

Interview with Mrs. Ruth Sullivan
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Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection
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Interviewed by John Waldron and Calvin Gower

This is an interview conducted for the Central Minnesota Historical Center by John Waldron and Calvin Gower, on October 11, 1973. Today we are interviewing Mrs. Henry H. Sullivan, whose husband was in the State Senate for twenty years, representing the 45th District. His father, John D. Sullivan, had been in the state senate for twenty years before that, not immediately before but for a twenty-year period.

Waldron: Mrs. Sullivan, can you give us some background on Mr. Henry H. Sullivan and Mr. John D. Sullivan?

Sullivan: John D. Sullivan was born in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. His mother passed away when he was a child. His father came to Minnesota. John was educated in Peterborough Institute and came to St. Cloud as a young man, about 1885. He studied law in the office of a prominent St. Cloud attorney and was admitted to the Bar of the State of Minnesota. Within a few years he was elected county attorney of Stearns County, only to have his opponent discover something that John did not know. John's father came to St. Cloud and became a United States citizen, but not knowing what the future might hold for his children who were living in Canada with relatives, he did not list them as minors to also become citizens. John could not, therefore, assume the office to which he had been elected. When the next election came around he again sought to become county attorney and was elected without opposition.

Gower: He became a citizen in that period of time?

Sullivan: Yes, "J.D." as he was called most of his adult life, became a citizen between the time he was first elected and unable to take office and the succeeding election year.

Gower: Did Mr. John D. Sullivan practice law in St. Cloud or Sauk Rapids?

Sullivan: John D. Sullivan practiced law in St. Cloud for many, many years. I believe from the middle 1880s until the time of his death, Christmas Eve 1933. During that time his son Henry entered the office with him and practiced law from 1913 until he retired in 1958. Henry died March 21, 1959. A younger brother, Charles J., became a member of the firm in 1926, but died in 1928. From that time on, John D. having retired from the active practice of law, Henry H. Sullivan practiced alone in the City of St. Cloud.

Gower: When was John D. Sullivan elected to the Senate and what years did he serve?

Sullivan: John D. Sullivan was elected to the Senate in 1911 and served twenty years, that is, five terms, to 1931.

Gower: What about Henry Sullivan's mother? What was her background?

Sullivan: Henry's mother, Elizabeth Schmidt, was born in Ohio, but came to the St. Cloud area as a young woman. She and John D. Sullivan were married in the early 1880s. The children were Frank J. Sullivan, Henry H. Sullivan, Charles J. Sullivan, and Margret Sullivan, who later became Mrs. Lawrence Hall of St. Cloud.

Gower: Did Henry Sullivan go to the public schools of St. Cloud, and read law as did his father?

Sullivan: Henry attended the public schools of St. Cloud and the University of Minnesota, graduation in 1912, I believe. That is, he graduated from the University's Law School, was admitted to the Bar of the State of Minnesota, and entered practice in St. Cloud with his father. He continued the practice of law here until his retirement in 1958. During part of that time his younger brother, Charles J., was also admitted to the practice of law and entered the firm, which became "Sullivan, Sullivan and Sullivan," in 1926. Charles passed away in in 1928 and Henry continued the practice of law alone until retirement in 1958.

Waldron: Could you tell us something about Henry Sullivan's first wife and the family they had?

Sullivan: Henry was married in 1912 to Hazel J. Brown. There were three children: Elizabeth Lee, Kathleen Mary, and John D. Sullivan II. This marriage ended in divorce in 1936. In 1937 Henry Sullivan married Ruth L. Hyslep, daughter of northern Minnesota pioneers, Colin and Alma Hyslep, who came from Michigan with a background of farming and horticulture. The family was a victim of the Moose Lake forest fire in 1918, and move to Sauk Rapids in 1920. Ruth was educated in local public schools and business colleges, and later became a legal secretary in the Sullivan Law Offices.

Gower: This interview is with the second Mrs. Henry Sullivan. I believe you stated, Mrs. Sullivan, that John D. Sullivan was in the State Senate for twenty years, until 1933.

Sullivan: His fifth term ended December 31, 1930.

Gower: Until 1931. Then Henry Sullivan, after two or three years, was elected to the Senate. Was he thinking of entering politics during the time his father was in the Senate?

Sullivan: No, Henry had never given any thought to entering politics until after his father's death, when many of his friends and his father's friends and political supporters came to Henry's office and urged him to run for the state Senate. He consented, and was elected in 1934. He served from 1935 to 1955; thus making forty years in all that the very important 45th Legislative District was represented by the Sullivans of St. Cloud, the father John D. Sullivan and his son, Henry H. Sullivan.

Gower: Was John D. Sullivan a Democrat?

Sullivan: Both Sullivans were Democrats. John D. was active in Democratic politics in the period, as I understand it, from about 1900 until his death. The son, Henry H. Sullivan, was a Democrat, a conservative Democrat. He never became a part of the DFL party. He was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in 1936. There was a split delegation from Minnesota, and Henry was with the conservative element.

Gower: Was John D. Sullivan a conservative Democrat, also?

Sullivan: Yes, indeed, he was a conservative; he caucused with the majority group in the Senate, mainly Republican. The legislature was non-partisan all of these years. Henry was a supporter of any cause he considered proper, whether sponsored by the conservative majority or the liberal group.

Gower: So Henry served in the Senate under several governors?

Sullivan: Yes, under Governors Olson, Elmer Benson, Harold Stassen, Edward Thye and C. Elmer Anderson.

Waldron: Did Henry Sullivan have any aspiration for higher office than state senator?

Sullivan: Indeed he didn't. Henry loved the outdoors and his freedom far too much to take any higher office. He was urged frequently to run for Congress, but he was not the type of man who could be happy tied to a desk. The legislature was all he cared for, as a career, beyond his law office.

Gower: What do you think were some of the most important accomplishments of Mr. Sullivan in the years he was in the Senate?

Sullivan: Henry's committee assignments over the years reflect the areas of his greatest interest, and show the necessity for an enormous amount of diligent work. The committees on which he served during the twenty years he was in the Senate were: Aviation, Civil Administration, Elections, Finance, Game and Fish, Motor Vehicles and Motor Tax Laws, General Legislation, Municipal Affairs, Rules and Legislative Expense, Railroads, Workmen's Compensation, and Soldiers Bonus and Soldiers Home. His service on the Finance Committee began in 1935. He became acting chairman in 1945, and was Finance Committee chairman from 1947 to 1955. As such chairman he served also on the Legislative Advisory Committee to the Governor and on the Minnesota Public Relief Committee. One of Henry's early projects as senator from "The Granite City," as St. Cloud was widely known, was to secure legislation classifying the dread lung disease, silicosis, caused by granite dust, as an occupational disease covered by workmen's compensation insurance. This resulted in greatly improved shop conditions for all granite workers. He assisted in securing increased appropriations for maintenance, improvement and enlargement of the State Teachers College. He was active in securing legislation benefiting the farmer, including appropriations which resulted in the virtual eradication of brucellosis, so dreaded by dairy farmers. He sponsored legislation establishing a School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota. New and better highways, including farm to market roads, and

constructive legislation urged by the district's large and ardent sportsmen's groups also benefited from his strong support. Some of the accomplishment of which Minnesota is justly proud – our beautiful Capitol Approach, the University's Mayo Memorial, the Veterinary College, the development of taconite pelleting by the University, the State's fine mental health program, to name just a few – owe much to this legislator. Some will also remember that it was Henry Sullivan's gentle persuasion (a longtime opponent, the then-finance chairman, refrained from voting) that brought the long-delayed, time-saving electric voting machine to the state Senate.

Gower: What was the make-up of the district that your husband represented in the Senate?

Sullivan: Some districts, as you know, have only one or two main interests. The 45th Legislative District, however, presents a strong challenge to its legislators because of its diversity of interests. Among these are education (St. Cloud Teachers College is within the district as are schools requiring gross earning allotments), labor and industry (major employers being the granite industry, the railroads, the paper mill and state reformatory), farming (there being a large and progressive rural constituency), highways (due to the district's location in Central Minnesota), and conservation (the district is noted for its large and ardent sportsmen's groups).

Waldron: Mrs. Sullivan, can you tell us some amusing stories of Henry's days in the Senate?

Sullivan: Henry was not a raconteur as was his father. Rather, Henry's quick wit seized upon situations, and often relieved tense or boring meetings, to the delight of his colleagues. It is impossible to reconstruct these occasions. Those familiar with legislative rules and protocol, will know that Sullivan "bent" protocol a bit at times in his desire "to get on with the work." One extremely hot afternoon in a special session found the senators weary and overworked with an unusually heavy calendar to be cleared. A sigh arose as a young senator noted for long

explanations of his vote took the floor. Several finance bills of utmost importance awaited Senator Sullivan's attention as finance chairman. At last Henry's patience grew short. Securing permission to question the speaker, Henry asked, "Please won't you vote now and explain when it isn't so hot?" I must add that the young senator took his "spanking" in good grace, accepted Henry's later apology, and that the two became firm friends. In the closing days of one session, the Senate Finance and the House Appropriations committees were \$15 million apart on an absolutely essential money bill. A Senate-House Conference committee with Senator Sullivan as chairman had just convened when a House member announced that their instructions were "not to yield on any point, there was to be no yielding by House conferees." Instantly Sullivan flashed back, "This is a Conference Committee. Meeting recessed." Startled House conferees left, to return later with a different attitude and different instructions. Much was accomplished that afternoon.

Gower: When your husband was elected a number of times did he do real well against his opponents each time?

Sullivan: Mr. Sullivan was elected to the Senate for five terms, twice without opposition, and in the other three elections he received very substantial majorities over his opposition.

Gower: Then in 1954 he ran against Mr. Richardson, is that correct?

Sullivan: No.

Gower: Your husband was never defeated in an election and in 1954 he actually withdrew from the race because of ill health, and supported Mr. Richardson, is that right?

Sullivan: When Henry realized that he could not again undertake the very heavy load of legislative work that his position in the Senate required, and knowing that he would be unhappy in a lesser role, he assisted materially in bringing about the candidacy and election of Mr. Richardson to succeed him.

Gower: Did your husband like serving in the state Senate?

Sullivan: Yes, Henry did enjoy his legislative career. He liked becoming acquainted with other members and knowing their views and backgrounds and the make-up of the districts they represented. Also, firm and lasting friendships were formed.

Henry's ambition was to give the important 45th District the same strong, high class representation his father had given it for so many years. That he succeeded in his desire to well represent the district is attested by his many re- elections with large majorities. Also, he was always polled as one of the top men in the Senate, as one of the two hardest working senators, and as Finance Committee chairman he was unquestionably one of the busiest.

Gower: When did your husband pass away?

Sullivan: Henry passed away March 21, 1959, after a long illness. Tributes included such statements as:

“He was chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee and his colleagues respected his great knowledge of the State's financial structure, just as they admired his rugged integrity.”

“Henry Sullivan was a quiet, modest gentleman, who despite his stature and honors was humble and self-effacing.”

I feel that the latter statement would have pleased him most.

Gower: This concludes this interview.