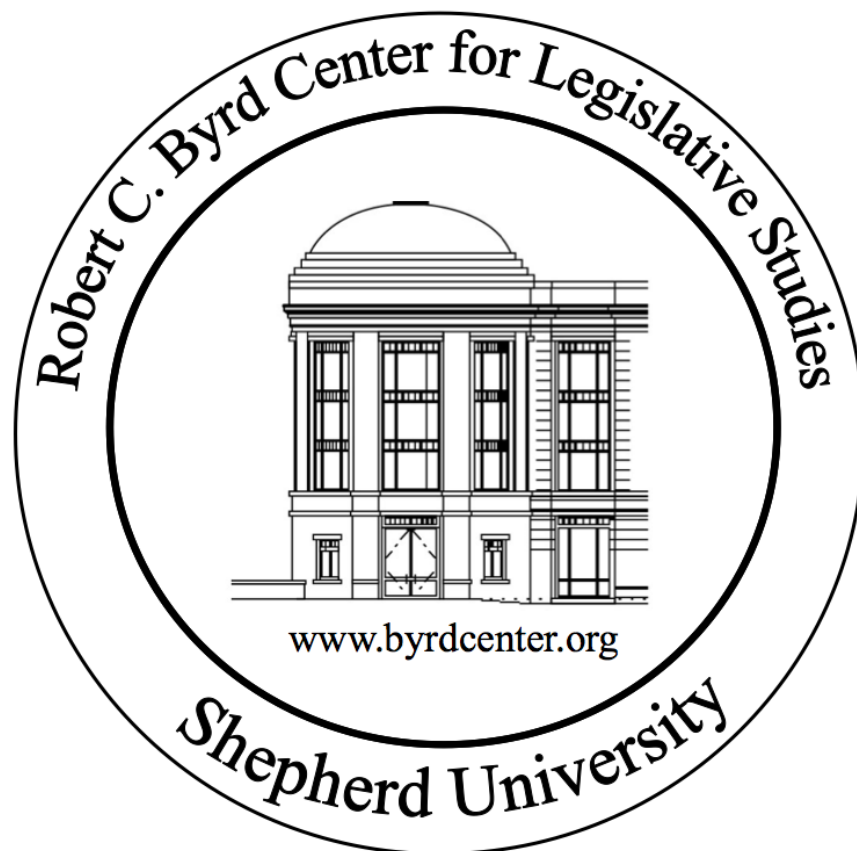


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

Fred VanKirk

July 31, 2013



Preface

By James J. Wyatt

Fred VanKirk served for more than 41 years in West Virginia's transportation sector. After earning a degree in engineering from West Virginia University in 1962, he worked in the Highway Department's planning and engineering fields until being named the state highway engineer in the early 1980s. In 1989, Governor Gaston Caperton named him West Virginia commissioner of highways, and in 1995, VanKirk took on the added role of cabinet secretary of transportation. He later served in this dual capacity under Governor Bob Wise from 2001-2005. In his role as West Virginia's lead highway official, VanKirk worked closely with Senator Byrd on the planning, development, and funding of West Virginia's transportation network.

Much of this oral history focuses on VanKirk's professional relationship with Senator Byrd. Van Kirk recalls traveling to Washington D.C. to be "interviewed" by Senator Byrd shortly after becoming highways commissioner, and he details the senator's excitement at having the opportunity to dramatically improve West Virginia's highway system through his position as chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations. He explains how Governors Caperton and Wise each facilitated and encouraged a direct line of communication between Senator Byrd and himself, and recalls project meetings with the senator in the appropriations committee chairman's office. Portraying the senator as always well-informed on the issues at hand, VanKirk notes that Byrd did not "dictate" his desires for specific projects and was readily open to recommendations regarding the most needed, feasible, and beneficial projects to West Virginia.

Moving beyond appropriations, VanKirk shares some favorite stories garnered from his meetings and travels with the senator. He also comments on Senator Byrd's relationships with several contemporary West Virginia political figures, including fellow Senators Jennings Randolph and Jay Rockefeller, and Governors Gaston Caperton, Bob Wise, Joe Manchin, and Arch Moore.

About the interviewer: Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview #1
Wednesday, July 31, 2013

Sturm: I'm Alan Sturm. Today is Wednesday, July 31, 2013. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. Today it is my pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Fred VanKirk. Mr. VanKirk began his career with the West Virginia Department of Highways in 1963. In 1995, he was appointed by Governor Gaston Caperton to serve in the combined position of Cabinet Secretary of Transportation and Commissioner of Highways. He also served in this position during the administration of Governor Bob Wise. This interview is taking place in the Fairfield Inn in Charleston, West Virginia.

Mr. VanKirk, I want to thank you for taking time to do this.

VanKirk: My pleasure.

Sturm: Now, as you know, this session's being recorded. Is that all right with you?

VanKirk: That's fine. Yes, sir.

Sturm: Okay. Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got to where you got to in the West Virginia Department of Highways.

VanKirk: Well, as you said, I wound up being Secretary of Transportation and Commissioner of Highways. I got out of high school in 1953 and went to work for the Highway Department after getting my engineering degree from WVU in 1962. I went into the planning field and became the State Highway Engineer in the early 1980s. Then, in 1989, I became Highway Commissioner and later Secretary of Transportation. So altogether, I think I served about forty-one years with the Highway Department, and I met a lot of wonderful people and saw a lot of progress.

Sturm: When did you retire?

VanKirk: I retired in January of 2005.

Sturm: Okay, now we know a little bit about you. Let's have you tell us a little bit about when you first came into contact with Senator Byrd, how you came to know him and how your relationship developed.

VanKirk: Well, my first contact with Senator Byrd on a professional level, of course, was in early 1989 when Governor [Gaston] Caperton became the governor of West Virginia. The governor called me shortly after we took office, told me that Senator Byrd was interested in the highway program, and that he would like for me to come to Washington and talk to him. So shortly after that, we set a time and a date, and I flew over to D.C. with my Assistant Highway Commissioner, Jane Cline at the time. We met with Senator Byrd in the Senate Appropriations Committee office. It was wintertime, and he had a small fire going. We just sat around and

chatted. He interviewed me, more or less, about my background and my political affiliations and that kind of stuff. We talked, and he finally told me that, as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, he had the opportunity to bring a considerable amount of money to the State of West Virginia if he had an administration that would cooperate with him and work with him.

I assured him that was certainly on the table, something we would do. He said that he would give me a call when one of the appropriation bills came up. And, he asked me to go back home and develop some priorities for the Highway Department, what we thought we really needed. And, when the time came, we'd sit down and talk about the funding and see what we could do.

Sure enough, later that spring or summer, he called and said, "This is U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd. Would you have time to come over and meet with me?" And, of course I told him my schedule was clear, and I did, I went back over to Washington. In the meantime, we had prepared a list of priorities in the Highway Department and prepared some strip maps, showing—at the time, the Appalachian system in West Virginia was not completed—Corridor G south of Charleston to Williamson and Corridor H in the northeastern part of the state, Corridor L, which was only two lanes from Summersville to Sutton, and Corridor D up in Parkersburg. The Parkersburg Bypass was not complete, plus several major roads around the state. So we'd prepared strip maps and had our projects outlined, the things that we would like to have done and just didn't have the money for. So, I took those maps and the priority list, and when I got to Washington, why, we went into the Senate Appropriations Committee conference room, and Senator Byrd was just delighted.

Sturm: Was he the only one there?

VanKirk: Oh, no, he brought in some staff and—

Sturm: Just his staff, though?

VanKirk: His staff and myself. We spread out those maps on the table, and he just lit up like a Christmas tree. I mean, his eyes lit up, he smiled, and he just danced around the table looking at those maps, really enthused. He'd run from one side of the table to the other, point here and there, say, "Where's this at? What project's this?" and all that stuff, Corridor G and Corridor H particularly. I'd outlined the projects we had ready, and he'd point his finger, "Now, where's this at?" And I'd tell him. It was in Mingo County, or wherever.

"Well, how long is it?"

"About two miles"

"And how much is it going to cost?"

I said, "About \$39 million."

“Well, put it on the list.” He’d point to one of his staff. “Put that on the list.” And this would go on and on for an hour or two. We’d go over every map I had, and he was really enthused about it. Just like I said, he danced around and smiled.

Sturm: Was he pretty well informed?

VanKirk: Oh, he knew more or as much about it as I did in the long run. I mean, when I told him where it was at, he knew exactly, and he’d tell me some things that I didn’t know.

But anyway, we made up a list of projects that we had ready to go to contract, and he would take a list and how much they cost. At the end of the meeting, he would swear me to secrecy. “Now, Fred, I don’t know whether I can get the money for this or not, but let me appropriate when the bill comes out. I’m going to try. So you just keep this under your hat, and when the time comes, I’ll give you a call.”

Usually, two or three months later, the phone would ring and there’d be Senator Byrd. He had a big smile on his voice, and he’d go down the list of how much money he’d gotten, when it would be available and that type of thing. So this is how we set the priorities, and every priority we set was something that the Highway Department recommended. I mean, he never once picked up a project and said, “Here, I want you to go—.”

Sturm: I was going to ask you, did he ever insert himself into it?

VanKirk: Never, ever. Not one time did the man ever tell me this is what he wanted to do. He’d always ask us what we needed and what there was to be done.

Sturm: Now, how long a period of time were you talking about with this first round of appropriations?

VanKirk: It was every year. I mean, every year or two there would be some kind of an appropriation bill come up, and this went on for years. Every year, maybe two or three times a year, whenever there was a bill that he had the possibility of getting some funding out of, whether it was a forestry bill or a highway bill or a Park Service bill or whatever, if he could find some money hidden in there somewhere, he would call me and we’d go over, and he would earmark that money for the State of West Virginia.

Sturm: Do you have any idea how much money while you were commissioner?

VanKirk: Well, overall, it was well over a billion dollars. I never did keep an account of it, but some of the roads he funded were, like I say, Corridor G and Corridor H. The Buckhannon Bypass was probably one of the first ones we did on Corridor H, and then we ran into some environmental problems. When we got those resolved, we started over in Hardy County and came from the Wardensville area back to Moorefield. He got the money for the Parkersburg Bypass on Corridor D. He got money for bridges, the Williamstown-Marietta Bridge across the Ohio River, about \$20 million, the Harpers Ferry Bridge over in the eastern panhandle, Jefferson County, U.S. 340.

Sturm: That's where I live.

VanKirk: There's another story behind that one, but anyway, he—

Sturm: Well, go ahead.

VanKirk: Oh, no. It was a little controversial with the U.S. Park Service whether we could build a bridge or not. They were preservationists. They did not want a new bridge or any kind of work done that would disturb the existing environment within the park area, but Senator Byrd persuaded the superintendent that it would be in his best interest to back off of that position and cooperate with the Highway Department and let us build the bridge. And, eventually we did.

Sturm: Let me ask you for a clarification of this. The folks in that area always say that it's because of the Park Service that it's only a two-lane bridge and not a four-lane bridge.

VanKirk: That was the compromise we came to because their concern was, if we four-laned the bridge, we'd have to four-lane route 340 going through the narrows there. That was a no-no with them, so we compromised on just replacing the bridge with a two-lane facility.

Sturm: Now they're only about more expansion—

VanKirk: That's right.

Sturm: —and possibly making the narrows into four lanes. I don't know how they'll ever do that.

VanKirk: I don't either, but that's—

Sturm: Well, anyway, go ahead. I'm interrupting.

VanKirk: But anyway, the eastern panhandle there in the early 1990s, he got \$105 million, I remember, for a four-lane highway, Route 9, from Martinsburg to the Virginia line. Again, we ran into some environmental problems, and that delayed that somewhat, but now I understand it's just about completed. So, he can have credit for that. U.S. 22 in the northern panhandle, he got us, I remember, \$45 million to four-lane Route 22 from the Ohio River to the Pennsylvania state line, to upgrade portions of it.

So he got money all over the state. And, when he became the Appropriations chairman, he said publicly that it was his goal to send or obtain at least a billion dollars for the State of West Virginia. Well, he did that much for the Highway Department, and that's not counting the FBI Center, the training centers in the eastern panhandle, the New River Gorge Park, and that type of thing. But, he got over a billion dollars just for the highway program alone.

Sturm: An amazing amount of money. Did you ever have to go back to Washington to testify in front of the Appropriations Committee about anything?

VanKirk: I testified before Congress, but not on this level, and not with Senator Byrd. He took care of all that. Once he had his list and how much it would cost, why, he took it from there.

Sturm: Now, how did you work? Did you clear up all this with the governor before you went?

VanKirk: Well, yeah.

Sturm: Governor Caperton sort of indicated to me that he didn't have much to do with it. He just sent you down there. You knew what you were doing.

VanKirk: And that's the way it worked out, I mean after the first two or three calls. Senator Byrd was very particular, you know, with protocol. He would call the governor and ask him if he could talk to me, and, of course, the governor got tired of that. He just told him, "You go ahead and call Fred, and then you two work together." And, of course, I kept the governor informed as best I could. And so, it was just really one-on-one between the senator and I. He liked it that way, and it worked well. [*Governor Caperton would often joke later that Senator Byrd was the only U.S. Senator with his own highway commissioner.*]

Sturm: Well, did this continue during Governor Wise's administration?

VanKirk: This continued right on through the Wise administration, up until the trouble started, the personal troubles Governor Wise had. Well, then the public meetings and hearings and appearances kind of dried up, so to speak. But, no, it went on right under the Wise administration. Matter of fact, in my opinion, Senator Byrd was responsible for Governor Wise being elected governor. He campaigned for him. And, I know that he [Senator Byrd] told me when he [Governor Wise] got elected that he asked the governor for two things, and that was to reappoint me as Secretary of Transportation and Major General Allen Tackett as adjutant general of the West Virginia National Guard.

Sturm: He told me the same thing.

VanKirk: And that's the only two things that he asked for, and then, of course, he got them.

Sturm: Well, let me ask this. In your observing just the workings of state government, not just the Highway Department, but I know you were aware of what was going on in other places, did Senator Byrd ever try to insert himself into the state problems or political issues or anything?

VanKirk: Not to my knowledge. Not one time did he ever. I mean, he was standoffish in that regard. It was up to the local politicians to take care of themselves. He would not even get involved in a gubernatorial campaign until right up before the election. I mean, the primaries, he would not touch. He would just wait till it was almost decided, and if he could do something, he would. But, he did not interfere in local politics whatsoever that I remember.

Sturm: Now, when Governor [Cecil] Underwood was governor, for example, you were not secretary at that time?

VanKirk: No, I stayed for about six or eight months, and then I left, retired for the first time. Senator Byrd liked Governor Underwood. They'd served together in the legislature before he ever went to Congress, but he didn't get along too well with the commissioner under Governor Underwood [Samuel S. Beverage]. At the public hearings and ribbon-cuttings, as I understood, the highway commissioner did not pay particular homage to Senator Byrd and what he had done, and Senator Byrd took public issue with that. He wasn't completely satisfied. But, he liked Governor Underwood personally.

Sturm: Were you there with Governor [Arch] Moore? I know you were in the Highway Department.

VanKirk: I was in the Highway Department. I was the State Highway Engineer. Bill Ritchie was the commissioner, I was the State Highway Engineer, and there was an incident, I think, that really propelled Senator Byrd to do what he did under Governor Caperton's administration, as far as getting the money. He related to me, Senator Byrd did, that when the interstate system was completed in 1986, he had called Bill Ritchie, the highway commissioner, and asked him if he and Senator [Jennings] Randolph could be invited to the ceremony. Well, it just so happened I was in Commissioner Ritchie's office that day he called, and, of course, Commissioner Ritchie told him that would be handled across the street, that he'd call the governor and see if he could get an invitation.

Well, he called the governor and the governor flatly said no, he would not have either senator at the ceremony. Well, Senator Byrd begged for at least just two minutes to come and appear because, you know, the interstate system had been developed under he and Senator Randolph for years. Bill called back across the street, and the governor said, "Not no, but hell no."

And Bill was completely—I mean, he was a fine fellow, Bill Ritchie, and he was completely devastated to have to call Senator Byrd and tell him that, no, he was not invited. Senator Byrd relayed that story to me. Of course, I already knew the story. But he held that grudge, I guess, till the day he died. He had nothing for the Moore administration in that regard.

Sturm: You mentioned Senator Randolph. Did you have a chance to ever observe how Senator Randolph and Senator Byrd got along?

VanKirk: Oh, they were very, very close, and they worked together. Of course, Senator Byrd was the junior senator, but they worked very close together and were very fond of each other.

Sturm: Did he ever talk about being the junior senator?

VanKirk: No. He was a senior senator when I got to meet him, and he never dwelled on that type thing.

Sturm: How did he get along with Senator [Jay] Rockefeller?

VanKirk: They got along quite well. I mean, their avenues in the Senate are two different ways. Senator Byrd was after the infrastructure, so to speak, and Senator Rockefeller was after the social programs, veterans affairs and that type of thing. So, they worked together on issues when they could, but they were really, you know, headed in different directions as far as their objectives were concerned. That's my view, anyway.

Sturm: From what you talked about, your relationship has been pretty much business and political. You told me that over the years your relationship with Senator Byrd changed.

VanKirk: Well, it changed. Yes, it developed. I don't know whether it changed or not, but—

Sturm: Well, it developed.

VanKirk: Every time he would come to town—we had ribbon-cuttings, and I think that was probably the highlight of what he [Senator Byrd] enjoyed most about getting the money. But after he'd gotten the money and we'd constructed the highways, he would request to have a ribbon-cutting. Of course, we'd do it. And, he always drew tremendous crowds at those meetings. But when he came to the state, he would always insist that I travel with him in his van, he and Anne Barth, of course, his West Virginia representative. We'd travel southern West Virginia, wherever the ribbon-cutting might be, and Anne would always have chips and Reese's Cups and stuff like that. I found out on those trips how much the senator liked sweets. He would eat Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. He wouldn't eat just two or three. I mean, the miniature cups, he would eat eight or ten of them just as fast as he could unwrap them. That's where I found out he liked peanut butter.

I went back and related that to my administrative aide, Phyllis Holmes. Phyllis would bake peanut butter cookies and put a chocolate candy Kiss in them and give those to the senator, and he loved that. And I made a pretty mean batch of peanut butter fudge. So, I started making peanut butter fudge to give to the senator, and he loved that. We had a tough time with logistics sometimes when he wasn't in the state. We'd send it to him, and he couldn't get it in the mail, you know. They'd never let it through the mail in the Senate chambers, so we'd deliver it to his office here in Charleston. Anne would get it over to the eastern panhandle, to Martha Anne McIntosh. Martha Anne was his appointments secretary. Well, Martha Anne, of course, commuted every day, and they would give it to her. Martha Anne, in turn, would hand-carry it to the senator's office. A day or two later, we'd get a phone call or a letter saying how much he appreciated it. So, we got along that way, and he'd call every once in a while just to chat and shoot the breeze.

Sturm: Hey, what did y'all talk about, both in the van when you were travelling with him and when he'd call?

VanKirk: He would tell stories about when he was first elected or something like that. Sometimes he'd break out the tapes in his fiddle-playing days, you know, play some of that and talk about when he appeared on the Grand Ole Opry, just various things. Of course, he was always inquisitive about my family and that type of thing. So, it was just general conversation, and he thoroughly enjoyed it.

Sturm: Did he talk about other politicians?

VanKirk: No, not really. I mean, he wouldn't—

Sturm: It wasn't a gossip session?

VanKirk: It wasn't a gossip session.

Sturm: Just conversation.

VanKirk: Conversation, just normal conversation, and we talked about the highways and what we were going to be doing in the next few years, that type of thing. But, he never had an ill word to speak of, other than the one or two with Governor Moore and someone else that—he didn't even speak disparaging there. He just let it be known that he didn't appreciate it.

Sturm: I hadn't heard that story before, and that's really interesting. Did he have any sort of a vindictive streak for people like Governor Moore if they crossed him? I mean, was there anything that he did to get even, let's say?

VanKirk: I don't know that he ever did anything overtly, but I know that he resented both him and, to some extent, Governor Manchin when Governor Manchin got elected. But, I don't know that he did anything overtly. Now, he might have. I don't—he didn't do it.

Sturm: What was the problem with Governor Manchin?

VanKirk: Well, when Governor Manchin became governor—it was probably the last professional conversation I had with Senator Byrd, other than some personal calls. But, he called me in right after the election and told me that he'd called the governor-elect and asked him for the same two things he had asked Congressman Wise for. He wanted to keep General Tackett, and he wanted to keep me because we were people he could work with and help to develop West Virginia. He didn't mention his name, but he kept saying "that man." "That man would not talk to me. That man would not give me an answer about my reappointments." He must have used that term ten or twelve times, "that man." And then, after that, why, I retired, and that was the end of the funding streak, as far as I know.

[I believe the funding efforts waned because, during the gubernatorial transition period, I attempted to advise one of the governor-elect's top officials about the importance of, and how, to work with Senator Byrd. The top official's response was, and I quote, "We don't need that old man." I don't recall any significant funding appropriations after that.]

Sturm: I had not heard that either.

VanKirk: Well, that's just something that happened. If no one knows that, then maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

Sturm: No, I think—

VanKirk: That's just something between the senator and I.

Sturm: Historically, this is something that probably will be valuable when people begin to look at relationships between the senator and governors and find out why the funding dried up. There will be some indication.

VanKirk: Well, unfortunately, he was getting on. His health started to fail shortly after that, too, so I'm sure that played a part in it. But, he resented the fact that Governor Manchin would not reappoint me as Highway Commissioner.

Sturm: How many trips did you make to Washington as a—

VanKirk: Oh, I never did count them. Over the years, it's probably, I would say, twenty trips or something like that.

Sturm: Did you ever do anything personal with him while you were in Washington, or was it all professional?

VanKirk: It was all professional. We'd have some conversations. I know, I made a mistake one day. It was around lunchtime. He would always have lunch served from the Senate cafeteria there. One day, we were just finishing lunch, and it was time for dessert. The server brought in the dessert, and I politely tried to decline. I didn't want any. Well, the senator took offense to that. "Oh, no, you've got to try this. Now, you've got to try this."

Finally I said, "All right, I'll try some of it."

So the server had already left the room, but he jumped up and he ran to the back door of the Appropriations Room and said, "Matilde. Hey, Matilde." That was the server's name. "Bring us one more dessert." So she brought it in, and I started, and I tasted it, and he said, "Now, what is that?"

I said, "Well, tastes like vanilla ice cream to me."

"Oh, no, no." He laughed, "that is frozen yogurt." And, he proceeded to tell me how good frozen yogurt was for me and that type of thing. So, he got a big kick out of the fact that I did not know what yogurt was and that he'd gotten me to eat some of it.

Then, another time, in the same room, in the Senate Appropriations conference room, the paneling is high. You know, the ceiling must be twelve, fourteen feet, and nine or ten feet is paneling, and above that, there's a series of murals above each panel, around the top of it. I made a comment on one of my first visits about one of the murals up there, and he launched into a history lesson. He talked for thirty minutes about the murals, what they meant, what they represented, what the general was doing there during the Revolutionary War, how the battle turned out, and the whole bit. So, he gave me the history lesson right quick.

Sturm: Did he ever take you on a tour of the Capitol?

VanKirk: Well, not really, just of his office area. Of course, he made his driver available to me. Whenever I had to go back to the airport, why, he would see that I didn't have to stand out there and catch a taxi. He'd have his driver take me to the airport, wish me well.

Sturm: When he was in Charleston, did you all have any personal relationships in Charleston? Did he come to your house or—

VanKirk: No, he never came to the house, but he would call at Christmastime and send letters, that type of thing. During the Second World War, he worked in the shipyards down in Baltimore, and during that time he didn't have much to do, so he painted a painting. It was a stone arch bridge, and he had some lithographs made of that. I think there were fifty of them that he had made, and he gave me one of those one time.

Sturm: They've got one at the Byrd Center. Yes, I've seen that. I didn't know he was an artist until I saw that.

VanKirk: Well, I didn't either, but he brought it into the office here in Charleston and presented it to me.

Sturm: Did he ever talk to you about how he got started in politics?

VanKirk: Oh, yes, yes. He'd talk sometimes about how he slept in cars, you know. He was a butcher to start with down in Sophia. He'd talk about some of the old folks down in Logan County, how when he was running for the House of Delegates and for Congress the first time or two, they would drive him around in their car. He'd sleep in the back seat all night long. I mean, that's just how hard he worked to get elected. He's talk about some of the old folks in Logan County and southern West Virginia. He'd mention their names and how they'd met him and carry him around.

Sturm: Did he talk about what made him actually do it, why he went into the state legislature and into Congress?

VanKirk: It was just a sense of public service. I mean, the man, that was his life. We all know that after he got in there. But, I think it was just a sense of wanting to do something, and he felt that was where he could make a contribution. He worked at it for what, sixty, seventy years, and he wound up being the greatest statesman, as far as I'm concerned, we've ever had.

Sturm: As you look at his career, from when he was first elected to the House of Delegates in 1946 up until he died, how did he change?

VanKirk: Well, he changed. I guess in his younger days, and, of course, I didn't know him then, but just from what I've read and heard and some of the things that other people told me, he was rather brash, I guess, when he was a younger man. He mellowed along toward the end and became a true statesman and a diplomat. Common knowledge, you know, are his prejudices and being in the Ku Klux Klan. He regretted that till the day he died, that he had done that. But that was just one of those young things that people do. He made a mistake, and he regretted it.

Sturm: When he was first elected in the late fifties, some people thought that he was just another southern Dixiecrat, like Strom Thurmond and Richard Russell and some of those guys. Do you think that was pretty accurate at that time?

VanKirk: Well, I think at that time they probably were. But, he grew. He was in the Senate and, you know, really found out what he could do and became dedicated to the State of West Virginia. And, he changed in that regard and totally devoted himself to that.

Sturm: So he grew as a man.

VanKirk: Oh, absolutely, like we all do. I think he certainly grew.

Sturm: I'm not sure we all do, but we all should. [laughs]

VanKirk: He certainly grew as a politician, I mean from the raw politics to being a statesman.

Sturm: He got elected nine times to the U.S. Senate. What did he serve, four terms in the House of Representatives? How in the world did a man get elected to the U.S. Senate nine times in West Virginia? The state changed over the years, you know. Everything changed.

VanKirk: Well, he did things for people, and he was honest and had integrity. I think people recognized that. He gave to the people, and they gave back to him. I think it was that simple. They knew he was an honest man, and he did what he could for them.

Sturm: How did he feel about people calling him the "King of Pork?"

VanKirk: Oh, he loved it. [laughter] He called himself the king of pork. I mean, that was one of the highlights of the ribbon-cuttings. He would always call himself the king of pork.

Sturm: And enjoyed it?

VanKirk: I remember one time we opened a section of Corridor H outside of Elkins, and there was an airplane flying by with some derogatory term about "Senator Byrd, Go Home," or

something like that. And, buddy, he rolled off of that podium, and he shook his finger at them. And, he told them he was the king of pork, and he'd do this, and they'd pay him no never mind because he was the king.

Sturm: I think I've asked you this, but just let's make sure we've covered—was there ever any time when you were talking with him about highway construction that he disagreed with you?

VanKirk: Oh, absolutely not.

Sturm: He deferred to your judgment?

VanKirk: He deferred, absolutely, right to the letter. He never one time. He was disappointed with the Route 9 situation because we didn't get it under way as quickly as we could, but not once did he ever—

Sturm: Well, I was over there when that was going on. That's still a mess. [laughs]

VanKirk: Hopefully, they're going to get it straightened out. But, not once did he ever intervene or say that he wanted this as a priority or whatever.

Sturm: You already mentioned the fact that he didn't generally, in the primary election, at least, endorse other candidates. How about the general elections?

VanKirk: Well, the only one that I know of particularly was Governor Wise, and he certainly went to bat for him. And like I say, I think he was primarily responsible for Congressman Wise being elected governor.

Sturm: Well, let me ask you this, then, and you alluded to this just a little while ago. Did his relationship and opinion of Senator Wise change when Senator Wise had his personal problems?

VanKirk: Well, it certainly did. I mean, I think it hurt him, because he liked the governor. But, it was just something that he couldn't tolerate, and he would have nothing to do with him after that.

Sturm: How did he get along with the rest of the delegation?

VanKirk: He loved—Congressman [Nick] Rahall, of course, was one of his administrative assistants back when he started. He liked him, and he liked Congressman [Alan Mollohan] real well. Congressman Mollohan might have been his favorite. I'm not sure, but he spoke very highly of him.

Sturm: How'd he get along with Congresswoman [Shelley Moore] Capito?

VanKirk: Well, I don't know that we ever broached that subject. Again, she was Arch Moore's daughter, and I'm sure that he—

Sturm: I'm sure there were lots of projects in her area. Was she invited to all the ribbon-cuttings?

VanKirk: Not really. [laughter] I remember on Route 35 there was maybe a little bit of—Congresswoman Capito would take credit for getting some \$600,000 for designing a certain portion, and Senator Byrd wouldn't touch that project with a ten-foot pole after that. That was her project. She could have it.

Sturm: She could have all the credit for it.

VanKirk: All the credit. He would not have anything to do with it.

Sturm: That's an interesting perspective too. You know, lot of people, political people, contend that he was not always in line with the Democratic Party in the state, that he kind of was his own operator, and he had his own—

VanKirk: He certainly was. I mean, he did what he wanted to do, and his objective was to further the economic development and economic foundation of the State of West Virginia, and he did his thing. He didn't cater to anyone else.

Sturm: Did he cooperate with the party?

VanKirk: As far as I know, he did, yes. I don't know that they ever had any problem.

Sturm: We've talked about his relationship with the governors and the other members of Congress. We talked about his endorsements. I'm going down through my checklist here. We talked about his membership in the Ku Klux Klan. I think we've covered a whole bunch of things here in just a short amount of time. What personal qualities did he have that enabled him to rise to such a high position in the U.S. Senate? At one time, he was probably the third most important man in the United States.

VanKirk: Well, he certainly was. I think his integrity and his dedication to his job. He didn't play games with it, and he always tried to be a straight shooter. I guess one word I would use would be his integrity. People recognized that and appreciated it.

Sturm: Both in and out of the Senate.

VanKirk: In and out of the Senate, that's right.

Sturm: What do you think his legacy for the state's going to be?

VanKirk: I would hate to think of where the State of West Virginia would be from an economic standpoint if it had not been for Senator Byrd, because, as I said, there'll never be

another like him. I think his legacy is that he laid the foundation for a lot of the progress that's going on right now, and what we can see in the future as far as the transportation system is concerned.

[Senator Byrd was fond of saying that, when he was first elected to the Congress, West Virginia had no four-lane highways. Today, we have in the neighborhood of 1,100-1,200 miles. Many of these miles can be attributed directly to his efforts.]

Sturm: Well, I know that you've got a lot of stories to tell about him. Share some of them with us.

VanKirk: Well, I don't know. I think I've covered some of them, but there was one kind of funny story about the fudge we talked about. We made the fudge. I remember when he was running for reelection here in the 1990s, and he came to town. We gave him a batch of fudge, and he took it on the bus. I'm not sure whether Senator Rockefeller was on the tour or not, but I know Senator Edward Kennedy was there, and they were going to southern West Virginia somewhere. Somehow they found out that the senator had this batch of fudge, and they all got into it, and they were just gobbling it up, I mean right and left. And, the senator somehow confiscated what was left and stuck it under his seat so he could have it for himself. That was a story told to me by a couple of people on the bus. That's kind of funny, I thought, people of that stature fighting over some fudge candy. [laughs]

Sturm: You give me a side here that I haven't seen before, about the fudge candy thing. But lots of times he appears to be outgoing and gregarious and plays his fiddle at these things, and now we know about the fudge, but he really didn't go to ball games, didn't go to movies, didn't play golf, didn't do the kinds of things that so many of us do. What did he do for relaxation?

VanKirk: Well, of course, you know, he went to American University and got a law degree. I mean, that took quite a bit of time. An historian, that man could talk about the Roman Empire and the United States Senate to no end. He studied history and contemplated the world, and that was his thing. He wasn't a golfer, and he wasn't an athlete, but he loved people, and he loved to delve into what made things happen. That's what he dedicated himself to. [*He was more scholarly than most of us.*]

Sturm: Did he play the fiddle much in your association with him?

VanKirk: No. He had trouble with his arm. He almost quit by the time we started. But he'd tell me about the times he went to the Grand Ole Opry and played and that type of thing. That was his thing back when he first started getting elected. He would go into some hall or wherever and play the fiddle, and that's how he got his name and recognition to start with.

Sturm: Did you know his wife very well?

VanKirk: I did not. Met her on several occasions, but I did not know her that well.

Sturm: He didn't bring her, then, to –

VanKirk: He brought her two or three times to some of the openings, you know, and she would sit there. And of course, we'd sit and talk to her. But she was a very quiet, reserved lady, and very refined. He would bring her, and he was always very dedicated to her.

Sturm: What kind of change did you see in him after she died?

VanKirk: Well, I think he slowed down. I mean, that hurt him tremendously, of course. But, at every meeting we'd have, ribbon-cutting, he would always talk about Erma, you know, and how, when he was a boy in school, one of his friends' father ran a grocery store. The friend would give him a piece of candy or bubblegum, and he would take it and give it to his girlfriend. That's how you make friends with a girl, he'd say. But, he was dedicated to her from the day they were in grade school until the day she died.

Sturm: Did you ever meet any of his children?

VanKirk: I never met his children. I met them just once or twice, but never socially.

Sturm: Did he ever talk to you about his grandson who was killed?

VanKirk: That hurt him very badly. I mean, he would talk about that and tell me how brilliant he was. I think the boy was studying physics or something like that, and he was very proud of him, and it hurt him deeply to lose a grandson.

Sturm: It would hurt any of us.

VanKirk: Yes, of course it would, but that really hurt him badly.

Sturm: You paint a picture of him—we see him as a statesman and a diplomat, but you paint a picture of sort of a regular guy who just happened to have a lot of power.

VanKirk: Well, he was a regular guy. I mean, he enjoyed just being a regular guy, you know. As far as being able to accomplish something and that type of thing, why, his eyes would light up, but he would just get as jolly as he could. He was a regular guy, but he was all business, you know, when it came to the Senate. And, as far as getting something done, why, he was a bulldog. He'd hang right in there.

Sturm: You mentioned the chewing gum that he gave to his wife. Did he talk much in other ways about growing up, what it was like as a child?

VanKirk: No. Sometimes. He grew up on Wolf Creek down in Mercer County, and he would talk about that, you know, and how they carried water. That and how he had to work as a child and that type of thing.

Sturm: What kind of work did he do? I mean, was it just around the house or—

VanKirk: Just the chores and that type of thing, and they were rather poor. I mean, his stepfather was a coal miner and his mother was—the aunt really raised him, and she was a mother to him. It was hard for him growing up, I guess, but just because they were poor. Everyone was poor then.

Sturm: Yes, I guess so. Everybody was pretty equal back then.

VanKirk: That's right. That built part of his character, I think, the hard times that he grew up with.

Sturm: And, he certainly did everything he could to see that they didn't return.

VanKirk: He certainly did.

Sturm: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

VanKirk: No, I don't think.

Sturm: You've got some notes there. Have we missed anything that you wanted to cover?

VanKirk: I don't think so. I think we pretty well covered it. I don't know what you say about the man. I mean, all the accolades that have been said about him, but he was a gentleman and a statesman and a historian. He loved his wife and his family and the State of West Virginia, and he did everything he could in his lifetime to see that we live a better life after he's gone.

Sturm: Mr. VanKirk, I certainly appreciate your time this afternoon.

VanKirk: It's been a pleasure.

Sturm: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]