

**Interview with James Pehler**

**June 15, 1973**

**Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection**

**St. Cloud State University Archives**

**Interviewed by John Waldron and Calvin Gower**

**Gower:** This is an interview conducted by John Waldron and Calvin Gower for the Central Minnesota Historical Center on June 15, 1973. We are interviewing James Pehler, a state legislator from District 17B.

**Waldron:** I guess we'll just start off with some general questions: Where you were born, during what time, and some of your parents background.

**Pehler:** I was born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, in 1942 on February 23<sup>rd</sup>. My parents moved then when I was about six months old and lived in the Minneapolis area, near the downtown area of Minneapolis until I was approximately four years of age when we moved to Fairmont, Minnesota and resided in Fairmont until 1960. I graduated from Fairmont High School on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1960 and enrolled at St. Cloud State the following fall. I finished up my Master's Degree in 1967 at St. Cloud State. The undergraduate degree was in speech and an art minor. The graduate degree was in speech with an emphasis in television directing, and at that time I also had a graduate assistantship at St. Cloud for the year of '66 and '67, part time graduate assistantship in '66 and a full assistantship in '67. I graduated in August of '67. I was hired then at St. Cloud State as a producer-supervisor of television programming that we were putting over channel two and also over open circuit channel seven. These were various programs that were given for credit on the television stations. Since that time I have moved up as Assistant Coordinator on television

and now I'm coordinator of Television Services and also involved in some teaching in the Mass Communications Department.

**Waldron:** On one of your campaign ads you say you came from a working family or a labor family. Could you give us some background on your family?

**Pehler:** Yes, my dad belongs to the Boiler Makers and Steam-fitters Union. He's also currently now employed by the city of Fairmont where he is a Maintenance Supervisor for the power plant. They have their own Municipal Power Plant in the city and he's Maintenance Supervisor there. My father, during the early period of my life and during the early period of his marriage, was moving around quite a bit to various construction jobs and worked out at Boshart Construction Company out of Minneapolis, and that was the reason for being in Grand Rapids at the time and then moving to Minneapolis and eventually moving to Fairmont where he was involved in a bauxite power plant. That is where he moved and settle there and continued to work there until, I would estimate about 1950, maybe a little earlier, but around 1950 at which time he went into business for himself as a mechanical contractor or putting in plumbing and heating in medium size hospitals and schools, and things like this. Then he sold out his business in 1958, because of economic factors and business competition by larger companies moving into the smaller medium size projects. At that time he went back to going on the road and some small business of his own. Basically he has been associated the Majority of his life working with other companies or for other companies as a steam-fitter mechanical contractor or maintenance person involved in steam-fitting and power plant and things like that.

**Waldron:** One more general question: While you were growing up what views or ideas did you own about America?

**Pehler:** Well, I guess views are really influenced by people around you. I grew up, I think perhaps in a, I hate to use the word “typical”, but to follow along with the modern definition, probably a typical or average, middle-class, American. I grew up in a Midwestern town, a small town about 12,000 in a basically white world. Any contacts I had with minorities evolved from friendships that developed from awareness or individuals from the Bahamas who were brought into the food-processing plants in Fairmont and working there. Friendships that developed were through my employment at these same places and through field work and various things like this before I had reached the age of being able to be employed at the factory itself. In terms of field work and things like this and also the fact that my father during that time actually had the construction seasons because of lack of development in technology in terms of year-around construction. His major crews were hired on during the summer months. We had individuals whom I had contact with that came from various parts of the country, primarily as they were brought in a semi-pro baseball league and then my father would have them working with him during the day hours, then allowing time off for games being played and things like this. Fairmont was unusual in the fact that we did have a triple league, a Triple A League, and a semi-pro ball club down there. Of course, this is where we did pick up some of the minorities. There were some contacts that way in fields and things like this with the minorities. It was a very superficial type of contact, however. Basically, I would say it was a semi-isolated type of concept in terms of the problems the minorities had at that time and some of the problems that they still have at this time. That was basically up to the time of my senior year in high school. I moved away from home-Mankato would have been the logical place to attend school. I moved away from home, specifically wishing to be a distance for separation, not because of a lack of understanding or communication or frustration at parents, but more so from the standpoint that I

felt it would be better at a distance to break some ties and become a little more independent and a little more on my own. Basically, I stayed in college because of outside employment. I worked with radio stations in St. Cloud, WJON and KFAM during my undergraduate and some in parts of my graduate period. That supplemented my income and was enough to keep me in school and graduate credits going. I got into some community involvement and participation in school, but it was like many of the other students I ran into, you don't really get into that much because you have that label of being a student. Therefore, people do not think that you're seriously interested in what's happening in the community. It was not really until the graduate level that I felt as comfortable or at ease with the fact that this is the town I lived in and this is the area I was concerned with. So I became involved with "Big Brother" and other community organizations that were not there so much as a student group before. I don't know if I got the answer of what you're looking for.

**Waldron:** That's real fine. Then going on, in other words your involvement in politics was a long process actually when you were running for District 17B?

**Pehler:** Yes, basically. I became involved somewhat on the college level although not in a party organization as such on the college level. That was the year of the 21 year old voting type of thing. So my primary involvement was in a radio station, but being also in terms of the politics of the student senate and also who was running for president of the student senate and various things like this. I worked in the media area in graduate school. After I got out of graduate school I became involved in campaigns I started off with the 6<sup>th</sup> District congressional campaign, one of the first campaigns I worked on. Usually you like to think that usually there's a pecking order—you start at the lower level to go up; but we started right on the 6<sup>th</sup> District and that was one of the first campaigns with Buford Johnson. We started with that. Actually I had worked previously

with John Massmann who was seeking endorsement on the DFL at that time prior to that. There were other individuals who had graduated from St. Cloud, like Roger Klaphake and a few others like this who were working on John's campaign and became involved in that and then moved over and went into Buford's campaign.

After that I became involved in various senatorial and representative races around the area. I worked with Senator Ed Schrom who was seeking election for the first time. That was in 1970 and I worked with him although not living in his district. It was adjacent to the district I was residing in at that time. I went on and did media work for him—some newspaper, but basically it was radio-spots and advertisements. I worked also somewhat on other individuals who were running for office in this area, but primarily the concentration in 1970 was on that campaign. In 1972, of course, I ran on my own here and so that is where my involvement took place. In terms of the party functions in 1968, I became a delegate to the county convention that was precinct delegate elected to the county and also in 1970 and 1972 I went from precinct to the county delegation. In 1972 we met first at the county and then we went into the District 17 delegation, which is now the new means by which the area will be working. I had worked through the county and had gotten to be an alternate to the Central Committee, and also the vice-chairperson to the Stearns County Central Committee. The alternate was to the State Central Committee for the DFL, so I had active involvement there. I worked a minimal amount on the governor's race at that time. More time was actually spent on Ed Schram's campaign, and is where we concentrated on for the Senate race. That is basically the political history of it until my running.

**Waldron:** Just exactly when would you say that you decided to run for representative yourself in 1972?

**Pehler:** My wife accuses me of making the decision earlier. Actually, my wife and I sat down and talked on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July evening. That was really about the first chance that we had to get together. I had been approached earlier—probably three weeks to a month before that by a couple of individuals. I had said that I was interested but I did not see the support there at the time. I wanted to see some more cross-section in terms of support. So I guess they went out and started talking and asking people. Through that three week period more people kept asking me, calling me, or talking to me about this and whether I was serious about it or not. If I were serious would I run, and if I did run what would be my intention, what would I do and various things like this. Over the process of about three to four weeks it appeared to be support from a diverse group of individuals. These were individuals from 17B and people from adjoin districts who were willing to help out and work on the campaign on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July I finally sat down with my wife at about ten o'clock at night and talked until two o'clock a.m. My wife at that time was also finishing up her degree, undergraduate degree. I decided that night and she said she had no major objections in terms of the fact that we could do it or attempt to do it. I filed about a week later. The first three days after I filed I was out of town on a project commitment that I had. The campaign didn't really start until after I finished my contract for that summer at St. Cloud. At that time I was also program director for the state college fair booth down at the state fair, which was a broadcasting schedule and was the first year it was going into effect. So that really took everything out of me. It wasn't until after the state fair commitment ended that I really had the first chance to spend time at campaigning. That lasted until after the primary. After I finished working in the evening I would go out door-knocking. I ran two or three meetings a night, and other meetings with the campaign staff during the other time, plus cutting commercials. It came

to about six or seven hours a night. Two or three time I would be sitting at the commercial stations making tapes until 2-230 in the morning.

**Gower:** Had you thought about running for office at any time earlier, just in general?

**Pehler:** I don't recall ever saying, "Gee, this is what I'd like to do at some time." I think the fact that I was involved in politics and involved in the election process of people that perhaps in the back of my mind the thought was there. To specifically say that this is what I had set as a goal or objective no I can't say that I did it consciously, but subconsciously the desire may have been there. I was involved in the political process. I guess that is where I got the interest, which was a natural building to that end.

**Gower:** What is included in 17B?

**Pehler:** That means defining the boundaries. Perhaps the simplest way to define it would be to come in from St. Cloud Township, both precincts One and Two are included. The St. Cloud Township is primarily west of the city of St. Cloud, and it swings partway on the southwest side. St. Augusta Township is primarily south of the city of St. Cloud and runs from the city limits. It's boarded on the Mississippi River past the clear-lake area. That is primarily the rough boundaries of that. The area of St. Cloud itself is a little more complex. It starts on the west bank of the Mississippi River at Germain Street, and follows Germain down to 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue and it jogs and takes up a couple of blocks. But primarily comes down the Osseo Road where it hits the railroad and then it swings up on 25<sup>th</sup> to follow the railroad out past Waite Park. Basically, as a rough general outline, it follows the railroad track dividing the city between north and south. It is basically everything south of that and west of the Mississippi River to the township edge.

**Waldron:** During the campaign were you worried at all about your opponent Sam Wenstrom? Were you worried that he might ride in on the coat-tails of Richard Nixon landslide?

**Pehler:** We had heard talks about Nixon's landslide anywhere up to five months before the campaign started in saying that it was not a year for Democrats anywhere. Primarily with it being a local or state race, I did not believe the association would be that strong between my opponent and President Nixon. The factor that was involved here, in Minnesota, at that time I felt was the fact that the Republican dominance=conservative up until the recent party designation the dominance of both houses and the mobility of people that were residents of Minnesota to have access to what is taking place. I felt that this was really a key issue and this is what we were talking about. We talked of opening up the committee meetings to the public and the media. We wanted to open up the conference meetings to the public and to the media. This is one of the objectives we had set in terms of campaigning. This is what, if given control, we would be doing. Since that time we have proven that out, much to the embarrassment of many Republicans who are still there. It really didn't make that much difference; you didn't need to run things behind closed doors. You run the committee much the same way you ran it before. Perhaps some arguments or discussions were embarrassing to the Democrats, but I think basically, with it open, boiled down to not a party being embarrassed by rather an individual who happened to take a stand or believe in a stand. It may be embarrassing to him. I have no qualms of having CCO's, as an example, in every one of the tax committees meetings or the education committees standing with their camera filming; nor was I embarrassed when they were filming the process of what was taking place on the floor or audiotaping what was taking place on the floor. I think if you're going to have credibility in a government operation you have got to have information available to the people, so that they can believe in themselves, so that they know or are attempting to know



what is going on and so that to the best of a media's ability or to the best of an individual's ability to get copies of let's say, committee meetings. The fact that the committee meetings were taped, I think was one of the key issues. The state was more of a key issue than was whether there would be following through of Nixon's supposedly large popularity. As it turned out, Nixon's popularity in Stearns County, particularly in St. Cloud, was not there. It was not the landslide proportion – he lost the area. I think we also had a closer tie if there was any coat-tailing effect in the fact that Senator Mondale and Humphrey spent the time that they did campaigning in the state. Ok, they were national figures but they were more of an identity with the people in the state and they are senators. They were out and willing to spend their time. Mondale was up for re-election, but the majority of his campaigning wasn't in "Mondale for Senator", but for Mondale campaigning for the legislature candidates that he knew in specific areas. The fact is that Humphrey was out talking, speaking, and helping in my respect, and five or six other legislators in the state received a personal letter from Hubert Humphrey to be distributed to their constituents. He was very praiseworthy of his conversation and knowledge of me. That was a sign of something I didn't ask for. I was called up by Hubert's staff and told this is what he would like to do for me. I guess there were five or six of us across the state that he did this for. He had picked out with his staff the people he would like to help. I'm not sure it was because of him knowing me that well, but he talked to me briefly and may be something had clicked. I don't know what had happened. It was a very nice compliment to me and to the campaign workers that he was willing to help in this respect, besides appearing in person and helping with fundraising.

**Waldron:** During your campaign in one of your other major themes, you made a statement that you were alarmed of people's lack of trust in politicians. Since the Watergate scandal has broken open have you found that people are more distrustful of politicians in the government?

**Pehler:** There are two aspects to that. One, we found that the concern for Watergate was when it was discovered. I think this is where a lot of the distrust took place. The people are still distrustful of what can happen in campaigns and are distrustful of the amount of money influence coming from large groups whether it be large business which is not legal anymore, but apparently can take place and has taken place before the Disclosure Act went into effect and the amount of influence that a large group can have on an individual person whether it be a president, senator, congressman, a state legislator or even a local elected official. I think that distrust is still there. A person as an individual still feels a frustration at politics and being ground up in the process. One of the things that I have consciously tried to do even after being elected is to keep in touch with and to answer correspondence, help individuals who are individuals and not representing a large company or a large group of people as a force, but rather people who want to say—take for example, “We got this ax bill that increased our taxes. Didn't you put a freeze on reevaluation of property?” I think it's very critical to answer that question and if you don't know the answer then find the information and get it back to them. A lot of times it may be just saying, “I'm sorry, it's a national policy or a national problem. I can't do anything, but I have written a letter and please find enclosed a carbon, to Representative John Zwach or Senator Mondale or Senator Humphrey.” No matter what political party the representative is from, you should voice your concern along with that individual's concern. If it has any importance to it, maybe this will help. I don't know. But you should at least carry it to the appropriate agency, checking up with various agencies in terms of conflicts between the Health Department and the

PCA. Who's in charge of this and what can we do to resolve it, why is this? There's one individual who happens to be a township accessor, who was supposed to have his schooling paid for which was required by law and attached to it. He was one of the last ones scheduled in, and they ran out of funds. Okay, the township pays for it. It's not a great amount, but yet when we put in the new bill that will continue this process again, I added a simple little amendment that allows the rate to be paid to those who were not taken care of before. It's a small amount of money coming back to a township or even a village, but it's an amount that they had to take out of their budget because here the state said, "Here's what you have to do, but we'll cover the cost of it."

Then they turn around and say "We can't honor that request of these few people." Well, this was the idea to at least honor the commitments. I think that is one way you can work at it. Another thing that has happened since the Watergate hearings have come on, is that you have seen a mellowing of the district from the standpoint that they're airing it – they're showing it again. One of the worst things that could have happened would have been a judge to rule that the Senate could not hold open hearings. I guess even at the point of saying that even at the open hearings I feel more honesty has come out then would have in a closed courtroom proceeding, where people do not have the opportunity to view it as openly as on television. Perhaps we are jeopardizing any legal penalties for some of these people by holding the open hearing, but the justifiable criticism is leveled in an open type of process. This is even more effective than any type of fine or suspended sentence with a three year potential or probation of whatever the case may be. This is perhaps a more effective means, if you want to use the term, retribution that if you were placed in a fine situation where you were to pay a certain amount of money or had probation and checking in with probation officers and not having the knowledge of the hearings

coming out. There's a deep depression, but I think that it's coming back up again. There are checks and balances, so let's use the checks and balances. This has helped. The biggest compliment that I got during the entire legislative session is that it is so great to be able to watch television, read newspapers or come down in person and sit in on a committee meeting and find out what's going on. Also the fact that all I have to do is call the chairman of the committee and say I would like to testify about something and they can get you on or the chief author can bring you in as someone to testify. I use this quite a bit because I can carry a bill, something I believe in very strongly, but unless I have the support of the individuals whom this bill will affect I think it's a very weak process. So you bring them in to testify or they sit in on committee meetings. A lot of times individuals would sit in on a meeting and would like to get up and make a statement about it. They are recognized unless it was a very tight schedule where you had 23 speakers on a two and half hour period of time. Normally, they were able to get up and make comments by simply identifying themselves. This was not the professional lobby group, but were citizens who were sitting in on the hearings and said, "In reference to this, I would just like to comment." I think that's great. That's the only way a system can work is to allow people for input, questions and answers, and sitting in on committees and finding out information about things.

**Waldron:** After the primary your opponent, Sam Wenstrom, ran very strong. In fact, he was picked in quite a few newspapers to win the district. Then in the election you won by 173 votes or something like that a narrow upset. They contributed it to the college vote. The college vote is a mobile population. Will you find this support again when you run for the general election?

**Pehler:** Perhaps more credit was attributed to the college area than what there really was. Let's go back to the primaries in which there was a very light turn out. I came in second by a wide margin in the primary. The college area was basically composed of elderly citizens and laboring

people, excluding student influence or student voters. Both of the precincts which I carried by a large margin in the general election were either close losses or close victories. Basically, I was an unknown person in terms of many of the individuals living in St. Cloud. I was not an individual who had run with a lot of publicity in the paper. Basically, I preferred myself to work behind the scenes and become involved in committees and activities which were not the big picture taking type. Wenstrom had lived here all of his life. Not taking any discredit from him, he was known by the older residents and the professional people. Yet was better known than I ever was. This was one of the factors in terms of the primary itself. The student population in the two precincts turned out and voted. In terms of how they voted, I don't know. Nobody really knows. I do believe I took more than 50% of the college vote. What percentage I really don't know. In terms of that I know that in two precinct areas of St. Cloud State they were heavy Democratic areas whether you go from Mondale, Humphrey, Nolan, McGovern, myself or Senator Jack Kleinbaum on the DFL. Although not official, we're non-partisan designation. We had made very pointed, in terms of which side we stood on, let's be honest about it. Finally now, at least it'll appear on the ballot this way. The mobile society part, yes. I would estimate that by the time from that November to two years later I will have probably a 60-65% turnover in individuals. I will have some freshmen and sophomores at that time who will still be here. I guess it's better off than being a state Senator, because that will be about 90% turnover in a four year term that he has. But I think that you really run your campaign on the groups of individuals that you have, that may or may not be affiliated with a socio-economic division or whatever. My area has had an index of being democratic for the last two elections, I believe. Basically, we've had an index of being a democratic area. I spent time on the campus campaigning and speaking to groups. I spent time in the community speaking to the elderly. I spent time speaking for labor. I spent time

speaking to the business community, and to the service clubs. To say that I really keyed in on one or the other, I think, yes there were probably three groups that I worked with the closest. That would be the elderly, the labor, and the students. I worked on these three because I felt these were my strongest areas, but I also carried areas that had been Republican in the past because I had worked those areas as well. I did not slight any areas I put more emphasis into some areas. I went out to St. Augusta township, for example, an area which I won by a very narrow margin. But it had been basically a Republican stronghold, but then I was the only one who was out there campaigning and door knocking and things like that. The St. Cloud Township I went out into that. I went into Waite Park which I lost by a wide margin not as bad as it could have been. It was much better than it had been in the primary. But I lost that. Wenstrom happened to be an individual who had lived in that community who was born and raised there. The people knew his family and things like this so that was his strong point and I attempted to get into where I felt my strengths were. So I worked these areas hard besides the normal going out and meeting people in various meetings and things like this. I did a lot of door knocking and that helped. You can never door knock an area 100% but at least you try to get as much as time permits. Because of a short campaign time you get out and meet as many people as possible.

**Gower:** Do you think that even if the college population would change quite a bit that you still would appeal to the college population that was here in say 1974?

**Pehler:** I don't know. I guess that now as an incumbent I would simply do as I did during the other campaign. I didn't put out two separate pies of literature one of which went to the college community, exclusively, and the other to the community at large, exclusively. I used the same literature in both areas. There are issues people disagree with me on, I assume they would still disagree with me. In various parts of the community, there are issues that people agreed with me

on, and I assume they would still agree with me. If people asked the question of whether I would appeal, I would say, "Here is my record. Here is what I've done." We can never find the ideal politician anyone that agrees with you 100% of the time or you agree with him 100% of the time. What you do is say, "Here's what I'm running for here are my key concerns or here is what I've done. If you agree with me 60-65% of the time you should probably vote for me. If you don't maybe you only agree with me 30% of the time then maybe you shouldn't vote for me because we're different." Basically this is what I did and what I presented I guess this was good enough. We had a good campaign committee on the campus itself. We had a committee composed of students from both sides of the political parties. They were the one who worked primarily in this area. The overall committee also came in and assisted in this area as well as going out into the community and assisting out there. We worked the areas. There's no doubt about it. But in terms of my acceptability there may be some who can relate better or work better with the students. I don't know. I just lay it out and say, this is what I believe. This is how I would act in this situation. My thinking now doesn't necessarily mean that I'm always right, and it doesn't mean that I may not change my mind. If you and I can't agree then I have the responsibility of convincing you that I'm right, and you also have the responsibility of convincing me that I'm wrong. It may be that I'm wrong and if I am then that's me and that's my problem to live with.

**Gower:** I'm not sure I made myself clear even though I think you get around to it. What I was trying to get at was that I think the mobility of the student voting group is really not too important because the newer group of students would be quite similar to the older group. So if you got the votes before you might very well get the votes again. One other thing that I'd like to ask at this time. Do you think that possibly your opponent was over confident after the primary and that this might have been one reason you defeated him in the general election?

**Pehler:** I don't mean to answer for him, but I do know that my committee said, "Okay, now we got you through the primary and now we'll have to get you through the general election. We've got to work like mad." This was the feeling of everyone including myself. I knew when I entered because I was on the last to file who my opponent would be or who I anticipated my opponent would be after the primary. I knew that if I was to win I would literally, have to run my butt off campaigning. The campaign committee would also have to do this because I knew that we couldn't do it by money. I knew we would not have a large budget I don't even know the exact dollar amount that the campaign committee put together, but I knew that we couldn't rely on a blitz in radio and television, and in the newspapers and mailings, and everything else like this. Basically, it would have to be people out talking to other people which meant myself the campaign committee, and the individuals who were willing to walk up and down the street for eight hours on end. They were willing to go out and just talk about me or dropping off literature and things like this. It was that type of campaign. I knew that we didn't have an advantage and that my opponent could have possibly had it. He went out with a mailing to all of the district. The reason I know that is because I got one from his campaign committee. That was an expense I didn't have, nor could I afford that type of campaigning. I had to rely on getting out. Perhaps he was confident, I don't know. I do know that my campaigning committee out-hustled his campaign committee. The students that were working for me out-hustled his campaign students. I like to think that I out-hustled him in attending meetings, basically from the standpoint that I was at many meetings that I did not see him around or his representatives. With that type of thing maybe he did become over-confident or thinking he had it sacked this is one of the strange things that I had overcome.



**Waldron:** To continue on that line, during the campaign you made a few statements toward Sam Wenstrom one statement saying that the DFL wanted to change the abortion law. You made a statement saying that wasn't so. Sam Wenstrom retracted the statement saying you were right. You said he finally developed issues but he doesn't have his facts right. Then later on in the campaign you said the same things about taxes when he came out with an advertisement saying "Minnesota is first in state taxes." Do you see this as loosening up any votes in that election?

**Pehler:** I think it may have had some effect on credibility. I think I developed the credibility of having information. The issues that were raised, the retraction of the first statement and his hanging on to the second statement as being accurate established my credibility to the fact that I knew what I was talking about. I was not just another candidate running and giving good generalities. My point in raising it in both instances was the fact that misinformation was being given out. The idea was to simply get the record straight as it stood. As it turned out later, in the case of the taxes, it was individuals from both political parties who had agreed on my stand in terms of the position taken and what had happened. They were tax people from the state, from the governor's office and others like this, who had substantiated my facts and figures that I was using. Mine were all current. This came out in a review on "Focus Forty-Five, the Friday before election." My facts and figures at that time were 1971-72 statistics and my opponent was using statistics going back to 1968-69 and some from 1970. His statements were inaccurate because they were old statistics and before the time of the hammered out, compromised tax package.

My statistics were as current and up to date as possible. Yes, I think this may have done some things. I'm not really sure. I think that people realized that I knew something about taxes besides saying, "They're too high" which was basically what my opponent had been saying. I was talking from the standpoint that, yes we do have high taxes, there's no way around it. Our

objective is to balance out the taxes so it's on a person's ability to pay. That's what we were talking about. We were not number one in taxes across the board in every position as he attempted to imply or wanted to imply with his ads and with his statements.

**Waldron:** When you first arrived as a freshman legislator did you find things disjointed or did you find it easy to fit in the workings of a legislator?

**Pehler:** We were lucky in that we did have two orientation sessions by the DFL majority before the session even started. Basically they were in terms of how the system works, what procedures you follow, and if you need a bill this is what you do with it. This helped quite a bit a tremendous amount. The first day involved the swearing in ceremony and the selecting of chairs and desks. I was able to find the coffee pot and the restroom, so I felt I was very well off that first day. It takes a while to get the hang of the process. When you're in the committee of the whole in the House floor you say, "Mr. Chairman" and when you're in the House, out of the committee of the whole and in the regular house, you always use "Mr. Speaker." You get the terminology down and you get the process down. The chief clerk took out three four house sessions in the afternoon in which we didn't have any committee meetings scheduled, and we spent that time going through the orientation sessions with him. After the first two days we were there, the legislative session had convened. This helped so we became quickly up to date. The other thing that I found to really be a great asset was the attitude of individuals who were there. Whether they were in for their second term or whether they were in for their sixth, seventh, eighth term, they went out of their way to help you with any questions. For example if you were on their committee and you wanted to get a hearing on a bill you would simply need to ask them. You say, "I have this bill that's coming in and I'd like to get a hearing. It's very important for my area and it's very important for the people that I represent." or "This is something that is good

for the whole state.” This was really great because they took the time to say, “This is what we’ve got logged in so far in terms of bills that have already been introduced.” I did this a couple of times even before I got the bill back from the reviser’s office where they’re composed and made up. I said, “When it comes, could I get an early hearing on it because I feel it’s very critical.” In one case the day after it came from the reviser’s office and I had his signatures, it was transferred down to the committee and I had the hearing. I had asked for someone ahead of time to do this. This is dealt basically with the mandatory curb ramping, when we put in new or replaced curbing we put a ramp on it so the physically handicapped can easily negotiate from a side walk level to a street level, without running into all types of problems and physical hang-ups in trying to get up the simple six to six and a half inch rise that was on the curb. That came in and I got it into the House with signatures on Wednesday. It was transferred down Thursday to the committee and was passed out of the committee and went to the House floor the next week. Within about a week’s time the bill was passed and into the senate waiting for action. You are able to do things like this. Obviously, major bills that may be very critical to an economic group, you spend the time with hearings and things like this. At that time there were no objection to the bill. Wisconsin was the only other state at that time that did have a law to that effect. I had done the research by conversing with them and conversing with the city of St. Cloud, which was doing it on a volunteer basis of their own. Also, I conversed with other communities like St. Paul and Minneapolis, and with the state which was also doing it. I believe they did it primarily as a convenience factor and they literally tore up existing curb and gutters that didn’t need to be replaced and did it just for the convenience of the handicapped. Our law said that when you replace or put in new curbing and gutters in shall have a ramp put in on a corner. We didn’t have a tremendous amount of money being spent by cities that had tight budgets, by this went through

very quickly. You may spend anywhere up to two months getting other bills through the committee process. So it depends on the bill and also the help that came through. As the session wore on support would come from more people in wider areas. Gary Flakne, who is an assistant minority leader on the Republican side and next to Aubrey Dirlan who is the number two man there, happened to be on a bill with me the full time parole bill. We had about a month and one half process getting through the House side and meanwhile my companion was working through the Senate. Gary was very strongly supporting and talking to his caucus, and I was also talking to members of his caucus that I knew. Between the two of us we were able to get it out of the House and over to the Senate before the deadline. This was one of the later bills that had come in so the month and a half's time that was spent of it was to make sure we got it through this session. It depends on the bill, but the cooperation was great. To me, it indicated the fact that this had occurred before, because even second termers were willing to go out of the way and help you with your bills. I got the impression that this had been going on for quite a while. The older fellows would help the freshmen coming in. I guess that if I was lucky enough to be reelected and serve again I would carry on this process because I know how much help it has been to me. I think this type of cooperation is great.

**Gower:** Would you think that your five months in the legislature did give you a lot of experience if you did go in there again?

**Pehler:** Definitely, no doubt about it. That probably takes care of two months of being not sure of knowing where to go and asking people. I'll have the double advantage because before everything was taken care of in 120 days straight through. These people had to do everything in that period of time, whereas literally we will be serving the equivalent of two sessions down there because of the fact of flexible scheduling and also the redefinition of the legislative days so

that we can use the sixty days the first year and sixty days the second or this year it turned out to be sixty-six the first year and fifty-four in the second. This will give me even more exposure.

There are some areas that I still have to double check, find out about, and ask someone whether it be a secretary that worked there before and knows some of the ins and outs and knows how to speed the process along, or whether it be some of my other fellow legislators.

**Waldron:** Being a DFL'er in a DFL controlled House with a DFL governor, do you find any pressure to vote along with DFL legislation? In other words, do you feel pressures in voting for legislation that you really don't want because it's DFL or by a DFL candidate or senator?

**Pehler:** Not really, I think there are three or four major bills that we talked over. We had caucus meetings and people would present bills. That doesn't mean that we talked about only three or four bills, but we talked about many of them. There were perhaps three or four that people felt very critical and concerned about. They felt they needed this bill not only for themselves, but felt they were basically state wide bills. I never felt in all honesty, pressured to vote anyway that I didn't want to. If you look at my voting record you'll find that the bills that I voted for were primarily ones that I felt that we needed. One of these was the tax-package. That was probably the closest because it was said that if any time, this was probably the time that we should vote as a body because this is the bill that people will really look at and either you make it or you break it as a majority. The majority leader said, "How many people can't vote in favor of this bill?" I think about six people raised their hands. He said, "Why? What are the objections? What are the problems?" this was discussed and the rationalization was also discussed. Some of the people finally said that they just couldn't vote for it, so he said that that was fine. In terms of individuals being ostracized or not getting bills – no, I think the only time that frustration is really felt by an individual and I've felt it a couple times as chief author on some bills, is when people come up to

you and say ahead of time “Look, I’m sorry but I can’t vote in favor of the bill” or “I’m going to have to vote against your bill.” If it’s a local bill and it’s going through by one hundred and three to thirteen, you’re not really concerned about people coming up to you ahead of time. But if you think you’ve got an important bill and a bill that you think should be there, and people have not said anything to you ahead of time, you are concerned. For instance, you know someone and you said “Can I count on you for this vote?” and he says “Sure, I have no objection to it.” Then it come up and he says “No, I just can’t” or they don’t say anything, which is probably worse.

There’s a lot of talking between legislators. There has to be, otherwise you wouldn’t get anything through. You spend a lot of time with people that you’re not sure can vote with you and spend a lot of time answering their questions and talking about the bill. Usually they’ll say “You’ve answered a lot of my questions, but I still have this problem of not thinking I can vote for it.” This is fine. But if someone says “Yes, I can vote for it” and then all of a sudden you need his crucial vote and he’s not there, you may get a little angry and frustrated by saying “Well, I thought you said you could vote for this.” Then the guy says that he changed his mind. Ok but he should have had the common courtesy to tell me beforehand. That’s on both sides of the isle with bills like this. I know that I voted on bills that had Democratic authors on them, but I had no qualms. I simply told them that I couldn’t support them. They said “Yes, you can.” But I said “No and here are the reasons why.” They said “Well, that’s a minor part of the bill.” But I said “That part bothers me and in good conscience I can’t vote for it.” Usually the freshmen were pretty freewheeling in terms of communication because they made up 40% of the Republican side and the Democratic side. That’s a powerful force. You can’t say “You have to vote this way because you’re not going to get anything else”, because the freshmen will just say “The hell with it.” They’re going to do it on their own, because there’s enough support. I’m not saying this was

the only reason why there wasn't pressure put on. I think it was just a new attitude in terms of politics and a person votes for something that he really believes. If it doesn't get through or it's amended or watered down you take that because you've at least fought the battle and gotten the concept through. This is the key thing. But you can't go around saying, "You better vote for this or I'm not going to vote for this bill and this bill of yours." Instead you go around and say "Look this is the reason I think you should vote for it if you can. If you have problems with it just ask me and I'll answer the questions." I found that this worked very well in all of my bills. I knew primarily that my votes were going to be in the committees as well as on the House floor. I knew I had a tight margin or a sloping one to spare, because I would spend the time talking to these people ahead of time or spending the time to hand them information sheets about the bill and the importance or reason for it and what it does and what it doesn't do. Often times someone gets up and makes an emotional statement that is going to wipe out all individuals on the family farm under \$1,000. That kind of statement just sat on the House floor by some people, but it doesn't carry the weight unless you have the information right there. It helps those who are making under \$1,000 to still maintain a living on a farm and keep in the family process, rather than allowing a corporation move in and takeover. You have to point out the reasons why and have the statistics behind it. This is a process of anything you do. You must convince someone that you know what you're talking about and have the knowledge of that subject. Probably the best way to lose a bill is to get up and start talking about something and not answering any questions. You'll get voted down. You'll get voted down so fast whether you're a Democrat in the majority or whether you're a Republican in the majority. You've got to know what you're dealing with and what you're talking about. If you have a problem, you attempt to resolve that problem so that it doesn't hurt someone. I'll go back to the example of the mandatory curb ramping again. In

some communities they have curbs, but they don't have sidewalks or they've got sidewalks but they don't have curbs. They asked us why they had to slant and slope and put in a curb with a ramp. Well, fine if the grass is sloping down and you don't have a curb, then it isn't a problem. If you don't have a sidewalk and everyone travels on the street then there isn't really this problem of people trying to negotiate up over the curb and onto the grass. Your problem basically is making sure that they aren't hit by cars or bicycles. We resolved this on the committee. This was something that I hadn't thought of somebody who represented this area knew about it brought it up, and we worked out the differences. That's the way the process works.

**Gower:** Concerning the matter of pressure, there was the charge at the end of the session that there was this tremendous pressure of Senator Berg, and also the charges that there were irregularities in the operations on the floor. Was it in the House and Senate both?

**Pehler:** The primary charges came out of the Senate. Representative Dirlam said that he was having something investigated about having irregularities on the floor. They were not stated as to what irregularities they were, so I'm not sure exactly what he was talking about. There was a great deal of people moving around the floor while the vote was on. I, myself moved around the floor while the vote was on because I simply locked my vote off and took the key with me, which you can do down there once you punch in. It was 3:30 in the morning and I was tired of sitting in one spot. So I went over and talked to a Republican representative's wife, who was on the floor as a visitor. I was talking to her and to other representatives on both sides of the aisle. I'm not sure if that's irregular or not in some fine print of the rules of the House. I may have violated it. I don't know. I did not see it when I read the rules of the House and no one told me to go away and sit down. Everyone on both sides of the aisle was talking and chatting and waiting for the vote to close. So if I was in violation, so was everyone else, except for about three



members of the House who may just have been sitting in their seats in some kind of dazed stupor at that time in the morning. Everybody else was moving around. That may not have been right. That is if the rule if should be brought out that nobody should move or leave his seat or anything like this. That may have been a violation, but personally I did not have any pressuring like this on the House side. I know that all the senators were lined up against the back wall in the back of the House watching the vote that was being taken. Senators have free access in the House at all times, the representatives as well have free access to the Senate at all times. The only thing is that the House members in the Senate have to wear a tie and a suitcoat, whereas we let the Senators come in at any time without a tie or a suitcoat. If that's an irregularity then it should be noted and members of the House should be advised that this is irregular. But to say that it happened on one side or the other is ridiculous because it was just basically that people were stiff and tired and felt like milling around. In a lot of cases people were just trying to wake up to try to keep awake, taking a little break. I guess this is what happened. I didn't stay to see the Senate because I drove back to St. Cloud that morning, being I was tired and wanted to get back to St. Cloud. I left after we had recessed at about 4:00 or 4:15, so I do not know what did happen in the Senate. There has been a lot of publicity about it, but I have not seen any specific charges in terms of accuracy that has come out of Senator Berg. I don't really know what happened over there, which is really not very helpful.

**Waldron:** Recently in the news, the DFL majority in both the House and the Senate was criticized for not carrying out their reforms in legislation that they had promised to their constituents. Do you have any comments on this?

**Pehler:** To be specific, I'm not really sure just exactly what the charges are. I haven't been keeping that close of tabs on it. One criticism is that we did not open up to process as much as

possible. I'm not sure how much more open you can make anything. There was some discussion at the beginning because some of the Senators were very reluctant to opening up the conference committees. Again the combination of the freshmen in both the Senate and the House put it across very strongly that you shouldn't just open up the conference committees. Unless someone wants to shadow a conference every hour of the day, he may be talking to another senator who is a senate Conference person. It's like the "Florida Sunshine Act." They allow the fact that two people may meet together and talk about something, but as long as the committee doesn't meet at a unit, there's no way that you can say "You can't do that." I carried on a continual conversation with the Senate. I was not on the conference committee, but I had a bill that was coming through the House with a companion going through the Senate. I kept in constant contact with the senator who was carrying the bill just to see if they were making any changes on that bill, because it was late in the session and I wanted to see how it was coming and to see which one would get where first. Whichever one passes first goes to the companion House. For example, the House passes a bill. The Senate companion is then laid on the table when the House file is sent over and they pick up the House bill. Or if the Senate passes on first then we lay the Senate file on the table and deal with the Senate bill. I kept contact to see what was happening. If someone wanted to come along with me there would be no problem. Usually I would have interns walking into this house session so see the Senator. If we were in discussion or debate on a bill in which they were starting to repeat information that had been discussed an hour before, then maybe I would run out quickly to go over to the Senate to ask the Senator on the floor a question where that bill was. I don't think that's any justifiable criticism and I'm not real sure what else they were criticizing. I know we were criticized for bonding, which is justifiable I guess.

When you're talking about expenses that are voted in and then trying to stand there and hold the line on the taxes, there's nothing else that you can do. The Veteran's Bonus Bill was a 60 million dollar package. Does that mean that we cut down on social services? Does that mean that we cut down aid to the cities? Does that mean that we cut down tax relief for elderly citizens? You can make the budget up any way that you want and can say you'll get this, you'll get that. But someplace along the line you've got to figure out where this revenue's coming from. So instead of starting with budgets and trying to find the taxes for them, you take each individual one as process and you also start with the tax system. One good thing we did this time was to start with the tax concept first and then search for ways to balance it out and make it more equitable. It depends on the person's ability to pay in a fair tax system. I think this is good. I don't want to sound political, but that's what I saw evolving throughout the process. There are criticisms and some of it is very justified. In some cases you can just say, "I did not happen to agree with that point" or you simply say, "Well, I just couldn't get the votes, if you voted in favor of it and didn't get it through."

Do you want us to go back to the arm-twisting technique or do you want to have an independent group of individuals who will say, "I cannot vote for that. You haven't justified it to me. I must vote against it." In some cases you lose bills that you would really like to have. Maybe you had campaigned hard on them but you just couldn't get the votes for them. Well, you go back to keep trying and keep convincing. Hopefully you can get that bill through. That's part of the process. To say that you didn't get everything through that you campaigned on is pretty hard because you go back and say, "We're the majority. This is what we campaigned on. You will vote this way." I'd rather have the freedom to decide as I see fit than to say that I put through everything that I said.

**Gower:** What do you think were the most important bills passed by the last session of legislature?

**Pehler:** I think maybe the tax bill, because it effects everyone. It's only the beginning of a step. It's not the best tax structure yet. We will continually make refinements on it. The '71 tax bill was a big step forward. The '73 tax bill will help again in certain areas and will help us move in the direction that we have been discussing. We will still find areas that will need adjustments, but we'll find that there may be other means of revenue which may be used as tax-dodgers now. These are things that we have to continue on. One example is the railroad. The railroads are now in favor of leaving gross earnings, at least the majority of them are for it. They're in favor of it because the bill that they had an individual carry is a great benefit to them and will help them pay less taxes. Our point is, are they then in line with other companies who have, to a certain extent, a limited monopoly to service in the state of Minnesota? If we change that tax structure by a vote through constitutional amendment, which has to be done by the voters, then how do we make it equitable to these people so that they aren't bearing all kinds of burdens like abandoned railroad lines? Also we have to consider if they are paying their fair share as compared to another industry who's out producing and working under another handicap or hardship. Are there areas now that the state of Minnesota is not receiving revenue from that would help to alleviate some of the problems with property taxes, which are still inequitable? There's a card around saying, "This is your home and therefore because you make \$5,000 and are a senior citizen you can get a credit on it. There's also a process whereby you can get \$325 or 45% credit on your home, which is trying to balance these things out, but it's not the ideal yet. Should we go into a company that produces two story apartment houses of cheap construction say that they'll get the same tax break as company that puts up a two story brick, of better construction well-built structure that

has the necessities and keeps his rent at the level where people from various economic groups can afford it? This is the thing that you keep working on and trying to resolve. You may make small steps forward or at times you may feel you're hitting your head against a wall and aren't making the progress that you want to. You see the problems there, and you keep trying to find the approach that can finally solve the thing. We haven't reached utopia and part of the process of changing as we go through life and seeing the life styles changing and the needs and wants of society change, is to try to attempt to change the best that we can. That's what we work at. I think that bill was probably the most important one. There were many things that we've done in terms of civil service personnel and retirement. We've brought this up to a level without much increase of costs on it. We've brought it up to a level where a person can look forward to retirement instead of looking forward to retiring and attempting to find another job to supplement his income so that he can afford to live. That's one of the areas that we moved into. One of the things that we'll be looking at during the interim now in the labor and management committee is the concept of portable pension plans in the private sector. If you work for General Electric for ten years, it is conceivable that you can take partial money and benefits over to another company if you happen to go to work for, say Sylvanis, and take that over and have an exchange program where you can work and have so many dollars' worth of credit to you that company is willing to transfer over. If a Sylvanis man leaves to go to General Electric then they do it that way. A person feels secure because when he leaves a place he doesn't leave his pension there and maybe get half of what he put in or even a quarter of what he put in. They talk of a mobile society with students, by there's a mobile society out there. It's not unusual for a person to transfer from Minneapolis to Duluth for a different company. People move and think nothing of it. They skip from Minnesota to Washington, to California, to New York or some other place like this. This is

one concept that we'll be exploring with businessmen and management. I think we can come up with some testing of this thing to see if this does work or if it does help. The soundness of pension plans is a key area. I got involved in about 122 bills. I was chief author of 33 of those bills and was second, third or fourth author of the others. I can say there were 122 important bills, but I think there were many more bills that came through. For instance, the Consumer Protection Bill in terms of open dating, it's not as good as some of us would have liked. But we did get the concept of open dating through so that you have dating on all packages of perishable foods, and you know when it can't be used safely. Right now you should find out when that product is good and when that product becomes harmful with no nutritional value at all.

Another consumer area we moved into was in terms of drug price posting. We took one step forward and there's many more to go in terms of the liquor industry in the state of Minnesota. We have now blunted the monopoly aspect of it much to the dismay of many people who said "You can open it up like that but no one else is going to get it." We've already got one license processed through and ready to do as soon as the law goes into effect. This will be slow because there may be other things that we need to do in this area.

I think there are many things that are taking place that the state of Minnesota says doesn't exist or says is illegal to exist. One example is the punchboards that operate in the state of Minnesota. You can go to the majority of the bars in Minnesota and there's a punchboard there. A majority of the cafes have punchboards. Under the Attorney-General's ruling and opinion, they're illegal in the state of Minnesota. There can be no gambling devices which give away prizes of cash value. So instead of giving away ten extra free punches, they give away a prize such as a blanket or monetary prize. These are illegal under our statutes. I think it's time that we wake up and see things to be changed and change them. What is wrong with the state of Minnesota? Why

don't they legalize punchboards and get revenue off of them in terms of taxes? Its entertainment, much like you pay any entertainment tax on a Twins' game or North Star hockey game. This is one area that we can move into. Instead of the money going out for the billboards and everything going back to Chicago or St. Louis, Missouri, which are two of the more common printing places listed on the bottom who produce these things, we should look into this area and bring our laws of the past up to date. These various areas are areas that we need to work in and are important to the state of Minnesota.

I guess we can really list a lot of things. We were able to do a lot of things locally in the city of St. Cloud in terms of the pension plan for the policeman. A pension plan for the fireman would have also been good if we had gotten it through. It didn't go through because we had problems with it, but the pension plan for the policeman was agreed upon so the city could operate. We were able to get a Drivers' Safety Center located at St. Cloud State College, which was federal money. We now have them operating on the old Airpost Road, but when the new facility is built we will have all the highway patrolmen doing their training up here, their driver's training and safety training, plus we will attempt to have all other motor vehicles operating in the states going to St. Cloud. It's a central location, that is handy and is serviced by major highways so people can get in and out. It had dormitory space for individuals to be housed in and we've also got the use of the college and existing buildings. We also have drivers as employment at the college so it's a service to the State of Minnesota and to individuals living in the state. These things may be all minor bills and local bills yet they're all very important. I could go down the list of bills that I thought were really important and would probably end up with about forty of them.

**Gower:** What about lowering the age of the majority?

**Pehler:** I thought it was a good bill. I thought it was an important bill. I thought that it was perhaps more important that we establish and age that would make it even all across the board instead of making eighteen for everything except for liquor, which would be nineteen. A lot of people weren't dealing in realistic terms in the sense that said someone in high school may be drinking. Let's face it they're doing it already. One of the recent articles in the newspaper was that bar owners were finding that it's much harder for a seventeen year old to get liquor because of the identification with the picture on it, which we never had before. I happen to be one who will get his license renewed in 1975 so I'll be one of the last who is still operating under the old driver's license but by 1975 everyone will have a license with a photograph on it. It's very hard to forge or change a picture or make up a picture. I think they found out that they have more control, although it still doesn't stop the guy who wants to get something and has a friend who is eighteen. You're never going to get rid of that, but we are being more honest about it. We're being in line with the surrounding states that have eighteen year old drinking laws. We're also saving a lot of traffic back and forth on Friday and Saturday nights to Wisconsin. You used to be able to go to Wisconsin and get beer and hard liquor. The drinking is one part of the eighteen majority vote that got a lot of publicity, but there are other aspects that an individual must consider. You enter into a contract to buy a car and you can't go to your parents and tell them that they co-signed so they'll have to make the payments. That's the eighteen year old's responsibility. A person is given more and more responsibility as a society develops. The age of majority at eighteen is a very adequate age. It's an age where people have traditionally accepted the change from a "kid" to a "young adult" or whatever terms you wish to use. You have an individual who has reached this age and has the rights so you may as well give him the



responsibilities with the right whether you're eighteen or twenty-nine, there are always responsibilities that are there which are very critical.

**Gower:** How did you enjoy your five months as a legislator?

**Pehler:** I enjoyed it. A lot of people might look at me when I say that because it wasn't parties or anything like this. It was a lot of hard work, but was exciting and interesting to me in meeting new people in the House and continually finding people to work with. It's a very exciting place to be there's no doubt about that! You go at a pace which at times is almost ludicrous, but because of what you're doing and knowing this is needed or maybe you have a strong feeling and want to get it through, you key yourself up and keep going. I found it very enjoyable and I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. As a matter of fact I've been back four weeks now and I'm kind of anxious to have the committee meetings start again. I enjoyed it very much. I enjoy my job here too, but this is something that I very thoroughly enjoyed. I enjoyed the political process and am anxious to get back to it. I still have some bills that I would like to see get through and would like to get them going again.

**Gower:** Thank you very much.