yeah, I expect so. Perhaps no greater concern than many people on the Mainland had about the fact that large parts of the prospective voting population of some of the states wasn't voting, or was voting, depending on how you looked at it. I think you could probably suspect that much of the opposition--I think this is fair to say, I haven't looked at the record recently--came from Southern states, or their representatives, who were in this mode at that point. Probably, now, it might be reversed, I don't know. But at that point, that would be where it came from. But basically, what they were worried about was how many votes were going to show up from what party. And I think that was the reason for Alaska being pushed first. It was thought that might be a better way to go. Of course, the net result was that the kind of party representation they got from Alaska and the kind they got from Hawai'i seemed to turn out to be reversed after a while, which proves something about politicians.

WN: What about the Communist threat or nervousness, I guess. I know Jack Hall had a lot of influence in the Islands.

TG: Well, it was certainly a rather crude time. The early '50s, of course, were the years of McCarthyism, which perhaps was not as virulent out here as it was on the Mainland or parts of the Mainland, but it slopped over and gradually became a major problem in Hawai'i. I think the basic problem, though, was not Communism any more than it is now. That's the title people like to give to something when they are mad about it because of something else, witness Brother Reagan. But the net result is that the plantations had been organized during and shortly after the war; that this was a rather traumatic shock to the sugar planters whose minds were set backwards instead of forwards and didn't quite realize what might happen. The fact that some of the organizers had connections with the Communist Party was a good excuse to use that to fight organization, and I think that's what they did. Turned out to be a losing fight, of course. But the same thing was used by the Republican party against the Democrats. I was accused of that sort of thing, too. They would stand up and make speeches about it and they thought that this would turn it around. In fact, they did this in the '56 election--attempt to reverse '54 by practically accusing every Democrat of being of the CP and so forth. Didn't wash, of course, and was foolish, and they fell on their head. But it's a mechanism, not a real reason, you see.

WN: I meant to ask one more question. And the question is, following statehood, and talking about the post-statehood elections from '59 on, what were the major differences between, say, the Burns camp and the non-Burns camp?

TG: I think, ideology to a sense. I don't think you can break the spectrum down quite that cleanly because there were many groups that floated in between or around the edges and so forth. Maybe in the '50s you could put the categories into like three bags or even four, depending on who was on which side at what time. But you had at that stage, maybe folks who were Democrats in the sense of having been members of the party in the '30s and so forth. Some of the more influential ones had been appointed to these or ones that had connections on the Mainland who were appointed judges and governors and things of this sort. And there were some who had been elected to office, of course, like Bill Heen, Herbie Lee and others, who were able to achieve office long before or a good deal before '54. You might call these the old or traditional Democrats. They spend a lot of time fighting with each other and others but nevertheless individually, they had survived pretty well.

And, of course, you had the inevitable political force of the 442nd, 100th, which was Burns's core. And they made no bones about it. And there you have sort of, what would you say, encapsulated unity in the sense that these were survivors of a tough time who had come together and hung together and were continuing to hang together, were going to stay that way, and they still do. Of course, they're getting a little old and creaky like the rest of us, but will shortly disappear through the grate, but nevertheless that force was there.

Then I think you had a lot of others who were perhaps unlinked liberals, if that's the right word, who did not agree with what had gone on in the past and felt that there should be something different done, and had a few strange ideas about taxes and land reform and putting money into universities and things of this sort, which were not widely accepted by the Republican establishment. I'd say this group probably was the idea group. The Burns group was the shock troops and the others sort of filtered back and forth between them.

END OF INTERVIEW