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Interview with Ken Johnson and Janet McLennan

Bob Straub Oral History Project

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Bob Straub Oral History Project

Interview by Michael O'Rourke with Ken Johnson and Janet McLennan at her home in Portland

April 26, 2006

[Text] Ken Johnson and Janet McLennan recall the fight to preserve the Nestucca Spit, led by then Treasurer Bob Straub. In 1968 Highway Department chair Glen Jackson proposed to re-route US 101 and pave over beach land at Nestucca. It was backed by then Governor Tom McCall but strongly opposed by Treasurer Bob Straub. Bob Straub with the help of Janet McLennan and Ken Johnson began their campaign to save Nestucca by mobilizing public opinion in support of their cause. Straub led a well publicized protest march along the beach and the adjacent Canary Hill. [End Text]

[Interviewer Michael O'Rourke] Well, a lot of the press coverage of this I think occurred early on, and maybe that's because to some extent the result of the two of you orchestrating events that attracted attention.

[Interviewee Ken Johnson (KJ)]: Why, we wouldn't do that.

[Interviewee Janet McLennan (JM)]: Oh yes, we would. [laughter] We organized really two assaults on the beach...

KJ: She organized.

JM: ...of public people, you know, public affairs that were well publicized and a lot of fun too; family events on Sundays. And one was there on Canary Hill and so it made good newspaper copy for a long time.

KJ: Now we had heard from the landowner on Canary Hill that he had a rifle and he was going to protect his property. Well, here we came trooping up Winema Beach and neither Janet nor I was in the Vanguard, but Straub was in the Vanguard and he started, the guy was standing up on the top of the hill, way up there.

JM: With his gun.

KJ: With his gun. And Bob said "hey, I want to go up and talk to him," and I thought, "That's the craziest idea you've had yet!" But I went along and got myself behind his nice large body and we went up the trail and the guy got up there and he was a pussycat. He and Bob had a nice visit and you know, they talked about dairy cows and one thing or another, and told him how destructive this would be to his life there on the farm and so on; and then they just had a pleasant visit and that was it, but I didn't consider that a good idea at all. Bob was like that, he'd just go right ahead.

JM: We wanted to create evidence to present, for Bob to present to Glen Jackson who was then Chairman of the Highway Commission, to give him a sense that this really was not a popular thing, you know. And so we created a petition. It was not a legal initiative petition; it was an advisory petition that people signed to indicate they were opposed to this location. In perhaps six weeks, I think we had something between twenty-five and thirty thousand signatures.

KJ: But now the pay step.

JM: The what? Oh yeah the pages were all pasted together till we had a wonderful scroll.

KJ: Yeah, it was a great big, big roll. Well, where that came into play is that Bob had asked Glen Jackson to come to his office there at treasury and Bob had this big conference table with a glass top and he started at one end of it and he rolled this petition down the whole length of the table and off onto the floor and said, "Look at that, Glen. People don't want that!" So, and of course Jackson is imperturbable, you know, he took it very calmly, but he also is a genuine person and I think he was impressed. But then we learned what really paid off was a little bit of research and neither Janet nor I is sure who did it, if it was one of us or somebody else, but it was discovered that that sand spit had been deeded over to the state by the Department of Interior, it was federal land; had been...

JM: Had been.

KJ: ...it was still actually in a sense, but it was deeded over, and then, but it had a reversion clause in it and that was that if that sand spit was reused for anything but recreation, it would revert to the federal government. So Bob went back to Washington D.C. and the then Secretary of the Interior was Stuart Udall, a Kennedy appointee and a strong environmentalist. And Bob appealed to him to bring out the hammer on that question and Udall said that he absolutely would, that it would revert to the federal government if they tried to build a highway on it. Well, that was a pretty good size stumbling block. And Jackson did then alter the approach to come around the sand spit and come across this way, and Bob wasn't buying that either, but that was more a matter of convincing. We didn't have a hammer there.

JM: Yeah. [Text] The battle over the Nestucca Spit finally ended in 1971 when Governor Tom McCall announced he no longer supported the highway plan. McCall had just defeated Bob Straub in the 1970 Governor's race. Today the beach at Nestucca is known as Robert Straub State Park. [End Text]