

GEORGE SKELTON, INTERVIEWED BY RICHARD EHISEN IN SACRAMENTO ON FEBRUARY 28, 2022

PART I

Rich Ehsen: Hello, everybody. I am Rich Ehsen. I'm the Managing Editor of the *State Net Capitol Journal* here in Sacramento. And today we're here for the latest edition of the Open California Oral History program. And I am thrilled today because we are joined by one of the true legends of journalism and political coverage in the state of California over the last 60 years, George Skelton, the columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. George, how are you doing today?

George Skelton: Pretty good.

Rich Ehsen: Great. Well, thank you for making some time to come here today and share some interesting insights into a very long and storied career. I'm really thrilled. This is the first one of these I've been able to do, so I'm really excited that it's you I'm getting a chance to talk to today. So welcome, really appreciate you being here. Let's start out with just one of the really true basic questions here, which is how you came to be doing this in the first place. You went to San Jose State. You majored in journalism. Is that what you always wanted to do? And how did the program maybe impact your decision to stay in the business?

George Skelton: Very little. No, I always wanted to be a writer, in elementary school even. But I was a sports nut. And that was my main interest, sports, so I liked to write about sports. And I guess my first big motivation was in the sixth grade when I wrote for the sixth-grade newspaper some baseball thing. And it was rejected. My teacher said it was too professional. So that was a motivator. I said, "Oh, too professional is pretty great." What he meant was I was writing about major league baseball, and he didn't think sixth graders would be interested in that. So I always liked to write. I knew I was either going to be a sportscaster or a sports writer. And my first interest was baseball, and track and tennis. I was kind of a jock. But then I got polio and that ended my career as a shortstop for the Yankees. I wanted to be around sports, so that motivated me to write about sports.

My first job was as at *Ojai Valley News*. I was a printer's devil, and what I did is clean the presses, mail the papers out on Wednesday night, melt down lead for the linotypes. One day I asked the editor of the paper if he was going to cover high school sports, and he pointed his finger at me and said, "You are." So I got 10 cents an inch writing about Nordhoff High School sports. From that, I wrangled a job with the *Ventura Star*, working 30 hours a week while going to Ventura Junior College, mainly sports but some general assignment. And I worked three summers at the *Ventura Star* full-time. I got a scholarship to San Jose State. And at San Jose State, I already knew most of the stuff that they were teaching, quite frankly.

Rich Ehsen: Right. You were living it already.

George Skelton: Yeah. And I got straight As in journalism, Cs and Bs in everything else. And from the start I knew I wanted to be a reporter. And I went to UPI as a sports writer in San

Francisco. I was the third man on staff. I covered some of the Giants and found out that there's a lot of assholes in professional sports.

Rich Ehsen: Yeah.

George Skelton: And two things happened. One, my wife was in Sacramento so I was in Sacramento one day and decided to go down to the Capitol. I'd never been to the State Capitol. I went up to the Assembly chamber. And I just happened to be there when they were debating Pat Brown's capital punishment moratorium bill. And I was fascinated by the debate. It turned out to be 40-40 vote. And I was taken aback by the UPI Bureau Chief. In those days, the reporters had desks along the side of the chambers in both chambers, so UPI had its own desk up front along the side. And the bureau chief was walking back and forth to the bureau, which was in the Capitol in those days. The press all had their offices in the Capitol. And I thought, "Man, this looks great."

And then the second thing that happened was I was helping to cover the '61 baseball All-Star Game. I'm in the National League locker room trying to get quotes. And this great Hall of Fame pitcher, Warren Spahn, six-foot-four, World War II hero, probably the greatest left-hander of all time, walks up to me, looks at my credential on my jacket, which was pretty nice. It had baseball bats crossed, Golden Gate Bridge in the back. It said, "Major League All-Star Game 1961." He looks at it and says, "That's cool. I could give that to some pussy." And he grabs it off my lapel. And I'm just there to get quotes. I mean, I'm a little guy. I'm not going to take on this guy. And I was really going for the story, not about the credential. But I thought about it. And I walked into the bureau chief's office the next day and asked for a transfer to Sacramento. And he said, "Well, wait until after the baseball season." So after the baseball season, I transferred to Sacramento to cover the Capitol.

Rich Ehsen: Well, I'm sure there were some interesting personalities in Sacramento too, but I'm sure you probably didn't have too many experiences quite like that one when you got here.

George Skelton: Right. Nobody yanked my credential away.

Rich Ehsen: Yeah.

George Skelton: And what I found out, what I've always said was, "There's a lot of assholes in politics too, but at least they do things that are important." And I found out that there really weren't a lot of assholes in politics. They're pretty pleasant guys, actually.

Rich Ehsen: Well, I found out the same thing because I also started out in sports. And I never thought I would want to cover politics, but that turned out to be exactly the opposite way. So I completely understand where you're coming from, George. Completely. Now, when you came here, you were with you UPI, correct?

George Skelton: Correct.

Rich Ehsen: And what year was that again?

George Skelton: '61.

Rich Ehisen: '61. Okay.

George Skelton: One week before Jesse Unruh was elected Speaker.

Rich Ehisen: Well, let's talk about that. What was the atmosphere like in the Capitol then? I'm going to ask you some more about Jesse Unruh here in a little bit, but what was the competition like in terms of the media outlets and the other reporters? We always hear what a competitive environment it was. Did you find that to be the case?

George Skelton: Yeah, it was competitive but collegial. As I mentioned, everybody had their bureaus in the Capitol. They went to the bathroom together. They ate in the coffee shops together. And they ran into each other in the hall. And UPI and AP were fairly intensively competitive, but two or three AP reporters became my life-long friends. Very close friends. I was the best man at one of Bill Stall's wedding actually. And one guy turned out to be a real big hunting and fishing buddy of mine. But another guy went to work for the *LA Times*, and we became close, Bill Boyarsky.

Rich Ehisen: Oh yeah.

George Skelton: But one thing about the Capitol in those days, it had kind of a musky feeling or smell to it because air conditioning wasn't perfected yet.

Rich Ehisen: The building itself smelled musty?

George Skelton: Yeah, the building itself, especially during the summertime.

Rich Ehisen: Okay.

George Skelton: It was warm, and it had kind of a special musky smell to it. And the reporters were headquartered where the Speaker's office is now, that whole wing on the second floor. There was a little bit of a coffee shop where the Willie Brown press conference room is now, right behind the chamber. And reporters would meet there every morning, have coffee, orange juice, doughnuts furnished by the Sergeant of Arm. Legislators were in there too. So we kind of palled around. But it was very competitive. A lot more newspapers. TV was just starting to take off. The wires were very competitive. Now there's only one wire service, AP, but we had UPI then.

Rich Ehisen: Were there any reporters that maybe served as a mentor, that saw you as the new guy? Or was that a broader thing where everybody did that?

George Skelton: There were some icons. My bureau chief, Jim Anderson, had been there 10 years when I got there. Everybody looked up to him. He was a big hero. AP had Morrie Landsberg, who was a long-time AP Bureau Chief. Those two particularly. But Jack McDowell

of the *Examiner* was a big star. Jackson Doyle of the *Chronicle*. And Squire Barons had been around forever.

Rich Ehisen: Squire Barons, yeah. He was still around when you started?

George Skelton: Oh yeah, he was around a long time after I'd been here. He was around into the mid-'70s, I believe.

Rich Ehisen: Okay. Oh, wow, yeah. Yeah, that's definitely an iconic name. You reference sports and politics, of course, and some similarities. But you've also written about other similarities between sports and athletes in politics and politicians. Do you remember some of those things, the similarities that you have discovered over the years?

George Skelton: It's kind of win at all costs. If you're in an election, you either win or you lose and you disappear. Same in sports, you either win or you lose. So there's no halfway in between, really. The language, politics has picked up sports languages – home run, slam dunk, strike out.

Rich Ehisen: I'll move the ball forward. Yeah, I've heard a lot of those things.

George Skelton: That's about it. It is very competitive. It's a game. I mean, it's a lot of strategy involved in baseball and in sports.

Rich Ehisen: You mentioned Pat Brown. I want to go back to Pat Brown. What was your first impression of Pat Brown? I mean, it feels like Jerry, of course, has overwhelmed him in our psyche, but Pat Brown was incredibly influential during his governorship. What was your impression of him?

George Skelton: One of the three great governors: Hiram Johnson, Earl Warren, and Pat Brown. Pat Brown built the State Water Project. He built most of these freeways we run on today. Eisenhower, of course, did that with the Interstate Highway system and furnished some money, but Pat Brown built the freeways. Built a lot of state colleges, later called universities, more UC campuses. He did a lot on civil rights. He's a warm person, warm human being.

Rich Ehisen: And how was he to cover? How was the access with him, because again, we'll talk about the differences with Jerry later, but how was Pat to cover? I've heard that a lot, that he was a warm individual. How is he in dealing with the press in your job?

George Skelton: Well, I was just some punk reporter in my 20s, but he treated me like I've been around forever and gave me a lot of respect. Everybody was the same. He was not afraid of the press at all. He would joke with them, carry on personal conversations with them. I started out writing a fish and game column once a week for UPI, and later I worked three years for the *Sacramento Union* and I wouldn't go to work there unless I could write in my fish and game column once a week, even though I was a political writer. Anyway, Pat Brown would take us fish and game writers on pack trips with him. He would go on an annual summer pack trip with the Fish and Game Commission and the Fish and Game Department chiefs. And he'd take us four reporters with him. So we'd go back up into the Sierra or Marble Mountains.

I remember one time I was all alone with him sitting on a bench at a picnic table at some lake up in the Northern Sierra, arguing about capital punishment, just he and I. And it was interesting because he was very anti-capital punishment, and I was for it. In this case, some guy had taken a shotgun into a bar in Sacramento and was holding it up, and some off-duty cop out of uniform tried to take the shotgun away from him, and the shotgun went off and killed the cop. So this guy, a poor black guy, he was convicted of first degree murder and was scheduled to be executed. And I was arguing with Pat that he shouldn't be executed. And Pat Brown, who's against the death penalty was arguing fervently that he should be executed because he killed a cop. Pat's father was a cop. No, his father-in-law was a cop. I'm sorry.

Rich Ehsen: And he'd been a DA, right?

George Skelton: Yeah. Pat was a DA. Yeah, he was a DA. And he said, "any cop killer, no matter the circumstances ought to be executed." Anyway, I found that interesting that he would talk to me like that. And another time, he was going up to Knight's Landing, north of Sacramento on a Memorial Day visit to veterans, he was going to make a Veteran's Day speech. He's going up in a big boat, so I asked if I could go along, and I was the only reporter. There was a couple of aides, and me and Pat Brown, and I had a lot of time just talking to Pat at the railing of the boat, going up there. He was very warm. He was the kind of guy who would tell jokes on himself, a self-deprecating humor. He used to like to say after he got beat by Ronald Reagan that, "Californians didn't appreciate my greatness," and then he'd laugh. He'd chortle.

Rich Ehsen: Who won the death penalty argument?

George Skelton: The guy was executed. But Pat Brown didn't do it, it was Ronald Reagan and... Well, a Governor always wins arguments. That would make any difference while you stood out.

Rich Ehsen: Did he change at all over time? Did that affability and that warmth, because the governors' jobs, presidents' jobs, we've seen how it wears on them and the pressure and all that, did you find that he changed at all over time?

George Skelton: No, not at all. No, he's always the same. A kind of guy was he. Once I had a picture of him and I, and I asked him to autograph it, so he autographed it. This was long after he'd been governor. He autographed it, "Pat Brown, Governor, 1959 to 1967." And I said, "Well governor, everybody knows you're the governor. You didn't have to write down." He said, "Well, your grandchildren may not know I was governor. So when they look at this, they'll see who I was." That's the kind of guy he was.

Rich Ehsen: Yeah.

George Skelton: And one time I wanted to interview him, and I forget when this was, but it was several years after he was governor. He was in San Francisco and he was making a speech at the Fairmont Hotel, so I arranged to interview him there. And we were in Ben Swig's suite. Ben Swig owned the Fairmont Hotel, he was one of Pat's big contributors, and kind of the presidential suite. So it's just Pat Brown and I, and Pat goes over to this bar, knows where it is in

the suite, pulls out a bottle of Wild Turkey. We had a couple of Wild Turkeys, and he goes on. I asked him about his re-election and Jesse, I asked about Jesse Unruh. He goes on about how the only reason he ran for re-election was to keep Jess Unruh from becoming governor. He went on about how Jesse would never make a good governor. No class, all that.

Rich Ehisen: Yeah.

George Skelton: So I wrote about it, of course. And the next day, Pat called Unruh and said he was, not misquoted, but taken out of context, and Unruh called me and just laughed. He said he knew all along that's what Pat thought. That's the kind of guy he was, very open.

Rich Ehisen: Yeah.

George Skelton: He was very honest, very candid. Never held back.

Rich Ehisen: Was Jerry ever around in those days as a young man, or was he off on the seminary? Did you ever run into him?

George Skelton: No, I never saw Jerry much in those days.

Rich Ehisen: Let me ask you about the press corps, cause the press corps had a reputation of being a very tight old boys club. What was your impression in that regard? Was it an old boys club? And how would you remember when you started to see more women reporters or is that... Have we made more of that than is true? What's your impression of what it was like then in that regard?

George Skelton: Well, I was a young boy, but there were a lot of white males, no question about it. But frankly, I don't think that was a discrimination against women as much. Sure, there was some, I imagine. I never felt that in journalism. My first wife was a journalist. We met at San Jose State in journalism school, and she became a reporter and she worked for the [Sacramento] *Bee*. She covered the capitol and she eventually went to work for the *LA Times*, covered politics. But she plowed through it and worked in journalism. There was a few women. We had one reporter at UPI who, when I was a bureau chief, she's was in the bureau. She went and became a war correspondent in Vietnam, and became a really good investigative reporter for the *LA Times*. But I think gradually, I think a lot of this was women choosing not to go into journalism. My second wife majored in journalism, thought that it really wasn't a good career for women so she became a teacher. I think in those days, women weren't career-minded like they became later. A lot of women decided not to go into careers, to stay home and take care of the children, or go into professions where they didn't have to maybe work all night. Do weekend work, teaching, whatever, a 9 to 5 job.

Rich Ehisen: How did the lawmakers treat them? Did you see any difference in how women, female reporters were treated by lawmakers?

George Skelton: Like men and women have always been. The better looking the woman the more the men paid attention to them. That's just the truth. And some men treated them like sex

objects. Some men treated them like reporters. Go down the list of the legislators, which I'm not going to name. And then you say the same thing about reporters. I've seen reporters the same way.

Rich Ehsen: Yeah.

George Skelton: They're womanizing reporters who treat female reporters like sex objects.

Rich Ehsen: Some things that are not that different no matter where you're at are they?

George Skelton: No, they're just not. To answer one of your questions, you began to see more women, the 70s and 80s, and then in the 90s and really into the thousands. Now I suspect there's more women than men reporters, in the capitol. And I think a lot of that is because women just decided they wanted careers, and they went into journalism, a lot of them did. Let me tell you a good woman reporter story.

Rich Ehsen: Oh. By all means, please.

George Skelton: Okay, so I'm the UPI bureau chief and Reagan's the governor. He's going to make a big announcement. I forget really what year it was, but I think it was probably this big welfare reform program. Decides to make it at the Sutter Club. Well, the Sutter Club doesn't allow women, or didn't in those days, allow women admission for any reason, except once a year when they'd have a dinner where the male members can invite their wives, that's the only time. So, Reagan for some foolish reason decides to have this at the Sutter Club, and Tracy Wood was working for us. Tracy was a great girl. And so I decided to have some fun and assign Tracy to cover it, and I talked to her about it. So we knew she'd get barred, but she was all happy to do that. Enjoyed it. So she went over there and started to go in. Reagan's people turned her away, "No, the Sutter Club doesn't allow women."

"Well, I've been assigned to cover this."

Well, you can't do it."

So she called me, and I called the Press Secretary Paul Beck, and said, "You won't allow our reporter in?"

"Who is it?"

"Tracy wood."

"Well of course not, you know the Sutter Club doesn't allow women."

I said, "Well, you can't tell us who to assign to cover stories. I want her to cover the story. She's up on this subject."

And I threatened not to cover it. I said, "We'll just write it off the handout." And I would have

done that. But they wanted UPI to cover it, because we had 130 newspapers in the state, plus about that many radio and TV stations. So they let her in, and she was the first woman to be allowed in the Sutter Club. Now, years ago, they started allowing members, but anyway, that was fun.

Rich Ehisen: A good use of leverage. Well, let's talk more about Reagan. He had a reputation also as being a nice man, though I think his political philosophies were probably about the polar opposite of most of Pat Brown's. What was your impression of Reagan? And especially as coming from Hollywood, how was he with dealing with the press?

George Skelton: He was accessible. He had a press conference once a week, which is unheard of now. But those days, every Tuesday he'd have a press conference. One Tuesday would be in the morning for afternoon papers, there aren't any afternoon papers anymore, and the next Tuesday would be in the afternoon for morning newspapers. He was readily available for interviews if you had a reason to interview him. He's a nice guy, decent but aloof. Aloof from everybody, aloof from his kids, if you believe his kids, which I do. I think the only thing he was not aloof from was his wife, Nancy. Not even his closest aides got real close to Ronald Reagan. But he was always a gentleman. A great guy. I had a lot of respect for him. I didn't agree with him on a lot of things, most things, but he was committed. He knew what he believed. He was a true believer.

Rich Ehisen: Well, let me ask you really quick, George. I don't want to jump too far outside of California, but later on when you went to DC, you're one of only two reporters that I can think of that covered him extensively as governor and as president, you and Lou Cannon, of the [Washington] *Post*.

George Skelton: Lou Cannon covered him for two years.

Rich Ehisen: Yeah. You covered him for a long, long time.

George Skelton: I covered him for eight.

Rich Ehisen: Yeah. Did you see a big difference in Reagan at all when he became President in any way? We talked about how these jobs shape people and change them and the pressures, etcetera, etcetera. What was your impression of him from governor to president?

George Skelton: He got older.

Rich Ehisen: He didn't change though?

George Skelton: No, he didn't change personally. Not at all. He got older. He got harder of hearing, and that affected his speech, but what really changed him was being shot. I noticed a big difference right there. He aged quite a bit.

Rich Ehisen: Were you there that day?

George Skelton: Yeah, I was there that day. I covered that.

Rich Ehsen: What was going through your mind at that time? Because you were at a couple of other presidential assassination attempts, we'll talk about that too, but that day it was more successful, though not ultimately successful. What was that atmosphere like for you and for the event? That was historic.

George Skelton: Big story. I mean, you're a reporter, that's what you think about. I don't think about anything else. Big story happens, you cover the story. You want to get it right, get it fast.

Rich Ehsen: But you'd also known the man. You'd known the man for a long time.

George Skelton: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know what?

Rich Ehsen: Did that play into it at all?

George Skelton: You're almost like a physician or a cop. You put your profession first in a situation like that. Yeah, here's the president, he's shot, and I thought from the beginning, he was worse off than the White House led on. I knew he was. And more so even than him, like Jim Brady, press secretary. He almost died.

Rich Ehsen: Right.

George Skelton: So you're really concerned about that, but the president's a story. You think about the story. That's me anyway. I can't speak for everybody. But the first thing I thought of was... I was there just a few seconds after he was shot. He'd been speaking to a labor group in a hotel bar room. I stuck around him, interviewed some of the labor people, see what they thought of the speech. Then I saw a bunch of red lights down there where the president was supposed to be. I went down the escalator, I said, "What's going on?" And they were just wheeling the ambulance off. Not the ambulance, but the limousine. And he said, "the president just got shot." So the first thing I thought about was, "This can't be like Kennedy. We're going to find out exactly what happened."

I went around interviewing everybody about what they saw. Who it was, who they saw shot him and everything. I got a different answer from everybody. Some people saw this John Hinckley, who was a young kid, they saw him. He had a beard, he had no beard, he had glasses, he had no glasses. They had the hair wrong. And that's where I first realized that eyewitnesses often aren't worth a shit, and that was my first impression. And I spent three, four days at the hospital getting briefings. Anyway, that was my emotion. Get the damn story.

Rich Ehsen: I really want to ask you about Jesse Unruh. Because Jesse Unruh was a titanic figure in the second half of the 20th Century in California politics. He's a big man. Big powerful, happy to wield power man. Willie Brown's mentor. What were your interactions? His nickname was Big Daddy for lots of reasons. Terrible womanizer. All the things that you think of with somebody like that. Again, give me your impression. You covered him. You dealt with him. What were your impressions of him?

George Skelton: Well, first of all, he and Willie Brown didn't like each other to begin with, because Willie in a primary beat a guy named Ed Gaffney, who was Jesse's easy vote. Ed Gaffney was an Irishman from San Francisco and would vote anyway Jesse wanted him to. But Willie came along and upset him. Beat him in the primary. So they didn't start out real well, but then they got close after a while. Not real close actually, but they had a big respect for each other. They were such pros that they respected each other immensely. I don't think they ever became really close.

My impression of Jesse: two personalities. One was the sober Jesse. A good government guy, thoughtful, classy, always concerned about the institution of the legislature. Trying to make things better. More competitive against the governor's office. He went on lecture tours about how to improve government and all that. Then there was the drunk Jesse, which quite often was no-class, vulgar, womanizer, obnoxious and a bully. A big bully. But Jesse was powerful, and his personality was such where he didn't have to say much to get legislators to go his way. Before the restoration of the capitol in the late '70s, the Speaker's office was right behind the Assembly rostrum, and there were steps from the Speaker's office right up to the rostrum. So if you were out there sitting on the floor of the Assembly chamber, and you saw that door open and Jesse would walk out, and the first thing he'd do is just stare out over everybody, and you could kind of feel this chill going across the room. Now, what does he want? What am I doing wrong? That was Jesse.

Rich Ehsen: Well, interesting because he seemed to have a pretty good working relationship with Reagan. Then you know here's Reagan, that's somewhat more aloof and more, a you say, a nice man, always somewhat genteel and that kind of thing. And then you have half of Jesse Unruh who could be like that and the other half could be like you just described it. Did he unleash that bad side of himself too often in the legislative arena, or was that saved for off hours?

George Skelton: Oh no, it was during the legislative arena too. There was the famous time in 1963 when he locked up the Republicans overnight in the chamber, because they wouldn't vote on an education bond. They wanted to see the language in the bond about where the money was going to be spent and Jesse for some tactical reasons didn't want them to see it because they wouldn't like it. But he wanted them to vote on the budget, and this is part of the budget. And they wouldn't do it, so he locked them up overnight. And they brought in cots. I don't think they ever used them but they brought in cots. He was drunk. He was drunk the whole time. And he admitted it later. But later he tried to excuse himself saying he was taking diet pills. Well, maybe he was taking diet pills and booze, but there was too much booze. He was stashed up for much of it in a bar over at the El Mirador. And his lieutenants like Jerry Walding, who was Assembly Majority Leader, later a congressman, would come down and tell him, "Jesse, you gotta get back here, and straighten this thing out. You're going to be the looking bad locking these people up overnight." And he would just mumble and wouldn't do anything about it. He finally did the next morning.

Rich Ehsen: What was it like to cover this guy though?

George Skelton: Fun.

Rich Ehisen: The situations like that, because did you feel compelled that there were things that you probably shouldn't report because of the way maybe what it...

George Skelton: No, no, great story.

Rich Ehisen: Great story.

George Skelton: No, you gotta report it all.

Rich Ehisen: And how did he respond to you reporting that kind of thing?

George Skelton: He didn't like it.

Rich Ehisen: Did he treat you differently?

George Skelton: He didn't like it. Well, just me, I didn't care. I got along with Jesse fine. One time I was doing a profile on him so I trailed around with him hitting the nightly bars. As all, well not all, Deukmejian didn't and Monaghan didn't, but many did hit the nightly bars. And we wound up back at his apartment, sitting on the floor, listening to Hank Williams records. He had a little [chuckle] record player on the carpet, and I think he had every Hank Williams album there was. He was playing all these records and sitting there singing to them, and I'm there with him. That's how I...

Rich Ehisen: Were you singing with him as well?

George Skelton: I might have been...

Rich Ehisen: You might have been. Okay.

George Skelton: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I might have been taking notes...

END OF PART I