

Interview with John L. Richardson
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Interviewed by John Waldron and Calvin Gower

This is an interview conducted by John Waldron and Calvin Gower for the Central Minnesota Historical Society on August 16, 1973. Today we are interviewing Mr. John L. Richardson who was a Minnesota state senator. He was elected in 1954 and then again in 1958 from District 45.

Waldron: Mr. Richardson, we usually just start off with general questions: when were you born, where you were born and some of your education background, and things like that.

Richardson: I was born in St. Cloud, Sherburne County, January the 24th, 1896. I've lived here practically all of my life with the exception of a year and a half, I spent in the service in the Air Corps in the First World War. My education – I graduated from high school, went through a business college, and I went to night school for two years. In 1940 I ran for the city council in St. Cloud and was elected for fourteen and a half years. When I was elected to the senate in 1954, I had served only a partial of my fourth term as a councilman. After I served in the senate I served two years on the charter commission in the city of St. Cloud. That's all the politics I had and probably will be all I'll ever have. Do you want anything else?

Gower: What about your family background? Was your father ever in politics?

Richardson: My father was a justice of the peace out in the country for two years. Those were the days when most anyone could serve in politics – you just had to say “yes”. No one wanted those jobs. They paid nothing. I'm a son of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Richardson, there were five boys

and five girls in our family. They're all living except one. My folks moved to California about twenty-five years ago, and they both died out there. Now the ten children, there's three of us still living in St. Cloud, three boys. I have a brother that's a patient at the Veteran's Hospital in St. Cloud and I have another that's retired. There wasn't any of them in politics except me. I think I got into politics like most people – you were talked into it. When they approached me to run for the city council. I didn't want any part of it and I said “no”, finally they talked and praised me up “we need good like you” and all these things and I consented. So I served four consecutive terms and lacking one year, when I was elected to the Senate. But it's very interesting to work and very thankless work, when you stop to think it all over. But my dad always told us “that's an obligation, that everybody should accept”, although he had a minor office. He always like to see other people serve. He was one of those fellows where he'd rather see somebody else do it than do it himself.

Waldron: In your fourteen and a half years on the city council can you tell us some of the major bills and things you have done?

Richardson: Most of the time that I was on the city council, at the time we had a lot different form of government than we have now. We had a commission form of government at that time. We had five councilmen and the councilmen didn't have too much authority. About all they did was pass ordinances and set up rules. On that commission form of government there's three commissioners: commissioner the mayor, commissioner of finance, and the commissioner of improvements, public improvements. They control the whole thing and this council was more or less a figure head. But in 1912 I ran my fourth term. At that time, they'd run the whole city and what was passed then, well there were so many things passed – a dog ordinance. I remember that very well we passed that and that was one of the first ones in the state of Minnesota. That was

really the toughest one to pass. We had so much opposition. As you know most people that have a dog they want them to run all over and that was a problem at that time. So many people opposed it, but it passed by one vote. I voted for it.

Of course, there's a lot of minor things like: controlling liquor, closing hours, opening hours, speed limits in the city of St. Cloud, and all other minor things. Nothing of great importance. In 1952 we had an election and we changed our form of government. Now we have seven councilmen and the mayor and they have all the power. Quite different than what it was when I first served. We had one meeting a month and a lot of times we didn't have anything to do, which is much easier, we didn't get any pay of course. Then in 1952 when they passed this new government they gave us fifteen dollars a meeting with a maximum of 450 dollars a year. Thirty meetings we'd get paid and if we had any more than that, that's grass.

Gower: Then was it the same thing on going into the senate – people approached you and said would you run for the senate and so on?

Richardson: As a matter of fact, I filed for the senate after it was too late to file for the primary or for the general election. I filed by petition and I was at a council meeting one night and we used to meet those days when they first started this new form of government. We used to stay up some nights until one, two o'clock in the morning. I was called out one night about twelve o'clock. Senator Sullivan was a senator here at that time. Had been in for twenty years. He had retired on account of sickness. This was just a month before the general election. Well, I laughed at him I said, "I have no desire to run. I got a business I've got to take care of." Well, I was talked into it. So I filed and I didn't get any signers and you got to have eight hundred signers on a petition. So that's the only way I could file I didn't ask anybody to sign the petition. I thought it

would be better if I didn't. So I was very successful. I had what they call a short campaign. About three weeks campaigning, which is unusual now days when you're running for an office of that nature or for that matter any type of office. I was elected by a twelve hundred and some votes more than the other fellow. The other fellow who now is county attorney (you probably talked to him too) he ran against me twice. Then of course in 1958, four years later, I ran for the second term and I won by about fifteen hundred votes at that time. But it's a great experience. It is like serving in the army, it's a great experience but you wouldn't do again.

I always felt some sort of obligation to every man and I was supposed to participate in those things, but when you have a family and you have a business it's very hard to get away. I think the average politician maybe I'm a little particular to that, I think it's a service that they really didn't ever fully pay in the way of salary. Of course they are going up, but at that time a good many people thought that if you'd serve without any pay you were a good man. But I think a lot of that's gone out of it now. In the early days when a man was elected that's quite an honor, but now they call it everything else but this. A lot of people think they're in there for the money only. But as I said before after it's all over, you think it's pretty nice, but during the time, many times you think why did I ever run? But I suppose that's a part of life.

Waldron: Do you think your fourteen years as a city councilman helped you in your election in 1954?

Richardson: Yes, I think the fourteen years I served on city council certainly did help. The first year I ran, I ran number five and there was all five of the old members that were in there before and when you have held office it's always easy to get re-elected. I ran as number five. I beat one of the fellows that was already in. In 1944 I was top vote getter and also in 1948 and 1952. You

fellows sitting here listening must be wondering what those other fellows look to hear talk like that.

Gower: When you went to the legislature did you find it easy to adjust to being there?

Richardson: I thought it was pretty hard. I had never been to the capital before. I went down there after I was elected for a caucus meeting. I took office January 1, 1955. I went down there about thirty days before that and had a caucus meeting and then I got acquainted. But it certainly did help. I was president of the council in St. Cloud for two consecutive years. I was vice-president the term before. But they're a lot alike being in the legislature of course much larger. I really didn't know what a lobbyist was when I was on the city council in St. Cloud. But when you get down there you begin to find out there is lobbyist running around, people wanting to take you out to dinner or something – wanting a vote for a certain bill. You are busier down there. There's something going on all the time. Every night there's a meeting and you have really got to be there all the time to do your job. But when you are in business like I was, it makes you doubly busy when you have a business, whether you are there or not. You have to find out what's going on and of course it is a thing that's hard to do and do it right on both places.

Waldron: I believe you were vice-chairman of certain committees. Can you tell us about them?

Richardson: I was vice-chairman of the general legislation committee. The rules at that time were the first term of four years only could you serve on certain committees. Not the important ones, but ones like game and fish, and maybe an insurance committee, and some of the minor committees. In the second term, you are elected vice-chairman to one committee. The third term you were elected chairman of some committees. They try to give you a choice, not always of course like the tax committee. I was a member of the tax committee in my second term. Actually

it's one of the big committees. The education committee was another big committee, but they only allow you to serve on one. After you were down there two terms, then you really had to go to work. So I was really an amateur the first two terms. I only was on one important committee and that was the tax committee.

Waldron: Oh during term there, you served with Gordon Rosenmeier. Can you tell us anything about his attitudes?

Richardson: Yes, Senator Gordon Rosenmeier was down there twenty years before I was. I think he served twenty-eight years all together. A very brilliant fellow. He had tremendous influence over everybody, a very powerful individual. He's a good talker and smart lawyer. His father was down there twenty-two years before Gordon was. So he knew politics, finally like the most of them, he was defeated. At that time the conservatives were in control of the Senate. When I first went down there the liberals controlled the House. I think this next term the conservatives control the House and Senate.

Gower: Which group did you caucus with?

Richardson: I caucused with the conservatives and as most people know they control the legislature and when the liberals control--both parties want to gain control of both houses. Of course you can't blame them for that I suppose. They have a better chance of getting their legislation passed that they're in favor of and who are people who belong to the minority group, you just don't have the same influence either.

Gower: Were there any particular bills that you felt you were involved with that were especially important?

Richardson: One particular bill was the licensing of the real estate agents. I was in the real estate business when I went down there. There had been bills introduced. These gentlemen had to be banded and had to be under a license. I was very much for that. Being in the real estate business myself, I knew some of the deals that were going on and there wasn't any bond if you wouldn't get backed out of something, you had no place to go. That law was passed in 1958. It's still on the books and it hasn't been changed or amended. That was one of the important bills. It happened to be one of those bills where it was passed by one vote. I voted for it. But there's so many bills down there. There's about thirty-six hundred introduced down there when I was there. Of course a good many of them never see daylight. The sales tax was presented down there when I was there, but that was voted down.

Waldron: Well, how do you view the parts in politics now? The party designation?

Richardson: Party designation came up in every session that I was in, but most of the people at that time voted against it both liberals and conservatives. I know that bill came up every year. One year the conservatives would kill it and the next time the liberals would kill the bill, so it never got to see daylight until 1960. It's passed now, I haven't got anything against it. I think it's probably all right, but it wouldn't have made any difference to me when I was on it, whether they passed this bill or not, it didn't mean too much anyway. Some people like it, but I think the way they operate is wrong, because I notice now that when I was running for office we always had rotated the candidates. My name starts "R" and I'd be on some of the ballots first, some in the middle, and some at the tail end. But I notice now they have changed that, the one that get the most votes in prior elections, would be on the head of the list, which I think is very unfair. They also passed a law that you can't run in a primary in any election in Minnesota for any major office where they have party designation. No one can run as an independent. So you either have

to be a Republican or a Democrat in order to run in the primary. The mayor of Minneapolis is an example of that. He's an independent and he is not going to be on the ballot next fall.

Waldron: Also during this 1972 legislature, they have opened the committees and conference to the public and television. How do you like that?

Richardson: Well, I think it's all right. I think the public has a right to know. I certainly agree that they are not always in public. They may say they are, but they can always meet at night someplace and no one knows anything about it. Say four of us on a committee could meet somewhere and no one would ever know. It's very hard to enforce that kind of thing. When I talk like that you think I'm against it, but out meetings were always open. But if there's something really important may be involving a man say in Huston, Minnesota, and one in Sauk Rapids, they would want to get their heads together to figure out what they should do. I think they still do that, I think they never will stop that. It's a lot like these contributions to the elections, you hear a lot of talk of when they should be reported and sure that's the law. But how are you going to stop a guy if he comes around with a hundred-dollar bill and says, "Here, take this and keep your mouth shut." A lot of that will go on regardless of the law.

It reminds me of the days when the country was dry, we weren't supposed to drink. I happened to come from a district when more was drunk when it was dry than after they had the liquor in it. That may not be the case in all parts of the country, but here it was. They drank whether it was dry or not. I don't say we shouldn't have these legislations, but it's hard to figure out what to do.

Gower: Had you done any work in the Republican Party before you were elected to the council?

Richardson: I wasn't an active member of the Republican Party. I usually vote, my wife always says that "when he says he votes for the right man, he's usually on the Republican ticket." But I

have voted Democrat in the past, my dad was a strong Democrat, born down in Kentucky and he thought that anybody who didn't vote the Democrat ticket there was something wrong with them. My dad was very conservative so I believe if he were here today he would vote anything but the Republican Party. But times have changed. He always said that the Democrat Party in his day, that was back in Woodrow Wilson, they were more conservative and the Republican were more liberal. So he was a Democrat, there's ten in our family and I think they are all Republicans as far as I know. They had been for the last few years. But we try to vote for who we think is the best, like everyone does, but this last election everyone voted Democrat, because of Kennedy he was so popular.

Gower: So you think that all voted Republican? You said you were a Democrat, but you went Republican in 1972. Did you feel that there was a good feeling among the legislators, of respect for each other and so on while you were there?

Richardson: A funny thing about the legislature, you hear some of the some of the candidate talking when they are campaigning. By the way they talk you would be surprised when you see them down there in the legislature, because some of the Democrats are very good friends with the liberals and conservatives. They chum around with each other and when you see – it's a lot like a lawyer trying a case. He will say some bad things in the court house, when he gets outside they will both go into the corner bar and then you would think they were the best of friends. That's the way they operate down there, which is wonderful. I voted for liberal measures and so did all the rest of the conservatives, and vice versa. It is not so patrician as people think when they are outside campaigning. They both talk from the same platform. You would think that they would never speak to each other to hear them talk, but that is over emphasized.

Waldron: I have got one more question. Do you have any amusing stories to tell us during your time in the senate?

Richardson: One of the interesting things that happened was in 1957. I was a member of the liquor control committee and the airlines wanted a liquor license so they could serve liquor on the flights. They have it in the airports, but I didn't want it on the flights. Anyway the bill was introduced and the vote was a tie. Just when they were voting I was called out to answer a long distance call. They were all waiting for me to cast a vote. I voted against it and the bill was defeated. But they managed to bring it up in a couple of weeks later, so we had the same situation and lost it by one vote. So they didn't get this liquor license until two years later. I still voted against it, but the bill was passed anyway.

Gower: What did you like about serving in the state senate?

Richardson: The nice thing about serving down there, they are such a nice group of people. They are always willing to help you. Even though they may be a liberal or a conservative. But when it comes to something like that, they really come out and try to help you. When I first got down there as I mentioned before, it was practically all new to me. One of the Senators came over and I got into some mix-up on a bill and he came over and hit me on the back and he said "Say can I help you?" I said, "Yes, you can buy me a one-way ticket back to St. Cloud!"

Gower: Did you run in 1962?

Richardson: I was beaten.

Gower: Why do you think you were beaten in 1962?

Richardson: Well, I had surgery in 1961 in December. I didn't have to run, but I ran the next year and I found that I had cancer. I made a speech down there one time about the sales tax. At that time, I didn't intend to run anymore. I had definitely made up my mind I wasn't going to run anymore. But I made a speech that stated that really the fairest tax would be the sales tax. Almost all other states had it. And you know they pinned that on me, they added literal on it and all this. But I didn't vote for it I advocated it. As I said, I had definitely made up my mind I wasn't going to run. Well those fellows when they get you in there once, especially when they haven't got anybody that they want to get in, then they run after you day and night to try to get you run again. I lost by 600 and some votes. There was 19,000 votes cast, it was a very close election. This guy that beat me got killed in an automobile accident.

Gower: Yes, that was Raymond Bares. Do you have any other questions? OK, this concludes this interview.