

May 25, 2004

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Call Number: OH1248-V

Maria Rogers Oral History Collection - Alex Hunter

Interviewed by: Gerald Caplan

Filmed by: Rocky Thompson

Synopsis Side [A].

00:00 Born December 20, 1936, in Brockton, Massachusetts. Grew up in Scarsdale and Briarcliff Manor, NY. Father was in construction business started by grandfather. Dad, Mayor of Briarcliff, New York, encouraged Alex's interest in politics. Describes his involvement in high school politics.

04:06 How he became interested in the University of Colorado. Enrolled at CU in 1955. Studied political science and communications. Involved in debate. Was selected as a CU Pacesetter. The University Mother's Club: for extra money, he delivered birthday cakes and exam survival kits to undergraduates.

07:34 Entered CU Law School in 1961. Was a Storke scholar, a member of Law Review, and a member of the National and International Moot Court winning teams.

09:14 After law school, he served as law clerk for Justice Leonard Sutton of the Colorado Supreme Court, and in an age when Justices were elected, helped the Justice campaign throughout the state. Tells story about Judge Sutton talking to union members in Pueblo and telling them that their support would not mean that he would vote their way, that he would make decisions on the merits of the law.

11:52 Worked for a year and a half as trial deputy for District Attorney Rex Scott, then in private practice. Then went into private practice. Active in local Democratic politics, chair of the county Democratic party in the late 1960s. Ran for DA in 1972 against incumbent Stan Johnson, in a hard-hitting campaign, which he won by only 650 votes. Discusses the campaign, including the effect of the student vote (18-year-olds had just been given the vote).

16:40 Early years as District Attorney: had a lot to learn. Innovations in DAs Office. Medical Review Board, which he describes now as not a very good idea. Constructive, collaborative cooperation between governmental agencies in Boulder County.

20:25 Other examples of innovations: In the early 1970s, he organized Victims' Assistance Program. Started one of the first consumer fraud units in the country. Held weekly and biweekly meetings in all parts of the county with small groups of citizens to discuss their concerns, an innovation for which the District Attorneys Office won a national award. He

was elected District Attorney seven times and served for twenty-eight years; he attributes some of his success to personal interactions with these citizen groups. Further discussion of the Victims' Assistance Program.

26:25 Discusses organization of the District Attorney's Office. Many of the judges now sitting in Boulder County Courts once served as deputies on Hunter's staff, mentions names of some of them.

28:32 Decision-making in the District Attorney's office. Decisions were made as a group and were made on the merits of the issues and not based upon politics. Only two occasions of political pressure on his decision-making (including one attempt at bribery) in the course of roughly 40-50,000 cases.

30:56 Growth of staff over the years.

32:45 Rights of the victim and the accused, and method and criteria for bringing charges. Care taken in deciding whether to charge someone with a sex crime.

34:10 Setbacks in his political career in his first term involving a real estate investment in Lafayette and a second divorce. Praise for Bill Wise, who helped him through this difficult time.

40:43 Discusses why he did not run for higher office. Headed National District Attorneys Association Commission on High Technology Terrorism in 1983, a continuing interest.

45:40 Campaigns for the office of District Attorney. Reasons for continued success.

47:40 Hardest cases were vehicular homicide, alcohol-related crimes, and drugs. His interest in problems of addiction. Personal connection due to his mother's alcoholism.

51:55 Noteworthy cases. Approximately 200 murder cases during his tenure. Domestic violence cases made up the majority of those.

52:30 First case; murder occurred before he took office. The murder of a 13-year-old girl in Sunshine Canyon and the conviction of Peter Roy Fisher. Issues involved in requests for parole. Discusses changes in sentencing laws between then and now.

58:27 Contract killing of Mary Ann Bryant by Bob Landry.

58:56 End of Side A

Synopsis Side [B].

00:00 Mary Ann Bryant case, continued. Former husband didn't want to continue paying child support. Describes commission and investigation of crime, outcome of prosecutions. Attempt to go for a death penalty conviction in the case of Bob Landry. 06:25 The Ballard case. Sexual assaults and abuse of children by parents, uncle, and friends. Convictions were

obtained, but not with very long sentences. Discusses the difficulties with prosecuting the case.

08:35 Discusses vulnerability of District Attorneys to being perceived as too soft due to plea bargains. Accusations leveled at him in this regard over the years.

10:39 The murder of 4-year-old Michael Manning. Involved controversy about leniency for the mother in exchange for information. Mother's boyfriend, Danny Arevalo, was convicted. Bill Wise's roll in dealing with the media.

15:40 The JonBenet Ramsey case, December 1996. One of the highest profile cases in the United States. Publicity intensified by the fact that the national media were already in Denver for the Oklahoma City bombing trial. Also, videos and photos of JonBenet in her dancing costumes inflamed interest. Involvement of the tabloids.

19:00 Tremendous challenges for the DAs Office. Involved difficult decisions. Public disappointment when the decision was made not to prosecute because of lack of sufficient evidence. Response was worldwide. Effect on his family. Pressure from TV and press on his office.

23:12 Hunter included the District Attorneys from Denver, Adams, Jefferson, and Arapahoe Counties as advisors in the analysis of the evidence for the Ramsey case.

26:15 Hired Henry Lee and Barry Scheck, who had testified in the O.J. Simpson case, to perform analysis of the evidence. Comments on Henry Lee's expertise. Barry Scheck is head of the Innocence Project, which has been responsible for the release of Death Row inmates by proving their innocence through DNA analysis.

28:25 Cost of the Ramsey case.

29:12 Rift between the Boulder Police Department and the District Attorneys Office. Comments on the limited experience and approach of John Eller, the Commander of Detectives, who worked the case. Focus on Ramseys blinded Boulder Police Department to a broader review and analysis of the evidence.

32:02 Animosity between the District Attorneys Office and the Boulder Police Department. Led to trouble and disagreements. However, no evidence lost, he believes.

34:40 Fall of 1997 story in Vanity Fair magazine included material from the Ramsey case file which was leaked to the magazine by Detective Steve Thomas in a move greatly criticized by the Boulder Police Department. Story included things that were evidentiary in nature and were taken from the file. Story included criticisms of the District Attorney's use of Lou Smit on the case. Led to rift between Alex Hunter and Police Chief Tom Koby. Comments on book by Lawrence Schiller, Perfect Murder, Perfect Town.

39:58 Comments on fierce competition between reporters to come up with information. Media "side shows": Stolen autopsy photos, attempt to bribe a handwriting expert to give up a copy of the ransom note, reporters invading privacy.

42:34 Did an intruder do it? Split opinions. Opinion and actions of Lou Smit. Hunter made difficult decision to take key people off the case. Alex Hunter went to the grand jury with new people, special prosecutor Mike Kane assisted by attorneys provided by the metropolitan county District Attorneys.

47:25 Hunter reflects on his career as Boulder District Attorney, on high caliber of the county's judges and its electorate. He discusses in detail the difficulty of and the reasons for his decision to not bring charges in the Ramsey case. His feelings about having worked on the case and about the decisions he made in the course of working the case.

52:55 The importance of following evidence without prejudging. What law students could learn from the case.

55:36 Hunter expresses admiration for the members of the grand jury in the JonBenet Ramsey case who served under the glare of intense publicity and kept their promise not to talk about the case. Contrasts to Rocky Flats grand jury.

58:31 End of interview.