

**Interview with Joseph Niehaus**

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**Interviewed by John Waldron and Calvin Gower**

**Waldron:** First we usually just start off with general questions, Mr. Niehaus, when you were born, where you were born, some general background on your growing up, and education background.

**Niehaus:** I was born on a farm, north of Melrose on February 23, 1906. I received my eighth grade education in a country school out there. I went to high school in Melrose. I worked on the home farm until I was twenty-nine years old when I married Luccine Weiner in 1935. We moved to a farm three miles east of Sauk Centre, where we have farmed since. I got involved in a lot of local organizations, primarily co-operatives. I served on the board of directors of Sauk Centre creamery for twenty-five years. I was secretary-treasurer of the local rural telephone company for twenty-six years, and on various other groups and organizations.

**Gower:** Was your father involved in politics at all?

**Niehaus:** Yes, he was. He was town clerk for over fifty years in Melrose township, he was secretary of the local creamery at Melrose for many years doing all the clerical work for the creamery, where I got a lot of background working for him while I was still home.

**Waldron:** What exactly made you decide to run for the legislature in 1968?

**Niehaus:** To be blunt about it, it was pressure from people who knew me.

**Gower:** Had you thought about running for the legislature before that time?

**Niehaus:** I never thought of going into politics once in my whole lifetime. It wasn't until people approached me and asked me to run for office that I started thinking about it.

**Waldron:** Exactly how did you shape your election in order to win? Here you were running against a man who has been in the legislature for six years. He was probably fairly well known around the area. How did you structure your election around that?

**Niehaus:** Well, that's quite a question. It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of foot work to do it.

**Gower:** Just what is your district? What geographical area does it include?

**Niehaus:** It includes northern and western Stearns County. It's all within Stearns County. It includes two tiers of townships across the northern half of Stearns County and down the west side.

**Waldron:** Was the fact that you're a farmer from this area a help to you at all in your campaign in '68 and your re-election?

**Niehaus:** Well, I'm sure that it helped because I became quite well known around the area. Dairying is a real important project around here for farmers. Since I became involved in the dairy business so much I became pretty well acquainted in the county.

**Waldron:** Now, when you first got back into the state House did you have a hard time adjusting?

**Niehaus:** No, I didn't; in fact I was pleasantly surprised. They had quite an orientation program when we first got there. After a couple of weeks, I was well on my way.

**Gower:** Now, you were a new legislator, but you were older than some of these young ones that are in there now. Did you feel in that first term that you had a chance to do as much as you would like to do as a legislator?

**Niehaus:** When I was first elected, the conservative caucus was in control and this helps a lot. In fact, I accomplished more the first session than I had possibly hoped to.

**Waldron:** You were vice-chairman on the agriculture committee. Are you chairman now?

**Niehaus:** No you see the other party is in control.

**Waldron:** Oh, right, well in 1971 you were vice-chairman. Exactly what were your duties as vice-chairman on the agriculture committee?

**Niehaus:** Well, as vice-chairman all the duties are very much like any other vice-chairman. He takes charge whenever the chairman isn't around or doesn't function. In the legislature if the chairman has a bill of his own to introduce or a thing like that, then naturally the vice-chairman takes over. You work out procedures on important issues together with the chairman [some?] times chair subcommittees.

**Gower:** On the election there of 1968, you had a conservative label and you were lined up with a conservative caucus. Do you consider yourself a republican? Is that the situation?

**Niehaus:** Well since party designation has gone into effect in the state now, I guess I'll call myself a Republican.

**Gower:** Did you consider yourself quite a bit more conservative than the incumbent there in 1968?

**Niehaus:** Yes, I did.

**Gower:** Now, just one other thing on that 1968 election. If you don't want to answer this you don't have to, what would you feel was the reason that you won the election?

**Niehaus:** I couldn't answer that question. I guess it was a number of factors which I probably don't know myself. I probably identified a little better with the rural areas.

**Waldron:** Sure. Was this district basically a conservative district or is it a liberal district?

**Niehaus:** I would say that it is more DFL than Republican. In fact, I had the support of a lot of DFL'ers.

**Gower:** Wasn't Mr. Tiemann the representative from this district for many years? Was he a DFL man?

**Niehaus:** Yes, he was.

**Waldron:** What were some of the major bills you have authored in the past, while you've been in the House?

**Niehaus:** One of the bills that I was chief author of and successful in getting passed, is a law which relieves anyone of liability if he helps out at the scene of an accident or emergency. In the '71 session I carried the bill in the House and was responsible for many amendments to the regional development act, which places the control into the hands of the local units of government, and it takes it away from the state. As it was this is the way the bill was originally drafted. This bill was originally drafted so that the governor could determine when a commission should be established in the region, and the state planning officer would be the one appointing,

the first chairman of the committee. The majority of the commission would be appointed officials. This was all changed in this bill, putting the control into the hands of local officials.

I became very much involved in local government and served on the local government committee all three terms. One of the bills that I was chief author of (which is very important to the townships) permits town board members to assess against individual property for improvements, which wasn't possible before. With all this urbanization out in the country, this is very important for the townships.

The way town laws were originally drafted – town boards could levy taxes only against the entire township. With this urbanization there were often improvements that these particular people would like to have, and would be happy to pay the assessments on, if they were levied against specific property. Now this had been changed so that the town board can do that.

**Waldron:** With the new 1972 DFL majority in there or a new majority in there of liberals, they passed that partisan politics bill where you had to label yourself as a Democrat or Republican.

Do you find this harmful at all in anyway?

**Niehaus:** I really don't feel too deeply about this, my own contention is, the more you stress party the less you're going stress people. I feel that I go to the capital to represent people, not parties.

**Gower:** But then do you think it's more difficult to do that with party designation, then or not?

**Niehaus:** Well, it seems that now there is more tendency to vote down caucus lines. At least in the first two sessions that I was there, we voted along caucus lines occasionally but not very

often. We saw much more of that this session. I think this was partly due to the fact that everyone was a little more party conscience.

**Gower:** Would you say that the voters in your district are real party conscience or are they rather independent in general?

**Niehaus:** I would say that many of them are independent. There are some that vote strictly party lines, but there are a lot of independents.

**Gower:** In that case, then it really wouldn't matter whether you had party designation or not. I mean would a person- an independent would vote for republican, or DFL depending on how he felt about them (the person who was nominated.)

**Niehaus:** Yes, I guess that's right.

**Gower:** So that was probably one thing you were getting at when you said maybe you weren't as disturbed by it as some other people might be. Did you feel that you were hampered in your operation in the legislature when you were in the minority in contrast to the majorities?

**Niehaus:** It definitely makes a difference. It's easier if you have a certain bill that you want passed and you have the support of your caucus, it's easier to get support for a bill, then if you are in a minority. There's no question about that.

**Waldron:** How do you view the opening of a committee's and conference meetings to the public?

**Niehaus:** I was very disappointed after all we heard about the openness that we were going to see in government. The one thing that I wanted to see changed in conference committee procedure is that the abolition of amendments to bills in conference. The committee should

conference only the part that the question was on. We tried to amend that when the rules were being discussed, but DFL'ers wouldn't accept this one. Everybody knows what the question was all about and whether this is open to the public or whether it isn't makes very little difference to me. You know where the problem is, the bill has been discussed on the floor and there's a hang up between the Senate and House version. This is what the conference committee is to resolve. I suppose if it's open to the public there may be some advantage. I don't object to it. In as far as all the openness is concerned, as long as there are closed caucus meetings those things are resolved in caucus, and after you get into the open meeting, the people that are in control, know definitely where they're going to give and where they are going to hold so it doesn't make a bit of difference.

**Waldron:** Do you, have you found the pay sufficient for your work as a legislator?

**Niehaus:** Yes, I'm satisfied with that.

**Gower:** Are you operating your farm now?

**Niehaus:** We operated it in partnership the first two terms. We sold out to our youngest son now.

**Gower:** Do you think, we of course now you sold out, but did you think that it was easier because you were a farmer and you could have a partner than for example somebody who would work in a factory or something like that, was it easier for you to make the adjustment on being a legislator? Was the salary better for you because of that and so on?

**Niehaus:** It certainly was. The salary and the expense accounts have been increased since I first came into the legislature and since I still had half ownership in the farming operation I had

income from there also. This definitely helped me, where somebody who was in a profession or otherwise, it was really a handicap for them.

**Waldron:** Seeing how a legislator has to run every two years for re-election, would you like to see the term lengthened and therefore probably have more consistency to their term?

**Niehaus:** Yes, I think it should be a four year term, because there is so much time and money spent on campaigning that, it's really difficult for a good majority of the people. If we want legislators from the rank and file of the people this would be distinct advantage.

**Gower:** Now you had opposition in 1970. How about 1972?

**Niehaus:** I had no opposition in 1972. Nobody filed against me.

**Gower:** We've talked to some other legislators, I don't remember how many, maybe two or so, who had no opposition at times. They said they thought that might have been harmful to them because they didn't have to organize as much then in that election and so on. What do you think about that?

**Niehaus:** Well, I could see where it would be harmful if they didn't get out in the district and felt that they could just relax because they had no opposition. However with reapportionment I got all kinds of new area in my district so I spent a lot of time there when I would have normally been campaigning all over the district. I don't feel that it hurt me too much.

**Waldron:** Do you see no opposition say in 1972 as sort of an indication that you're doing outstanding work in the legislature, in the House?

**Niehaus:** That's anybody's guess!



**Gower:** You had a fairly close race in 1970. Did you have the feeling that there was just some kind of disarray in the other group and that's why they wouldn't nominate anyone in 1972 or do you have any explanation for that?

**Niehaus:** I really have no explanation for it. Naturally if you're in there a while, people get to know you better. If you try to do your job, I imagine it has some effect.

**Gower:** You are planning to run in 1974 then?

**Niehaus:** That's right.

**Gower:** Now you've had, this will be three terms and you plan to run for the fourth term, so I assume you like being in the legislature. What do you like about being a legislator?

**Niehaus:** I guess this is something that grows on you. I didn't know at first when I was elected whether I was going to like it. But you get to working on issues and researching and debating. It's just like anything else. It's something that grows on you. I like that type of work.

**Gower:** We've talked to eight legislators or former legislators and every one of them said that they felt there was a good feeling of working together, and live and let live feeling among the legislators, regardless of their party. Now, how do you feel about that?

**Niehaus:** This is right. It's something that I really enjoyed in the legislature and I didn't expect to find there. You can fight like cats and dogs on the floor, go out to dinner together and forget about the whole thing. This is something you don't see anywhere else in life except in the legislature.

**Waldron:** Do you have any striving for any higher political office, other than House?

**Niehaus:** No, I don't. I've gained some seniority in the House and if I move up, I'd be a freshman again, I'm too far along in years to think about that. I'm not aspiring to any higher positions.

**Gower:** What committees are you on in House?

**Niehaus:** Now I am on agriculture, on local government, health and welfare, and general legislation and veterans affairs.

**Gower:** Were you given about the same committee assignments in the DFL dominated legislature as you were in the previous conservative one?

**Niehaus:** That's right. It seems that regardless of which caucus is in control, they give the legislators as far as possible the opportunity to serve where they'd like to. I feel that I've been fairly treated. I didn't get everything that I like, but you never do. It's got to fit into the entire program. That's understood, I feel satisfied with my committee appointments.

**Gower:** This concludes this interview.