

Leona Egeland Rice

PART I: From public school teacher to the California Legislature

Interview conducted by Dan Morain in Napa, California, on January 22, 2024.

PART I

Dan Morain: Welcome to another Open California series of Oral Histories made possible by a grant from the California State Library. Today, we're talking with Leona Egeland Rice, who was an Assembly woman for three terms, from 1974 through 1980.

Leona Egeland: Right.

DM: Thank you. We're at Leona's home in Napa. Lovely Napa. Lovely home. So you were something before you became an Assembly woman. You grew up in Tucson. You were born in New York, but you grew up in Tucson and you went off to college. And tell me what you studied in college.

LE: Well, I actually had my undergraduate work at the University of Arizona, and I majored in biology and education. And then, I went to San Jose State to get a graduate degree. And San Jose had a special program in science education, and it was a lovely program. It looked great, and it looked like I could take a lot of classes in the physical sciences as most of my classes as an undergraduate had been in the biologic area. So it was fun to think that I could catch up with astronomy and geology and other of the physical sciences. And I took a lot of chemistry.

DM: And so your profession coming out of college was as a high school...

LE: As a science teacher.

DM: A high school science teacher.

LE: I taught middle school and high school.

DM: And were there a lot of women who were high school science teachers at this time?

LE: No, not...

DM: Give us the date. What year are we talking about?

LE: Well, I graduated as an undergraduate in 1960 and graduate in 1965, got my master's.

DM: Okay. So then you're teaching in the late '60s, early '70s?

LE: Right.

DM: Or late '60s?

LE: Right. The late '60s.

DM: Yeah. And public schools?

LE: Yes. They were all public schools.

DM: In San Jose?

LE: I taught in Tucson. My first year that I taught was in 1961 at Flowing Wells High School. It was a junior high-high school combination. And I taught general science and biology.

DM: I see.

LE: And so that was the beginning. And then when I went to San Jose to do the master's degree, then I stayed in San Jose and I taught... I actually taught in middle school. I taught in two middle schools in San Jose.

DM: Public schools?

LE: Public Schools.

DM: Yes. And so, let me back up just to stop you. Growing up in Tucson, what'd your parents do?

LE: My father was a plastering contractor. My mom was a housewife. My mom never drove, my mom never worked outside of the home, and they moved to Arizona because my mother had rheumatoid arthritis, so she needed a dry climate, and that's how they moved to Tucson.

DM: I see. And I guess there was some incident where you were unfairly treated in public school. Tell me about that.

LE: Oh, [chuckle] well...

DM: And then we'll fast forward to your time in the Legislature.

LE: Okay. All right. Yeah. This has to do with something that happened in the Legislature. When I was in middle school in Mansfield Junior High School, and I was in Mr. Kollof's math class.

DM: Mr. Kollof?

LE: Mr. Kollof. He was a bully. And I was sitting between Ray Hopkins and Howard Goldstein, and they were buddies and they were passing notes to each other. And I got caught with the note.

DM: So you were the go-between?

LE: I was the go-between, but I didn't squeal on my friends. So I got to go in front of the room and bend over and be paddled.

DM: You're kidding.

LE: And how old are you in the eighth grade? I can't remember.

DM: 13, 14, maybe 12?

LE: It was very, very embarrassing. Beside that, it hurt, and I didn't wanna cry, I didn't wanna show him that I would cry. I never forgot that.

DM: All right. All right.

LE: So when you fast forward...

DM: We'll get to that.

LE: Oh, okay.

DM: We'll get to that.

[laughter]

DM: We'll get to that. So you're working in San Jose as a science teacher, but then, was it a side job? How did you come to become part of the third house, a lobbyist in Sacramento? And tell me who you were lobbying for.

LE: Well, I was married and I had two daughters, and I wasn't teaching, I was actually teaching part-time. I taught kids that were being homeschooled because they had an illness or they had an accident or something. So, I would go to their homes and I would teach them whatever subjects they were taking. I also taught, for two years, I taught people who had never gone to school before that came from foreign countries. And they actually wanted to get a high school degree. And they wanted to be able to read stories to their grandchildren. And some of them had been brides from the Asian countries. Some of them came from Europe, and a lot came from Mexico and Central America. But they all worked very hard. They were very enthusiastic. And it was probably a wonderful experience for me to be with all of these wonderful adults that were so interested in learning. And we started the curriculum from first grade, and we went through, probably, fourth grade. And then the second year we went the rest of the way to the eighth grade, and then they would take the eighth grade equivalent and they could go to high school. And so, that was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that.

DM: And so you at some point started working the hallways of the California state Capitol. How...

LE: Okay, yeah. So I taught... Besides the teaching that I just described, when I was ready to go back to full-time teaching, I couldn't find a job because the schools were very poor. And I was a very expensive teacher. I had several years of experience, and I had a master's degree, so they could actually hire two teachers for my price, so I couldn't find a job. And so that was interesting. But I was very involved with the different groups in San Jose and particularly environmental groups. And I...

DM: So political organizations?

LE: Well, they were... I started with American Association of University Women, and I belonged to them. And they studied a lot of environmental kinds of things, the water projects and the Peripheral Canal, I can't remember all of the things, but we had a lot of studies and then a lot of local things. And one of the things that I got very involved in was the passage of funding for a tertiary sewage treatment. So I always say I started in garbage and sewage...

DM: I see.

LE: [laughter] ... and then politics. But these were things that I could relate to from a scientific point of view. And I thought that they needed assistance. We had a lot of problems with garbage and sewage.

DM: In San Jose and the (San Francisco) Bay.

LE: And people were throwing raw sewage into the Bay, and it would come right down to the apex at the bottom in Alviso, and you could smell it all over San Jose. So that was my first foray into politics. But there were issues that I wanted something done and I found that people were elected, whether it was at the city, county, or state level or federal level, somebody was making decisions. So that's when I started getting involved in other people's campaigns. And I found people that agreed with things I wanted to see done. And so, I would work in their campaign so that I really started working in other people's campaigns. And then, I found that often when they were elected, they didn't want to move in those controversial directions because they felt that that would be a barrier to being reelected. So they didn't do that. So I was very disappointed often. So I said, I have to run myself.

[laughter]

DM: Well, but before you ran, you were working for organizations as a lobbyist.

LE: Yes, I was working with Planned Parenthood and Zero Population Growth.

DM: And what year would that have been? 1970-ish or so?

LE: It was... No, no, it was in the, probably in the, let's see 1969, 1970, something like that.

DM: 1969, 1970?

LE: Yeah, yeah.

DM: So this is right around the time Roe v. Wade is passed.

LE: Right.

DM: California has already ... Governor Reagan has already signed California's first abortion (law)...

LE: Tony Beilenson's bill.

DM: ...Rights bill. Tony Beilenson was the state senator from Beverly Hills, who carried that legislation.

LE: Right.

DM: Later remember Congress. And so you're working in the Capitol on abortion-rights issues and population related issues.

LE: Right. Right.

DM: And what was your... What were some of the bills or the issues you were working on?

LE: Well, the very, very first thing was just to sort of get a resolution.

DM: Okay. Tell me some of the issues that you're working on behalf of Planned Parenthood and Zero Population.

LE: Okay. The organization wanted to have a resolution about overpopulation and...

DM: A resolution passed by the Legislature.

LE: Passed by the Legislature. And those have no force, but they bring attention and you get more, you get press on these and people start talking about them. So, that was... actually, I think George Moscone carried that for us, not Tony. And so that was a resolution. But Tony Beilenson carried bills having to do with contraceptives to minors, the creation of the Office of Family Planning, vasectomies. Kaiser and others didn't want to pay for all of the vasectomies. So they were, had introduced criteria that men had to have three natural children before they could get a vasectomy at Kaiser. And so, that was, I think, one of the first bills I lobbied against and got to testify before the committees about that.

DM: And so you're talking 1969, 1970, '71, maybe '72. And there aren't a lot of women in the Legislature at this time. So you're talking, you're a young woman, young mom, talking to men about well, sex. How did that go?

0:12:36.1 **LE:** It was a great job. I got to go to Sacramento and talk to men about sex, and I got paid to go to Sacramento and talk to men about sex.

[laughter]

LE: And they didn't know what to do about it. I mean, they would listen to me, but I'd start talking and they'd go, 'I think I gotta close the door. No, maybe I should keep the door open'. And we'd laugh and it was really cute, they didn't quite know what to do because that wasn't a topic that people talked to them about out loud, especially a young woman. And it made sense and they just, but it was funny. They didn't know what to do.

DM: Did you have any... Can you recall any especially awkward or uncomfortable?

LE: They were all awkward.

DM: They were all awkward.

LE: They were all awkward, no matter, even if they agreed with the premise of whatever we were talking about. Like the creation of the Office of Family Planning or vasectomies. I would just be able to ask them, so do you count the illegitimate children that...

DM: Among the three?

LE: Yeah, among the three. Shall we go out and find those in order to document that vasectomy would be warranted or could be given according to your criteria? And they certainly didn't want that. And they all of a sudden decided that that wasn't a very good thing to vote for.

DM: I see. So you were able to kill that bill?

LE: I killed that bill. Yes. I killed that bill.

DM: Well, there you go. There you go.

LE: Yeah.

DM: So you were working the halls when, well, George Moscone, obviously a state senator, becomes mayor of San Francisco.

LE: Yes.

DM: Willie Brown is an Assemblyman from San Francisco. John Burton's an Assemblyman from San Francisco, John Vasconcellos...

LE: No. John Vasconcellos was not San Francisco. John Foran.

DM: In San Jose. Yeah.

LE: Yeah. John Foran was also... Yeah.

DM: In San Jose. Yeah.

LE: He was San Jose.

DM: Henry Waxman. These were people who, all... Howard Berman, Leo McCarthy. These were all people who made quite a name. Were there any who you became friends with who you felt like you had a connection with beyond politics that...

LE: Gary Hart was in my class.

DM: So Gary Hart from Santa Barbara.

LE: From Santa Barbara.

DM: Okay.

LE: Yes. The state person. He was in my class. I had a very large class of, people who were elected in 1974. And he was my buddy, and all through the years. He and his wife.

DM: So tell me why you decided to run for the California State Assembly. 1974 is Watergate year. The Vietnam War is still going on. A lot of things are happening politically.

LE: In 1970, there was the census and then, a new district was created. The map was redone of the districts. And so, there was my house in the middle of a new district without an incumbent. But that took a while because if you remember, there were problems with the people who usually drew the districts. There was a lot of controversy. And then, they redid it the second time, and finally, they threw it into the courts to redraw the districts, so that they didn't favor incumbents because the committee that was doing the original redistricting was definitely favoring incumbents. So, when they... When the court did it, that's when there became a district without an incumbent. And that's where my house was, in the middle of that.

DM: And this is in San Jose. What part of San Jose?

LE: Well, I lived close to the Almaden area of San Jose.

DM: Okay. Alright. And you had a primary.

LE: I had eight opponents in my primary.

DM: Were they all men?

LE: There was one woman, and the others were men. I was not the chosen candidate from the Democratic Central Committee.

DM: So the Democratic Party endorsed in your race?

LE: Bill Diehl was the endorsed candidate.

DM: Bill Diehl?

LE: Yes.

DM: Okay. And why did they not endorse you?

LE: They didn't endorse women. They didn't endorse young people, and they didn't endorse minorities.

DM: I see. Okay. And so, you're running in a primary, did any sitting legislators help you?

LE: I had, well, two-and-a-half... Three, I had, Bill Lockyer, and Bill gave me one of his staffers with whom I'm still in touch. His name is Steve High. He lives in San Jose now, but he gave Steve to my campaign while he paid for Steve and from his coffers of some kind. And so I had Steve, and then Willie gave me funds.

DM: Willie Brown.

LE: Willie Brown. And George Moscone came and did some talks for fundraisers.

DM: So you had three Democratic Assembly members who were supporting you?

LE: Yeah. Well, Moscone was a senator.

DM: Yeah.

LE: And the other two were in the Assembly. And March Fong came and did some events for me.

DM: And she would've been Secretary of State at this time? (Ed's Note: Eu was in the Assembly in 1974 but running

for Secretary of State).

LE: Yes.

DM: Yeah. So why was the establishment not supporting you?

LE: They didn't support me even when I won the primary. When I won the primary, they just said, 'Well, that's a lost seat.' So they didn't support me at all. They didn't, they wouldn't have supported several of the other candidates had they won because they were minorities.

DM: Okay. And yet you won?

LE: I did win.

DM: Was it in a landslide?

LE: I think I won by something like 56%, 57%, something like that.

DM: Yeah.

LE: But there had never been a woman elected in the San Benito part of my district, my district included. And it's different now, the 24th Assembly District. But my district was all of San Benito County, and then Gilroy and Morgan Hill and the southern part of Santa Clara County. Almaden, Edenvale, Oak Grove, Evergreen. All of that.

DM: Okay. And so what... So 1974, you were elected in '74, who was your Republican opponent?

LE: Peter Tweedt.

DM: Peter Tweedt?

LE: Yes.

DM: But was this...

LE: Peter Tweedt was an assistant to Reinecke, Lieutenant Governor Reinecke.

DM: So he had some institutional support.

LE: He had a lot of institutional support.

DM: And how'd you beat him?

LE: I was better.

[laughter]

LE: I was more honest. And I showed that he just moved into the district.

DM: Carpet bagger.

LE: So we did a little, little bit of research and found out he was a carpet bagger. Right.

DM: I see. Okay.

LE: So that didn't sit well with a lot of people.

DM: But then also, this is 1974. This is Watergate time.

LE: Right.

DM: And so what do you think the impact of Watergate was on your election?

LE: Big. It was big. And I've often felt that if you looked across the country, you would find that many women were elected after Watergate. Up until that point, politics was kind of a rough area. It wasn't very feminine. There were women in the local school boards and possibly city councils, but not at the state and federal level. Not many. And so, women didn't necessarily vote for women. They asked their husbands or their fathers or their brothers, 'Who should I vote for?' And then they would say, 'Well, this gentleman here, or this gentleman here'. And so after Watergate, they could turn to their husband and say, 'You told me to vote for this, a-hole, and look what happened. I'm not gonna vote for who you tell me to vote for.' And you know what? I know that lady. I worked with her in the league. I worked with her in the environmental council. I worked with her in the redevelopment agency. I worked with her in AAUW. So they knew me 'cause I had been involved with so many projects with women. So I always say that Republican women elected me, 'cause they crossed over as well as Democratic women, but they, the Republican women, voted for me, too.

DM: I see. And so, okay, so you got into the Assembly sworn in, I assume in December of '74. And really it starts rolling a couple of weeks later in January. And there was a speakership fight going on that time.

LE: Oh, yes.

DM: And so what's your... Tell me about that. What's your role? What was your role and that you're fresh... You're a freshman?

LE: I was just... Right. It was just at the beginning. And I didn't know Leo McCarthy at all. He was invisible in my election. But Willie (Brown) had been very supportive, had come and spoken at our fundraisers and loaned me funds, which I paid back. And even though he told me I didn't have to, I said, 'Oh, yes, I do'. But I knew him and I felt that he was a person I could work very well with. And so I voted for Willie. And the next day, I was moved to the sixth floor of the Capitol.

DM: From where, where had you, where was your...

LE: I think I had, I don't remember exactly. Somewhere on the fifth floor. And they put me in an office.

DM: A regular office.

LE: A regular office.

DM: And then you moved up to the sixth floor.

LE: And I moved to the sixth floor.

DM: And what's on the sixth floor?

LE: And the sixth floor is an office that had belonged to John Vasconcellos' committee staff. It was very tiny.

DM: How tiny?

LE: And it was tiny enough. So my two secretaries had to signal each other so they didn't get squashed. When one opened the file drawer and the other opened the door, [laughter] it was very small. And so we were up there. It was very uncomfortable. We knew we were being punished.

DM: And did Willie try to help or was this was, there was nothing he could...?

LE: Well, he was in the doghouse. Yeah.

DM: He was in a doghouse too, right.

LE: There was nothing he could do. Yeah. Because the Speaker tells the Rules Committee what to do and everybody. Your office is measured. Everybody measures their office, and more, the bigger your office, the more powerful you are. So I was in the doghouse.

DM: Yeah. And so, you though figure out a way to exit the dog...

LE: Oh, I had to. I had to.

DM: [chuckle] So tell me about that.

LE: Well, Pauline Davis was the only woman that was in the Legislature.

DM: So you're one of two women?

LE: One of two women. I was the feminist in the Legislature. I had...

DM: The only one?

LE: The only one. I had a statewide audience of women. And so I sent an invitation to the president of the state, PTA, the state Business and Professional Women, the State League of Women Women voters, all of the state organizations of women. And I asked their presidents if they would please come to Sacramento to meet with me. And that I would be very interested in issues of concern to them and legislation that I should introduce. And so they all accepted. They were very excited to be able to come and have that kind of a conversation. And then, I contacted Mr. Speaker and I asked him, I told him, about the meeting and I asked him if he would please come and welcome this group of women who were leading thousands of other women, if he would welcome them to the Capitol. And he said he would be very happy to do that. 'Where was the meeting?' And I said, in my office. And do you know the next day I had a new office on the fourth floor.

[laughter]

LE: And it was much bigger, and I had that office for the rest of my tenure.

DM: I see. I see. Yeah. And so Mr. Speaker would have been Leo McCarthy?

LE: Yes.

DM: You didn't call him Leo.

LE: I was not allowed to call him Leo. Perhaps John Foran called him Leo. But I was not ... he was either, Mr. McCarthy or Mr. Speaker. It was very formal.

DM: Formal. And so he attended this meeting on the fourth floor?

LE: Well, he came and welcomed. Yes. The move was very swift. One day and everything I had was in the new office.

DM: Did he ever say anything about that?

LE: No, no.

DM: Never had that discussion?

LE: No, no.

DM: Okay. All right. Well, so you introduce some legislation to begin with. What were some of your early bills that you were interested in? It's not just winning an office. It's winning an office to do something.

LE: Well, why did I wanna go to Sacramento? Actually, I wanted to see what I could do for children. I felt that there was very little money spent, where it needed a lot more money spent in all areas of education, in the areas of mental health care for children. I knew from having been in the schools that a good teacher can recognize a child that has some problems very early on. I think if you asked kindergarten teachers, they could identify the kids that are loners, the kids that don't socialize well, the kids that, just have, like to hit, they can identify children that need some special assistance and we don't have anybody in the schools or we didn't have anybody in the schools. Schools had cut back so that they didn't have nurses. They didn't definitely have anybody that the teacher could refer them to. I thought that at least the school districts should be able to have somebody to whom the teachers could refer the students that they thought needed more help, needed testing, needed special attention. Because I just didn't... As I said, I think, you could identify people that had the beginnings of problems that would fester and show up later.

LE: I also, and just in education, I felt that there was much more that could be done. So I really felt that I wanted to do more as a teacher and more for children. And a lot of my thoughts were in that area. So, I was very concerned about the testing of infants for example. Infants when in the hospitals were tested for certain kinds of, anomalies, certain kinds of problems, and so that they

could catch them right away, but they didn't test for some of the more rare things that would yet like phenylketonuria, PKU, was one of the tests. It was...

DM: This is a prenatal test right?

LE: Yes. No, no, no. This is a post. This was when the infant was in the hospital, there were a series of tests. They would prick the heel of the baby and then they'd do blood tests or urine tests. But some of the tests like PKU were rare and they were expensive and so they weren't done. And yet if you could identify the problems early on, you could do something about it. If you waited, they would, it would be mental health issues, if in fact the child survived. So I was very involved with that. I also did some legislation on fetal alcohol syndrome and I had huge opposition from the alcohol industry.

DM: How did you even know in 1974, '75, '76 that fetal alcohol syndrome was a thing?

LE: There was a professor at the university in San Diego who was doing research. I just read a lot about and tried to keep up with medical research and what was going on with children. And he had done a lot of work on looking at this whole phenomenon of a lot of symptoms, a lot of things that happened to an infant, when this was before they were born, and then the mother had alcohol issues. And so, if I could, I mean, I knew we weren't going to be able to stop people from drinking at all, but perhaps they didn't know that their drinking had anything to do with these children that were born that had mental problems and physical problems as well. And so, I just had read this gentleman's research, and I met with him, and I asked him to assist me in trying to do something about that. And so we put in a bill that required anybody who sold alcohol to have signs put up. And you see those signs today, they're still there. So if you go into a bar or a restaurant, talks about the effect of alcohol for pregnant women.