Mel Steely: 00:00:00 Hi, I am Dr. Mel Steely. I'm the Georgia political heritage archives at the University of West Georgia. Today is December 8, 2004, and we're interviewing Representative Bill Heath for our archival program today. Representative Heath, would you tell us a little bit about your background? Where were you born and when were you born?

Bill Heath: 00:00:26 I was born in 1959 in Columbus, Georgia. My father was a county extension agent and moved around the state a little bit, in pursuit of work. And when I was born he was living in Muscogee County, and I was born there.

Mel Steely: 00:00:44 In '59?

Bill Heath: 00:00:45 In 1959.

Mel Steely: 00:00:47 Ok. Who were your parents and your grandparents? Tell us a little bit about them.

Bill Heath: 00:00:53 My father was Donald Heath, his father was Lester Heath and mother Willabelle Heath. They lived in the Clem community here in Carroll County. My mother, Dolores, was Dolores Yates. Her father was Comer Yates, former principal school superintendent here in Carroll County. And her mother was Gladys Yates.

Mel Steely: 00:01:23 Okay. And all of them from the West Georgia region area?

Bill Heath: 00:01:27 Yeah. All my family's from the West Georgia area. Mostly Carroll County.

Mel Steely: 00:01:32 Okay. What kind of work did your grandparents do? One of them was a school principal, Yates?

Bill Heath: 00:01:43 My mother's parents were both educators. My grandmother was a teacher and my grandfather was a... I guess he taught, coached, was principal, and at one time served as a school superintendent. On my father's side, actually my grandfather, Lester, was on the school board at one time. But he was a farmer and a business man from, like I said, from the Clem community. He had a bus line at one time and--
Mel Steely: 00:02:18 That during World War II or do you remember?

Bill Heath: 00:02:21 Probably right after that. I don't know exactly the dates on that, but he farmed down in the Clem area.

Mel Steely: 00:02:34 Okay. Would you say that you grew up mostly in what Haralson County, Bremen area?

Bill Heath: 00:02:41 I moved to Bremen in 1969. My father had an opportunity to come back to Haralson County as county extension agent, and we moved to Bremen in 1969. And other than a period of time when I was in school, and just for a few months thereafter, I've lived in Haralson County all my life.

Mel Steely: 00:03:06 Okay.

Bill Heath: 00:03:07 Or since that time.

Mel Steely: 00:03:07 So what was it like growing up in Bremen and Haralson County in the '60s and early '70s? It was small, not exactly rural, but close to being rural.

Bill Heath: 00:03:21 Yeah, it was, but for a kid, ten years old, I guess they don't consider it rural or urban, it's just home. Never thought that much about it until going to school, and kind of got out of Bremen and Haralson County and saw that there was different atmospheres. Certainly I went to school over in Marietta, so that was a big shock to me.

Mel Steely: 00:03:59 Yeah. Well tell me about your social life growing up, were you involved in clubs and activities, Scouts or church groups, or things of that nature?

Bill Heath: 00:04:09 Sure. I was a member of first Baptist church in Bremen, and we had lots of little youth activities there. I was also a member of the 4-H Club and spent a lot of time there. My father, being the county extension agent I guess, sort of encouraged that. My sister's not raised 4-H Club, steer in participating in that program.

Mel Steely: 00:04:39 Your sister Sandra?

Bill Heath: 00:04:41 Sandra. Sandra, and also Carol.

Mel Steely: 00:04:45 Okay. And what does Carol do? I know Sandra went on to become a lawyer eventually.
Bill Heath: 00:04:50 That's right, and she's living in LaGrange now in a solo practice. My other sister, Carol, lives in Bremen. Is married there and has three children.

Mel Steely: 00:05:02 What's her married name?

Bill Heath: 00:05:04 Files. Carol Files.

Mel Steely: 00:05:05 Okay. Did you win anything in your 4-H Club stuff, with your steer?

Bill Heath: 00:05:13 Yeah, I don't remember. I didn't consider myself a champion by any means. The 4-H Club program is designed to give everybody opportunities. I don't think there's giveaways, but everybody has an opportunity. And yeah, certainly I had some champion steers at times, and won some awards with some of other 4-H projects, but I don't remember what that was.

Mel Steely: 00:05:44 Yeah. But you did have some success as you came through it and all?

Bill Heath: 00:05:48 Oh, sure.

Mel Steely: 00:05:49 Yeah. What do you remember about schooling, in the high school there? Any particular teachers or subjects that stand out one way or the other?

Bill Heath: 00:06:00 I've always tended towards the more difficult classes. That the teachers that really raked me through the coals probably made the greatest impression. And probably, so far as education, the most memorable teacher was Grace Ragsdale. Was an algebra teacher. I struggled with that. And somehow she managed to teach me a little algebra, so she made quite an impression on me. The other one was Bill Wood, who was a vocational... At least my experiences with him was as a science chemistry class, and then later on as a vocational teacher. And I participated in those programs, so got to appreciate him and his style.

Mel Steely: 00:07:00 Okay. When did you graduate from high school?

Bill Heath: 00:07:03 1978.

Mel Steely: 00:07:05 Okay. Bremen High School?

Bill Heath: 00:07:05 In Bremen, correct.
Okay. And then you had some choices to make. You could've gone into the military, you could have gone on to further your education, gone to work or whatever. What did you decide to do?

Well, my father was a workaholic, so I was anxious to get to work and be productive. But I knew that I needed a college education. I was interested in electrical engineering. And during, I suppose my senior year in high school, visited several schools around. Auburn, Georgia Tech and Southern Tech are the three that I remember. I ended up going to Southern Tech. I disliked that environment more, maybe because it was a smaller school and a little more family type environment. But also attended West Georgia for a couple of quarters during my senior year, and got a couple of math classes out of the way.

Okay. But West Georgia didn't have the technical program that you wanted?

That's correct. That's right.

But Southern Tech was--

Southern Tech did, and I went there. My parents paid my first two quarters of school, and then being sort of independent nature I guess, I decided after that I was going to pay my own way through school, so I did. That was before the days of HOPE.

Yeah. How did you get the money to do that?

Just... I was working here, back at home on the weekends in a TV shop. And then I took a job with Colonial Pipeline, doing... Originally I was doing assembly work in electronics, and moved up to actually doing some design work for them. And when I got my associate’s degree, I went to work for them full time and continued my school. They had a very flexible work day, and I continued my school mostly at night but occasionally get an early class in.

What did you make a career Plantation, staying with them?

Colonial? No, I didn't. Actually, when I got my bachelor's degree, it was sort of difficult for them to give... Seemed to be difficult for them to give significant pay raises to employees. They were not able to compete on salary, and I left. I left Colonial Pipeline and went to work for Brinks.
Mel Steely: 00:10:00 Is Colonial the same as Plantation?

Bill Heath: 00:10:02 No, they're different. They both serve a lot of the same area, but they are different.

Mel Steely: 00:10:07 Okay. But both of them are located in Bremen?

Bill Heath: 00:10:09 Both them actually do pass through Bremen, in Haralson County. Plantation, you're thinking about the tank farm there.

Mel Steely: 00:10:17 The tank farm is what I'm thinking, yeah.

Bill Heath: 00:10:18 At Bremen. But there's also... Colonial is actually a bigger pipeline, and it's, at least in the Haralson County area, lies just north of Plantation's.

Mel Steely: 00:10:30 Okay. You came back home then, got busy working. Your sister, in the early '80s, had gotten involved working for Newt Gingrich and one of his campaigns. Did that stir your interest in politics, or did your parents... I know both of your mom and dad, I knew them, and they were very involved in Republican politics in the late '70s and '80s.

Bill Heath: 00:10:58 Yeah. Well I think that came about... My father, as I said earlier, was a county extension agent. And he got interested in doing more. He started trading in a little bit of real estate, one thing or another. And the extension service prohibited him from actually practicing in another field, but of course he could buy real estate and he could sell real estate. So he bought a few tracks of land and got interested in that.

Bill Heath: 00:11:34 I think when he went into business for himself is what really turned him on to the principles of the Republican Party. And of course I grew up in that, and was involved as well with the Republican candidates and politics. Sandra's work with Newt was interesting. To have a sister involved with a US Congressman was interesting. But I don't think I thought that much about... I don't think it had that much impact on me, as far as ultimately running for public office myself.

Mel Steely: 00:12:19 You were just involved in your own world and your own business or?

Bill Heath: 00:12:24 That's right. I mean, we...

Mel Steely: 00:12:25 Starting a family. Is this about the time you got married?
Bill Heath: 00:12:30  I got married in '82 and--

Mel Steely: 00:12:35  About the same time, then.

Bill Heath: 00:12:36  Yeah, I don't remember exactly. I don't tie those two together. But yeah, we were starting a family. I ended up moving back out here to Bremen, and purchased a farm. I was all about trying to set the world on fire, so.

Mel Steely: 00:13:00  Okay. Well at what point then did you decide you wanted to get involved in politics yourself? Had you been involved in anybody's local campaigns, had your daddy [inaudible 00:13:13] you to go put up signs, or anything of that sort?

Bill Heath: 00:13:16  No, I did some of that, and I enjoyed helping candidates. Never gave much thought to running myself. I think what got me involved in my first race, was I was out actively recruiting candidates to run against Speaker Murphy, and I had about five different people who I thought who'd qualify to run against him. And it was the week of qualifying, I believe it was on Tuesday of that week of qualifying. We had a little lunch up town, some friends and I, and after lunch we were all sitting around talking about politics. And it was at that time I realized that none of these candidates were actually going to qualify against Mr. Murphy.

Bill Heath: 00:14:17  I'd put a considerable amount of work into that, and I looked across the table at one of my buddies and I said, "You think I would have a chance at defeating Murphy?" And about that time, one of the guys sitting on my right hand end of the table, he jumped up. He said, "I'll commit to raising $10,000 for your campaign." And the guy at the other end of the table jumped up. He said, "I'll match every dollar he raises." And that's how I got started. I just slipped up.

Mel Steely: 00:14:53  What got you involved in trying to recruit somebody to begin with? Were you working with the Republican Party then?

Bill Heath: 00:14:58  No, it wasn't really--

Mel Steely: 00:14:58  You're just mad at Mr. Murphy about something?

Bill Heath: 00:15:00  I felt like West Georgia needed to represent different. Mr. Murphy devoted his life to politics. But the problem was, he was focused on being speaker, as opposed to being a representative. And I wanted someone to represent us.
Mel Steely: 00:15:24 So you kind of stumbled into a race against the strongest, most powerful Democrat in the state?

Bill Heath: 00:15:30 Like I said, I haven't always chosen the easiest routes in life.

Mel Steely: 00:15:34 Yeah. Well, back a little earlier, Kenneth Smith had run against Mr. Murphy.

Bill Heath: 00:15:41 I believe that was in '88.

Mel Steely: 00:15:44 And had been defeated and had been, in effect, run out of business as a result of it. Was that a cautionary thing for you, or did you just feel like that didn't really matter, or what?

Bill Heath: 00:15:56 My business was a little bit different from Mr. Smith's. I was working for a nationwide company. My work was primarily out of Marietta and I didn't feel that Mr. Murphy could hurt that business.

Mel Steely: 00:16:25 Who was this you're working for again?

Bill Heath: 00:16:26 Brinks.

Mel Steely: 00:16:27 Brinks, okay.

Bill Heath: 00:16:28 The armored car company. I was designing and building coin and currency processing equipment. So I wasn't fearful of him being able to affect that job. What I failed to realize is the number of hours required for a campaign. And ultimately it has hurt that business, but it is just because there's not enough of me to go around.

Mel Steely: 00:16:58 Found out everybody wants you when they want you.

Bill Heath: 00:17:01 Exactly.

Mel Steely: 00:17:02 Yeah. That's just one of the reasons I never ran for politics, it takes a huge amount of your time.

Bill Heath: 00:17:10 You are smarter than me. I could have enticed some folks to do some things with lots of money and still been bet ahead, but I didn't know that.

Mel Steely: 00:17:22 But you're enjoying what you're doing, aren't you?

Bill Heath: 00:17:25 I do. It's a lot of work, but I enjoy it.
Mel Steely: 00:17:28 Well now, you jumped into the campaign, as I said, against the most powerful Democrat in Georgia. One who had made a slogan of "keep the gavel" in, what was it, '66--

Bill Heath: 00:17:40 The 18th.

Mel Steely: 00:17:40 The 18th District, for years and years with the implication that as speaker, he could bring all kinds of goodies to Haralson County and do wonderful things. Haralson County was important, because he was important. And you decided to run against him as a Republican, in a minority. How in the world did you fashion a campaign? What kind of issues did you pick? Tell us about that first campaign.

Bill Heath: 00:18:10 As I said--

Mel Steely: 00:18:12 That was in 2000?

Bill Heath: 00:18:14 That's correct. He was focused on being speaker. All of his campaign material referred to speaker. Everybody referred to him as speaker. And he had a problem. People knew him as Speaker Murphy, not as Representative Murphy. In fact, when I started campaigning, it was really kind of fun. I would walk around and walk up to someone, extend my hand and say, "Hi, I'm Bill Heath. I'm running for state representative. Do you know who your representative is?" And most, the vast majority of people, did not have a clue who their representative was. And so I used that against him.

Bill Heath: 00:18:56 He worked to be speaker, and in order to be speaker you've got to... Speaker, as you know, is elected by the members of the House. We as citizens do not elect the speaker. Therefore, he has to win two campaigns. He's got to win the vote out here in his district, and then he's got to win the favor of the other House members. And he did that by helping those folks in their district. And in fact, in the second campaign where I beat him, he made the comment that he had given up what he considered the good parts of his district, the Democrat portions of his district, to his neighbors to help them.

Bill Heath: 00:19:45 That went on all along, and I used that against him. Being speaker was not beneficial for Haralson County and the 18th District. Folks all across the state, they'd make comments about it to me as I was out traveling that the streets must be paved in gold in Bremen, and they didn't realize that he used his strengths to buy votes from other parts of the state. He did a lot of things for other parts of the state, when he was not doing
things for the 18th District. So I used that against him. Had I known how to run a campaign in 2000, I would have beat him then. I think I lost by like 495 votes.

Mel Steely: 00:20:34 It put a pretty good scare.

Bill Heath: 00:20:36 It was. Seemed like the percentage was 48 and a half, or maybe a little bit better, to 51 and a half. So it was close. No one ever gotten more than about 35% against Mr. Murphy.

Mel Steely: 00:20:52 How much did local politics affect all of this?

Bill Heath: 00:20:55 Quite a bit. The main thing I think that hurt him in the first campaign was his involvement with the hospital there in Bremen. The local hospital authority had decided that they needed to contract out the management of the hospital. That was taking place across the country, and they felt like that was the best thing to do. Take advantage of economies of scale. And they set out to do that, and Mr. Murphy had an interest in the way that that took place, as he had an interest in almost everything.

Bill Heath: 00:21:37 And he got involved in that process, cost the county and city a lot of money, a lot of embarrassment. And actually costs, in the long run, they got a worse deal for the management of the hospital. The original contract, which was awarded to Tanner Medical Center here in Carrollton, the original contract was almost a little better than the subsequent contract. I think they saw, after they went through the legal battle, that we didn't have to offer all that to get that day off. So I used that against him.

Bill Heath: 00:22:23 He was involved in a lot of things other than being state representative or speaker. Seemed like anything that happened in West Georgia had to be approved by him prior to take an action on it.

Mel Steely: 00:22:39 Kind of the godfather of the county, huh?

Bill Heath: 00:22:41 He was. In fact, one of my original radio ads said something about, I don't remember what it said, but something about a dictator or a dictatorship. And the owner of the radio station, when he heard my ad as I was recording it, he says, "You're calling him a dictator!" I said, "I didn't call him a dictator, but you knew that he was," and that's the point of that. So it worked very well.
Mel Steely: 00:23:10 How did the golf course issue affect... Or was that in the second race?

Bill Heath: 00:23:15 That was in... I believe that was in the first race as well. It certainly didn't help him. His, and I don't remember all the details on that, but seems like maybe his in-laws had sold the property where the golf course was to be located, to the city many years ago, with some agreement. Something like “You don't have to pay any principal on this,” and in fact, he may not have had to pay anything for, I believe it was twenty years, but at the end of twenty years, the interest and principal will be due.

Bill Heath: 00:23:54 That gave the city an excellent opportunity to develop the property. The problem was, it was very rugged. It wasn't really suitable for an industrial site. There were some wetlands problems, and I guess due to this at least perceived dictatorship, folks tended to do things under the table. Try to get the ball rolling and get some momentum going before making it available to the public.

Bill Heath: 00:24:28 And so there was a group that was working on the golf course deal, and there was another group working on locating a school there. I suspect that was maybe the technical college that was ultimately located at--

Mel Steely: 00:24:44 That at Waco?

Bill Heath: 00:24:44 At Waco. But anyway, those two things were going on, unknown to the opposite side. But the bottom line was, at least alleged, that anything that happened out there successful kept the family from getting that land back. And because the city was unable to pay for it, the city was trying to work out ways to put something in there that would be profitable, that would allow them to pay off their debt.

Bill Heath: 00:25:14 So there was a lot of talk about that. Yeah, it had some impact. I don't know how much. There was always a perception that Mr. Murphy always had his fingers involved in everything, and benefited financially from everything. I don't know that that's exactly the case, but there was that perception.

Mel Steely: 00:25:36 I remember there was never any charge of him being crooked or stealing, or anything. It was the use of power.

Bill Heath: 00:25:46 Nothing formal. Yeah, a lot of informal. The same allegations went on with the westward original reservoir. His family owned
some property out there and everybody said that it was planned that way. But certain things are happened by coincidence. Somebody had to own that land out there, and perhaps it just happened that he and his family owned some of that land.

Mel Steely: 00:26:18 Or owned it before the reservoir ever came up.

Bill Heath: 00:26:21 Exactly.

Mel Steely: 00:26:23 But they would still benefit from it. And there is the concept of the perception.

Bill Heath: 00:26:26 Exactly.

Mel Steely: 00:26:27 So yeah, I understand what you're saying. And of course that helps an opponent, doesn't it?

Bill Heath: 00:26:33 It does, and we utilize that.

Mel Steely: 00:26:39 Sure, I understand. How did he react to all of this?

Bill Heath: 00:26:41 The first go-around, he ignored me. He was banking on his past performance. Nobody had ever gotten more than say 35% against him, and he didn't ever expect anybody to. Certainly not a young Republican that had not been involved in local politics, and he pretty much ignored me.

Mel Steely: 00:27:09 Did that work to your advantage or?

Bill Heath: 00:27:11 Sure it did. Like I said, if I had known how to run a campaign, I'd have probably beat him like a drum the first time.

Mel Steely: 00:27:18 Why do you think you lost that first time? Just ignorance on how to run a campaign?

Bill Heath: 00:27:23 Mostly on how to run the campaign.

Mel Steely: 00:27:24 You had enough money.

Bill Heath: 00:27:26 Well, you never have enough money. We did raise a considerable amount of money. I don't remember the numbers, but--

Mel Steely: 00:27:36 Over a hundred thousand?
Bill Heath: 00:27:37 No, it was more in the seventies. Once I proved to the state party that hey, this could work, they got involved. They got involved a little bit late, and I think those who were in leadership in the party at that time, I think they'll all admit now that we missed an opportunity.

Bill Heath: 00:28:08 But everybody thought that Murphy was undefeatable, that he would die in office. And the state party didn't take me serious, initially. It was fun to see somebody out there beating up on Murphy, but they didn't think I had a chance of winning. They got involved late in the campaign. Once they saw that the momentum was changing, and that I was able to raise some decent money, they...

Mel Steely: 00:28:45 Who were your major allies in this, aside from the Republican Party? You have any particular groups of people?

Bill Heath: 00:28:52 Yes, but they were... Out of fear of Murphy, there were a lot of people who were supportive that wouldn't dare give over a hundred bucks to a campaign against him. So there were a lot of small donors. There were a few who would make significant contributions, but it was mostly business folks. The medical community, they saw what was going on and how we almost lost our hospital. They saw the amount of tax dollars that were wasted in lawsuits that Murphy later took credit for. But I'll say it's mostly the business folks, the business community.

Mel Steely: 00:29:49 None of the church groups, or the young women's groups, or any of that kind of thing?

Bill Heath: 00:29:55 Well, no, the young women's groups were friends with members of the Murphy family. The Murphys had been involved in a lot of things out there. A lot of the social civic clubs.

Mel Steely: 00:30:13 And there's a bunch of them.

Bill Heath: 00:30:14 And there's a bunch of them, and they were involved. I mean, I guess everybody, every organization, sort of courts the speaker and certainly doesn't want the speaker angry with them. So those groups were a little standoffish.

Mel Steely: 00:30:36 The reason I asked the question, is my daughter lives in Bremen and I think went to your First Baptist Church there, and was very involved with the junior women's league or something.

Bill Heath: 00:30:49 Junior women's league, yeah.
Mel Steely: 00:30:50 She won some kind of award with them, and was very involved about three years ago or so, the period of your first campaign, and was telling me that her group was very involved for you against Mr. Murphy. Were you aware of that at all, or is that just her perception or?

Bill Heath: 00:31:08 I don't know about, I'm not going to judge her perception. I can tell you that it was sort of cold out campaigning. You had to have a tough skin. You had to be able to accept rejection. Some folks appeared to reject you who went in the booth, obviously, and voted for me. I knew that was out there, and I guess that was the way I was able to keep a positive attitude and keep going when things didn't...

Mel Steely: 00:31:39 So they might vote for you but they wouldn't put up a sign?

Bill Heath: 00:31:42 They wouldn't put up a sign, and they didn't want to get seen talking to you very long. Certainly didn't want to be on your campaign disclosure. It was tough, but something I felt like needed to be done.

Mel Steely: 00:31:57 I remember one of my former students, Judge Hulsey, Eddie Hulsey, was running for probate judge at that time and he had supporters in both camps. Some of your people supported him, and some of Mr. Murphy's people supported. And each side, he said he had to be very careful because the other side would be suspicious of the other supporters.

Bill Heath: 00:32:21 That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:32:22 He said it was really--

Bill Heath: 00:32:24 It's a difficult balance.

Mel Steely: 00:32:25 Yeah. In a small community like that, everybody knows everybody and who's speaking to who, and that sort of thing.

Bill Heath: 00:32:31 Well, I had several discussions with my supporters, who would come to me and say, "Now listen, I can support you, but I can't support so-and-so," who was another supporter of mine that was helping someone else. And I said, "Listen, you stay focused on this House race, don't worry about who my other supporters are."

Mel Steely: 00:32:57 Vote for who you want to there.
Bill Heath: 00:32:58 That's right. I don't expect you to agree with all my supporters. I don't even agree with all my supporters.

Mel Steely: 00:33:05 Richard Russell and Sam Nunn made a career out of that very thing, as did Talmadge, in the US Senate. In the idea that I run my race, other people run their races. They support me, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine.

Bill Heath: 00:33:20 Well, and another, and I know you know this, but a difficult thing to deal with is you're running a campaign the same time a lot of other folks are running campaigns. And if I win my campaign, I'm going to need to work with whoever wins this race, and this race, and this race.

Bill Heath: 00:33:42 And you have to be careful not to alienate one of those, so that it hurts your ability to work with them once the election is over. And there were a few races where I clearly had a difference of opinion with a particular candidate. I didn't mind being known to differ, but for the most part I tried to respect everyone else and I wanted as many of their supporters as I could get.

Mel Steely: 00:34:17 Now when did you decide you would go and run for a second time? You lost the first time in November of 2000.

Bill Heath: 00:34:24 Oh, I had made that decision before I lost. That was a little bit difficult. A campaign is grueling and it wears on you. You get to wondering sometimes who your friends are, and it's tough.

Mel Steely: 00:34:53 It makes you appreciate your dog, doesn't it?

Bill Heath: 00:34:54 Yeah, it does. It does. I believe that you've got to run a campaign believing that you can and will win. Not to the point of being arrogant, but you've got to have that confidence. You can't get up in the morning and go face the masses thinking you're going to lose. But I also think you need to have a contingency plan. And when I started raising a significant amount of money, I mean when I got above $5,000 I felt like... And part of that $5,000 may have been someone in $2,000 contributors. When I saw people investing in me and my campaign, maybe it wasn't just me, but the campaign, whether it had anything to do with me or Mickey Mouse in this position, but they had invested in this campaign against Murphy.

Bill Heath: 00:36:00 I felt like I owed it to those people not to run one time, pack up my bags and go back to being an electrical engineer and a farmer. So I was committed to the second term, or a second race, before I knew the results of the first one. In fact, the night
of the election, I did a radio interview where I announced that I would be running for that position in two years, and that this was what tomorrow would be the first day of a two year long campaign. So we kept going.

Mel Steely: 00:36:38 And you got good support for it. This time the party came in behind you more?

Bill Heath: 00:36:45 Yeah, they were there. I think having almost pulled off of winning the first time, it's probably how I was able to attract, what I believe to be, the best political consultant in the state.

Mel Steely: 00:37:05 And who was that?

Bill Heath: 00:37:07 Joel Michael Hannon. May have been one of your students at one time. He had, at one time, been political director for the state party. He was a young guy, and I didn't give him much credit because of his age, to be honest with you. But he knew what he was doing, and actually his firm also ran the governor's campaign two years ago.

Mel Steely: 00:37:38 Governor Perdue?

Bill Heath: 00:37:39 Governor Perdue. That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:37:41 What was different the second time around? You had basically the same local issues. I mean Murphy still was perceived as being kind of a godfather, and involved in everything.

Bill Heath: 00:37:52 No, I don't think he was.

Mel Steely: 00:37:53 You don't think so?

Bill Heath: 00:37:57 I think the first campaign proved he's defeatable, and we didn't have the hospital issue, the golf course issue. We didn't have the controversy going on in the second campaign that we did the first campaign. But folks saw me as a viable candidate, they realized that Murphy could be defeated.

Bill Heath: 00:38:30 We actually raised about the same amount of money, but we just got a lot more support. There were a lot of folks that in the first campaign said, "I can't support you this time, but I'll support you next time.” Thinking I would not run again maybe. But that's probably the biggest difference, is we just had some momentum going. I don't think Murphy recognized that the fact that during reapportionment, he actually created a district that was less favorable to him. That probably helped me too.
Mel Steely: 00:39:11 When you say less favorable, what do you mean?

Bill Heath: 00:39:13 Well, that he had less of Polk County, which was still very much a Democratic stronghold, and it had more Paulding County, which was definitely a Republican County.

Mel Steely: 00:39:30 So the reapportionment thing helped you in the sense that it gave the 18th District more Republicans?

Bill Heath: 00:39:44 That's right. Again, one of two things. Either he didn't intend to run again, or he again was so arrogant that he thought that he was undefeatable. I don't know which. I mean, there's speculation that he didn't intend to run.

Mel Steely: 00:40:02 I had an interesting conversation--

Bill Heath: 00:40:06 Even if he didn't intend to run, I can't imagine him creating a district that I could win in, because he hated me.

Mel Steely: 00:40:16 I interviewed him, as I'm doing you now, shortly after he lost. And I asked him that question, and his response was... I can't remember it precisely, but it was something along the lines that many of his friends had encouraged him not to run again, to go out, to take his step down now while he's on top and have the history of never being defeated, et cetera, et cetera.

Mel Steely: 00:40:42 And he felt like that, at least what he told me, was "I didn't feel like that was right." He said a real man wouldn't do that. And he said, "I grew up watching gun smoke. And you go out in the street and you shoot it out, and one guy wins and one guy looses. And the people make that decision. If I lose, I lose, but I'm not going to tuck my tail and run."

Bill Heath: 00:41:02 And that was what he was afraid of. Had he chose not to run, the media would have said he could read the writing on the wall, the Republican upstart, whatever they call me. Young upstart Republican, Bill Heath, scared Murphy out of the race. That's the last thing he would have wanted to have been called, was scared.

Mel Steely: 00:41:32 I think that's probably true. From what you're saying, what he said, that's probably pretty accurate.

Bill Heath: 00:41:38 And, it's unfortunate. I mean, I don't wish bad things on him. He did serve this state for a long time, and did a lot of good things for the state. But that was the choice that he made. And while it
wasn't necessarily fun at that time, it was an interesting campaign.

Mel Steely: 00:42:04 Yes. It was. And did receive some statewide interest.

Bill Heath: 00:42:08 Nationwide, nationwide. I actually had a friend that told me that he ran into Arnold Schwarzenegger during his campaign out in California. He was out there on a convention and they was having a young Republicans convention in the hotel where he was staying, and he went down just to see what was going on. And Schwarzenegger came down the hall and spoke to him, not knowing he was from Georgia, and he told him that he was from Bremen, Georgia and he said, "Oh yeah". He said, "That's where the speaker lives." And so Schwarzenegger was actually following the race in California.

Mel Steely: 00:42:47 He's a bright guy.

Bill Heath: 00:42:48 He is.

Mel Steely: 00:42:49 And he had spent some time in Georgia. I remember going to events where he was there to raise money for Newt. He'd brought him in to be a fundraiser, and he raised a lot of money. People like Donald. After you won in 2002, you of course went to the House. Were you caught up at that time in ideology, had ideology played a big role, conservative versus liberal? And Mr. Murphy had always thought of himself as a conservative. How was ideology in the race, and was that a guiding factor for you when you went into the House?

Bill Heath: 00:43:43 I've always had strong conservative and moral values. Fiscally, Murphy was a conservative. Socially, I don't think that he was. When I went to the House, what I tried to do was to be sure that I didn't forget why I ran, and what I was prior to being elected to the House. I didn't want to go over there and get wound up in the golden zone of state government, and lose who I had been. I mean, I focused on that, but we probably didn't use that a whole lot in the campaign.

Mel Steely: 00:44:51 Campaign was more personal?

Bill Heath: 00:44:54 It was, it was about what have you done for the 18th District.

Mel Steely: 00:45:01 Well now as you viewed yourself as a member of this new group, and it was a new group, I mean, this was not exactly a Republican landslide. But in 2002 it was heavily Republican advantage taking over the Senate, a new governor, Republican
governor, an increase in the House in Republicans. Lynn Westmoreland became the leader. Very aggressive. How much is ideology in that? The press tends to picture the Republicans as, what would you say, Christian right wing fanatics or some such thing?

Bill Heath: Well, yeah, and I think the key word there was fanatics. The press... Maybe it's that the press is going to stay on the underdog. They're not going to be too abusive of those in charge and in power. I have always felt like the media, for example, was pretty liberal. Maybe that's because my perception that they were more loyal to the Democrat party. I'm trying to figure out exactly what your question was?

Mel Steely: The question was about ideology. Is the press pictured you as right wing Christian fanatics. Did you want to go there so you could stop abortion, put prayer in the schools, make people salute the flags, make everybody become a Baptist and you know...

Bill Heath: I didn't go there to make anybody do anything. Those issues that you were referring to, prayer in the schools and saluting the flag, and maybe Ten Commandments. Those are things that I feel like we should be able to do if we want to. Government shouldn't say that you can't do these things.

Bill Heath: The abortion issue: I am strongly pro-life, and have always been and will always be. I believe that it is important that we extend the same protection to the unborn as we do for the born. I have worked hard to get some of our anti-abortion, or women's right to know bills passed, and I'll continue that. But that wasn't the reason that I wanted to serve.

Mel Steely: One of the greatest things that the liberal group in the country fears, according to their interpretation of current politics, is that if the Christians take over, and they use Christian in the broadest sense here, picture in all is if you're a Christian you must be a fanatic kind of thing. Once you get in, you're going to try to force us into your morality.

Mel Steely: They do not look at it from the other side and say if our people get in, we're going to try to force you into our morality. Because they don't picture themselves--

Bill Heath: That's true with every issue.
Mel Steely: 00:48:50 I think it's true. Yeah. The opposing side has their view of it, I understand. Did you run into much of that while you were there, with this ideological thing from either those against you or for you? Was it more just a day to day let's pass legislation and argue about the merits of legislation? What was it like, in other words, your first weeks and months as a state representative?

Bill Heath: 00:49:15 Okay. Well let me address something to you, we're just talking about that. What those folks who oppose... Trying to use some of your terminology and phraseology. Christianity, those who oppose Christianity. I have to question where they're coming from. Those principles is what this country was founded upon. And when you read all our founding documents, and the writings by our forefathers, and they all talked about these things that maybe you're referring to as the fanatical right-wing Christians talk about.

Bill Heath: 00:50:03 What I feel like I'm trying to do is preserve what this country was really founded. The principles that this country was founded upon. The atmosphere, when I went down and joined the general assembly, 179 other House members was, for the most part, was cordial. For the most part, we had good relationships. There were very few people that I just had no desire to talk to. And usually those people had the same desires about me. By and large, it was a good atmosphere, good relationship. And we were generally able to discuss issues civilly, and we had a good working relationship.

Bill Heath: 00:51:12 Most folks there was glad to see me, a lot of Democrats were glad to see me. They knew that losing Murphy was a big blow to their party. But they also knew that getting him out of the way meant the potential for opportunities for them.

Bill Heath: 00:51:36 I never will forget the night that I met Speaker Coleman at a reception. And we'd already been around several receptions, and Speaker Coleman, I guess, was to the point where he was speaking pretty freely. And I walked by and spoke to him and he asked me how I was enjoying being in the House. And I said, "Oh, I'm having a good time." And I said, "And I noticed that you are too." I said, "I see this smirk coming on your face when you were about to pull one of your little tricks." And he looked at me and he said, "I never expected to be where I am." And he said, "I'm going to have fun."

Bill Heath: 00:52:23 And I kind of took that as a compliment. I think he knew that had I not won that race, that he would have never got that opportunity. So it was interesting. Had a lot of friends down
there. Folks would've thought would have never been friendly to me.

Mel Steely: 00:52:42 Now you came in, there were two major historic things that happened. One was Murphy was gone and there had to be a race for the speakership. And that in itself was historic and important. The other thing was the first Republican governor coming in and using his power to create a Republican majority in the Senate, by getting people to switch and then getting very involved in House politics.

Mel Steely: 00:53:11 Talk to me a little bit about those two things, especially about the speaker’s race. So between Mr. Walker, Larry Walker, and Coleman, it was clear that the Republican wasn't going to be speaker. We didn't quite have the votes at that point to do that. But there were deals talked about on the other side?

Bill Heath: 00:53:36 There was, and there was a coalition to support Larry Walker, who's a great man, and it required quite a commitment from those Democrats who were going against... They were actually going against Murphy. Murphy was out working for Coleman. Murphy was on the phone day and night calling House members, trying to get commitments for votes for Coleman. I think that was probably... Murphy's effort was encouraged by the fact that he knew that the Republicans were more trying to help Walker out.

Bill Heath: 00:54:48 So Murphy probably called every Democrat House member, but we were building a coalition. We had a list of Democrats who had committed to voting for Walker, but that was a top secret list, because those folks would not have a pleasant life if they were known at that time. In fact, most of them were never known because the coalition kind of fell apart.

Bill Heath: 00:55:25 I believe it was the morning that we were to be sworn in. It was actually one of the black Democrats, decided he just didn't think he could handle voting against Coleman. I don't know what Murphy might have told him, but he said, "You got to take me off. I just can't do it." And when he left, then several of the other black Democrats followed him, and it fell apart. That's when we chose to run Westmoreland instead of Walker. But certainly there, everybody knew Walker was a strong contender and would have probably been elected speaker. Had that one black Democrat, not...

Mel Steely: 00:56:22 You know who he was?
Bill Heath: 00:56:23 I do.

Mel Steely: 00:56:24 Are you willing to say?

Bill Heath: 00:56:25 No, sir.

Mel Steely: 00:56:29 Okay. What's the governor's role in this House situation? I know he and Mr. Walker were friends, personal friends, their families were friends. This is Governor Perdue we're talking about.

Bill Heath: 00:56:49 I really don't know how much the governor played in that. I mean, I'm sure he did.

Mel Steely: 00:57:01 You weren't at that pay grade yet?

Bill Heath: 00:57:03 That's right. I was sort of trying to figure out what all was going on and how it all worked.

Mel Steely: 00:57:13 Still in the phase of learning the bathrooms, the secretary's names and all that?

Bill Heath: 00:57:17 Well, that was a phrase that was used quite often, and it would take me two months to find the bathrooms over there, you know? But it wasn't really that way.

Mel Steely: 00:57:27 Didn't anybody say an engineer's got a mind that works very differently anyway?

Bill Heath: 00:57:31 Yeah, maybe that helped.

Mel Steely: 00:57:33 It's been my experience that it actually does. You think through things differently.

Bill Heath: 00:57:40 Sure.

Mel Steely: 00:57:40 You have points of reference. Whereas a humanities person or something, tends to philosophy all along the way and concern this and concern that, they don't move to try to come to the end of something as an engineer might do. Anyway, this is a humanities person, I'm wandering off the issue already.

Mel Steely: 00:58:05 Now when the Republicans who did take over the house, I mean the Senate, in 2002. After the governor got, I think it was four people to switch, and you had a Democratic lieutenant governor and a Republican Senate in effect, with the president pro tem of the Senate actually running the Senate. Excuse me. In the House, you didn't have that. You had a strong Republican
minority, but you had a Democrat running the house. Mr. Walker, who lost the race, I understand stayed and was helpful to all comers, both sides.

Bill Heath: 00:58:48 He was.

Mel Steely: 00:58:49 And the phrase I hear frequently used, that he was a real gentleman.

Bill Heath: 00:58:56 Sure.

Mel Steely: 00:58:56 Surprisingly, I hear it much the same thing about Mr. Coleman. That he tried to work with both sides. Was that actually your experience?

Bill Heath: 00:59:09 It was. And I mean, talk about Larry Walker just for a second. Because of the race, the speaker's race, not knowing who was going to be speaker, we essentially did not have a speaker from the time of election until we elected a speaker. I mean Murphy was speaker, but he didn't really have the authority to make office assignments, committee assignments, and I suppose even desk assignments.

Bill Heath: 00:59:48 So it was close to the end of the first week before we got our office assignments and committee assignments. So we were all the freshmen who were trying to work. The only place we had to sit down and work was either in our vehicle, or back at our desk and in the chamber. And I remember one afternoon I was in there working and Walker came by and just visited a little bit, and he said, "Well, I've got a reputation of being pretty good at drawing up amendments, floor amendments." He said, "If you need help on that, I'll be glad to help you". He said, "I might not always agree with you, I might help you draw up your amendment and then vote against it." But he said, "I'll help you." And that's what I found to be true with him. I mean, you knew where he stood. He, very politely, would tell you where he stood and why. And I had an opportunity to work with him on some legislation, and found him to be very fair.

Bill Heath: 01:00:59 Coleman was also relatively fair. It's kind of funny how these people like Coleman... In leadership, he's out front. Everything bad that happens is going to be blamed on him. And he's trying to pacify his caucus, the Democrat caucus. He's got to keep his troops together, and it causes him to have to do some things maybe they really wouldn't want to do.
And there was also an effort by Coleman to mimic some of the things that Murphy was famous for, as far as controlling the house. And those were the times when I could just see that smirk coming over his face. I knew I could tell sort of what he was about to do. But anytime I went up to see him about an issue... And the final hours of the session, I was working on a little simple car tag bill. Wasn't a controversial tag, probably everybody would have voted for it.

We're having quite a fight over pro-life tags and abortion tags, and that kept a lot of dust in the air. But, but several times I went up to talk to Coleman about my little simple tag bill, and he was always fair with me. I think he worked with me to try to help me understand that you got to keep control over this body, and everybody's got priorities.

Do you think he was thinking, while he was working, this was the guy that made me speaker?

Maybe, but I felt like he would have done the same for anybody that treated him respectfully.

Tell me about Westmoreland. What's he like to work with? I've heard pros and cons.

I felt like he was easy to work with. I felt like he stayed focused. I mean, you could certainly go to him and discuss an opposing view on something. And he would listen to you, and try to help you understand why you were wrong. But I think he'll be a powerful congressman. He's a very sharp guy. I hated to see him step down as our leader. He did that. I think it was probably the right thing for him to do, because certain people would've said, "Well, he's headed in a certain direction" because he's campaigning for a higher office.

I think that was the right thing to do. I think ultimately he found out that, just like I did when I ran for Senate, that running for a higher office is a tremendous amount of work, maybe more than you ever anticipated. And he was a great leader. Most people had lots of respect for him. Obviously everybody's not going to be his fans, and I would say if you got a leader that everybody seems to like, he's probably not much of a leader.

Yeah. He famously, Lynn Westmoreland, now talking about the minority leader, he very famously had running battles with the governor of his own party during this period, and was criticized roundly by many of the governor's supporters saying, "Why
don't you just go along with the governor and quit causing
trouble,” et cetera, et cetera. Talk to us for a minute about that,
and how it impacted on the House members.

Bill Heath: 01:05:23 I think the biggest issue there was the proposed tax increase by
the governor. The governor, I don't remember the exact day,
but elected first part of November, he had about two or three
weeks as I recall, to get his budget prepared to be able to get it
off to print and get it back in time for the beginning of the
session.

Bill Heath: 01:05:51 And based on the information that he could put together at the
time, they most logical way to make the budget work was a tax
increase. Initially it was talked about being on alcohol and
tobacco, pretty quickly the alcohol portion got dropped, and
ultimately the tobacco portion got defeated. But Westmoreland
opposed that. As did I. I'll never forget, I think it was on
Wednesday morning of the first week of the session. We were
all, or the Republican House and Senate members, were invited
down to the Capitol for breakfast. I thought it'd be a great
breakfast. It was a few donuts and some coffee and juice, but it
was there that the governor told us he was going to... The
budget would be on our desk, and he was proposing a tax
increase.

Bill Heath: 01:07:03 And man, I was sitting there thinking, how, and what have I
gotten into, and how will I deal with this? I mean, I ran on less
taxes and less government. And I've been here three days now,
and the team leader is asking us to vote for a tax increase. And
it was pretty tough. I was about to head back to the Capitol I
need to walk into... I suspected that when I got there, news
media would be all out in the parking lot. I need to pull in and
get out with a smile on my face, everything's lovely. It was
pretty tough. But Westmoreland, you might say, led the charge
there, opposing the tax increase.

Mel Steely: 01:07:49 The governor had you all out to the mansion for your breakfast,
or?

Bill Heath: 01:07:52 He did.

Mel Steely: 01:07:52 And then you drove on back into Atlanta?

Bill Heath: 01:07:56 For the session to begin at ten.

Mel Steely: 01:07:58 Did Lynn Westmoreland, did he then meet with the House
caucus?
Bill Heath: 01:08:02 No, I mean there wasn't time to meet that morning. I mean, by the time we got finished at the mansion, we had to hustle to get back for the beginning of the session. All the Republicans didn't go along with the tax increase. There were enough that, obviously that we defeated it. I think it was the right thing to do. Westmoreland has been beat up on some for that, but I actually think that was the right way to go. I think it offered the governor an out.

Mel Steely: 01:08:50 Yeah. Gingrich had a similar thing happened with the first Bush president, where he opposed a tax increase. The president was just really all over him about it. You know, you've got to support me and help me and I just can't do it. He and Lynn had that in common, I think.

Bill Heath: 01:09:07 Well the governor's floor leader, Glenn Richardson--

Mel Steely: 01:09:11 The new speaker?

Bill Heath: 01:09:12 The rep from Paulding, who will be our speaker, and was the governor’s floor leader. He and I represent... Well, currently represent portions of Paulding County. Had been a big supporter of mine and he had had encouraged me to support the governor in his tax increase. And I told him I had some problems with it, and that I had maintained to do everything I could to avoid having to even vote on it, that I was opposed to it. But probably in the end, I'll probably go along with the team. But the more I thought about that, the more I just, I couldn't do that.

Bill Heath: 01:10:06 I think because of that conversation, the governor had me down on his list of people who are voting for the tax increase. And the governor went through calling, at least all the Republican House members into his office, who had said that they were going to vote against the tax increase. And I was down on the floor one day, and my cell phone rang and I answered it and it is the governor, one of the governor's staffers. He said, "Hey, can you meet with the governor?" I'm like, "When?" "Now." I said, "We're in session, I need to be in here voting." And about that time he said, "Whoops, I'm sorry. We don't need to meet with you. I was looking at the wrong list." And so it confused me. I didn't know--

Mel Steely: 01:10:52 What list were you on, huh?

Bill Heath: 01:10:53 Yeah. So I went over to Westmoreland, and I said, "Listen, I just got this strange phone call." I told him what had happened. He
said, "That's about the tax increase." He said the governor's calling folks over to try to persuade them to vote for the tax increase. And I said, "Well he's obviously got me on the wrong list." I said, "What should I do? Should I call and confess, or that's their mistake. Let them." He said, "No, you need to call them and shoot straight with them."

Bill Heath: 01:11:27 So I called the guy back, the staffer back up, and I said, "Listen, I suspect you've got me on the wrong list." Well, by then I knew it was going to be that afternoon before we can meet. But I went over to the governor's office and got my scolding there, and then I came home. I believe it was the evening after I'd been scolded in the governor's office, I came home and there was a school event at Bremen High School and one of my big supporters walked up to me. It was like a play or something at school, and had an intermission and I was going out front, got me a Coke, and one of my big supporters came up and said, "I can't believe that you have caved in to the South Georgia farmers." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, why don't y'all go ahead and vote on this tobacco tax increase and let's give the money to the school to move on."

Bill Heath: 01:12:34 And, well, it wasn't quite that simple the way he explained it, but I mean he laid into me. And I walked back in and I told my wife, I said, "This is tough." I said, "I have stood up and fought for what I believe to be right. I took a pretty good scolding today and I come home and my supporters now are saying, we want you to cave in." And that was when reality struck, this is not an easy job.

Mel Steely: 01:13:16 Do you think the governor's people had called your supporter and ask him for help?

Bill Heath: 01:13:20 No. No. And he obviously didn't understand, we can't approve a tax and devote those funds to any particular project. I explained this to him, my explanation is you just put the money in the cookie jar and then everybody comes along and gets to reach in and take some out.

Mel Steely: 01:13:45 But he thought because of the HOPE scholarship thing?

Bill Heath: 01:13:50 No, it wasn't HOPE. It was K-12 education.

Mel Steely: 01:13:54 I know, but many people thought you could... HOPE was dedicated.

Bill Heath: 01:13:57 That's right, that's right.
Mel Steely: 01:13:57 If that proves you can do it, and therefore you ought to do it, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Bill Heath: 01:14:02 Right, right.

Mel Steely: 01:14:05 It makes it harder to say you can’t dedicate it, when they look at HOPE and say, wait a minute. You did.

Bill Heath: 01:14:10 You did.

Mel Steely: 01:14:12 Of course, you can always blame that on Zell.

Bill Heath: 01:14:14 Well, huh.

Mel Steely: 01:14:16 Which I think, personally, it was one of the greatest things they ever did and made him one of our great governors, but being in education, I thought that was a pretty good thing. What’s your strongest memory of the session? Your legislative session in the House?

Mel Steely: 01:14:34 It doesn’t have to be profound. Just when you think about those two years, what do you think about? What pops in your mind?

Bill Heath: 01:14:43 This is certainly not profound. But, early on, I engaged in a battle with a lady who many perceived to be a very strong Democrat. I sat on the Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee, and we had a bill come to that committee. It was, we hear simple housekeeping bills a lot. And that’s really what this was. This actually was a bill from Tommy Urban, commissioner of agriculture, asking us to change the legislation, referring to required inspections on beehives, and it was eliminating these required inspections.

Bill Heath: 01:15:35 So I liked that. I mean when you think of less government, that was a good piece of legislation. The only problem was the very last sentence... This was a very short bill, less than one page, but the very last sentence of the heart of the bill said something to the effect that the beekeeper had to assist the inspector when he did come to inspect them.

Bill Heath: 01:16:00 And it occurred to me that if I had bees, serving in the general assembly, and the inspector were to call me and say, I’m coming to inspect your bees January the tenth, or some day that we were in session, I either had to be in violation of the law or neglect my duties as a state representative. So I went to this lady – it was Ann Purcell – and I told her, before our committee meeting, I said, I like your legislation. I didn’t know it at that
time, I didn't know that it was coming from the commissioner of agriculture. I said I like this piece of legislation, all except for at the last sentence. I said we need to just strike that last sentence and it's perfect. And unfortunately, at that time she didn't even know what the legislation said. She was carrying it for the commissioner of agriculture.

Bill Heath: **01:16:52** By the time I got to our Ag Committee meeting, the commissioner had his lobbyist out in the hall to catch me, to find out why in the world I was messing with their legislation. And we had a pretty good little battle over one sentence in the bill, and Ann Purcell, of course, would not want her legislation amended by a freshman Republican. It really had nothing to do with my amendment. It was the fact who I was. I mean she stood her ground. And being sort of determined, I stood my ground, and I fought it and I fought for my amendment. I tried to get my amendment in the House Ag Committee, I came up one short. One vote short to getting the amendment on the bill in the committee.

Bill Heath: **01:17:50** And as I left that committee, another Democrat came up to me and said, "Well, are you satisfied?" He said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm not finished, but I'm okay." And I kept working the legislation. I was dealing with the commissioner, it's actually not a lobbyist, it was a member-assistant commissioner, I believe his title was. And I was working with him, he was trying... The commissioner didn't have any love for me, being the guy that beat Murphy. He and Murphy were big buddies and it turned into a big party battle, and that was probably my most memorable experience. I worked it, I worked it hard on the House floor. I was determined to get that one line struck.

Mel Steely: **01:18:43** And did you?

Bill Heath: **01:18:45** I did but, but Ann Purcell followed me around on the House floor. I was going desk to desk to desk, talking individually with the Democrats. I had all the Republicans on board. I was talking to the Democrats, the Republicans were with me because they saw the significance of here's a freshman Republican that they had loved to torture. It wasn't going to hurt anybody. So they were with me 100%. I was working the Democrats one by one. I mean, just going through the book, I'd maybe never met you before, but I went and sat down beside you and explained why we need to strike this last line.

Bill Heath: **01:19:23** And Ann was about three members behind me, explaining her... She followed me. And it came up for a vote, and we lost it by...
just a few votes. And being a freshman and not exactly understanding the rules, one of my colleagues yelled at me, move to make a motion to reconsider. And so I did, and I won the motion to reconsider. And then we won on the passage of the amendment. And that was probably the most significant.

Bill Heath: 01:20:01 Then of course she went to work across the hall in the Senate, and I did too. That was my first time over lobbying senators to vote for a House bill and not to amend it. I want this bill passed over here, exactly like we sent it to you. I had a lot of friends on both sides. It was over a relatively insignificant piece of legislation, but a lot of good experience, and I made quite a friend with Ann Purcell. It took her a little while to recover, but ultimately she knew that I was willing to fight for what I believed in.

Mel Steely: 01:20:37 What's your biggest regret?

Speaker 3: 01:20:40 We need to change tapes.

Mel Steely: 01:20:49 Okay. Representative Heath, tell us about your biggest regret in the Senate? What is it that you wish you had--

Bill Heath: 01:20:56 In the Senate or the House? In the House?


Bill Heath: 01:21:03 What I wish I could have done? If I had to choose one battle that we lost that, that I wish that we could have won, would have been the passage of Senate Bill 23, which was the women's right to know bill. Again, that goes back to a sort of a question from earlier in the interview about the moral values. But I am very strongly pro-life, and I felt like that, to be quite honest with you, I felt like the speaker was being manipulated by the masses of his party to not call that bill up for a vote.

Bill Heath: 01:21:50 And he assigned it to... Well, it ended up in Rules, where Calvin Smyre just would not even talk about passing it out. And that was by design. The speaker could have reassigned the bill and moved it on to... Speaker could have asked Smyre to move it, and could've gotten it moved. But that's probably, if I had to choose one battle that we lost... and had statewide ramifications, it would be that one.

Bill Heath: 01:22:32 Obviously the reprogramming of the bond money for our reservoir in West Georgia, I wish that that had not had to
happen. But that was something that we really didn't have a whole lot of control over. We were kind of running against a clock, I heard it was running out.

Mel Steely: 01:22:56 Well, generally, the whole general assembly was faced with a period of budget cutting, weren't they?

Bill Heath: 01:23:02 They were. But the reservoir money was an issue that the bonds had been sold prematurely. We had three years to spend that money, and we obviously were not ready to spend that money on the reservoir. And so sort of like a feeding frenzy, once the House Appropriations Committee realized that, forty some odd million dollars had turned into $40 million worth of pork.

Mel Steely: 01:23:34 And we never did get--

Bill Heath: 01:23:40 Kind of like finding a piggy bank underneath the bed or something. You don't always spend that money that wise. It's kind of like new found money or...

Mel Steely: 01:23:52 Well, it's a major issue, because of the water wars going on with Alabama and Georgia and Florida. And Alabama and Florida claiming they want Georgia not to use some of that water, so they can have it when it gets to them.

Bill Heath: 01:24:04 Yeah, they want the water. It fell on Alabama and the water that runs off of Georgia.

Mel Steely: 01:24:08 That's right.

Bill Heath: 01:24:10 All we want is what fell on Georgia.

Mel Steely: 01:24:12 I think they view that as perfectly reasonable.

Bill Heath: 01:24:14 They do. And I think it reasonable that we should get the water that the good Lord delivered to Georgia.

Mel Steely: 01:24:22 Well, you reckon they'll ever get that thing settled? I think it's still up in the air, isn't it?

Bill Heath: 01:24:27 It is.

Mel Steely: 01:24:29 I remember Gingrich and Mr. Murphy, and a bunch of them were working on it back in the late '80s, early '90s.
Bill Heath: 01:24:35 It actually started in the late '70s. I don't know. I think we, as a nation, will always battle over water. I hope we get this one resolved and move on.

Mel Steely: 01:24:53 When did you make a decision to run for the Senate? You don't have one term in the house, and some people might say it's a little premature. But what made you decide?

Bill Heath: 01:25:04 Well, let's give you a little bit of background. I'd made friends in the House, and we'd go to lunch together, and go over sections together, and discuss legislation. And so you develop some good relationships. And as we were walking to and from the parking lot and doing different things, I had made several comments about not having any desire to be a Senator, that I just didn't particularly like the atmosphere over there.

Bill Heath: 01:25:46 The atmosphere in the House was sort of rowdy and noisy, and it just was a lot more informal. And you go over to the Senate, and it's kind of like walking in a funeral home. I mean, it's always quiet and somebody in the well giving a long speech, and none of those things appealed to me.

Bill Heath: 01:26:11 But when the courts ruled that the maps that were drawn in the 2000, 2001 session were unconstitutional, and demanded that we redraw maps. Of course the Senate did, and passed maps in the House. I think they were reading the writing on the wall. Georgia was very quickly becoming a Republican voting state, and they just refused to pass maps out on the House side.

Bill Heath: 01:26:50 So the courts ended up drawing maps, and when those demographers were charged for that job, they were supposed to not know where any of the incomers lived. They were supposed to draw compact, single member districts. And I felt like I would be safe just knowing where other House members lived, and I never worried about that. But what happened was, the court drew a map that split Haralson County, the county that I live in, and they drew a district that has me living on the very western edge of the district. I can almost throw a rock from my home out of the district. And combined me with a very good friend of mine, another freshman Republican, from Paulding County who had been elected like fourteen years to the school board out there, was unopposed in his House race. Good friend of mine. Our wives are good friends and we were, we were drawn into a district together.

Bill Heath: 01:28:09 So while I tried as best I could to explain to him how glamorous it would be to be a Senator, and how much fun that would be and blah, blah, blah and tried to encourage him to run for this
Senate seat. At that time we didn't know that Senator Dean would retire. He was committed to running for the House seat, and I looked at the numbers and felt like that I would have certainly have a much better chance of defeating Senator Dean, than I would defeating Howard Maxwell.

Bill Heath: 01:28:56 Howard and I actually came to... I mean I shared that with Howard. We kept that decision a secret for quite a while, just so that other folks wouldn't decide to get into that House race. To try to discourage it anyway. If both he and I were in it, maybe it would appear a little bit crowded on the Republican side, and try to discourage anyone from getting in into that race.

Bill Heath: 01:29:36 I went and visited with Senator Dean, and tried to get him to share his intentions of whether he would or would not choose to run again. He really wouldn't open up, he wouldn't share that with me. But I did tell him that I was seriously considering running for that seat. He and I had had a good relationship, still do today, and I shared with him my intentions to run, and that it wasn't anything personal with him. It was just kind of what we felt like we needed to do. And he made the comment that I would be his first choice for a successor, if he chose not to run.

Bill Heath: 01:30:33 And that was all actually on Monday, before the last night of the session, which was on Wednesday. And during the session on Wednesday, I had had a news reporter... I was out in the hallway talking to someone and I had a news reporter come up, and he was standing just like you and I are talking, he was standing over here to the left, and I could tell he was wanting to talk to me. But you know when you go out to talk to somebody, everybody starts hitting you. And I try to focus on whoever I had engaged with.

Bill Heath: 01:31:08 So finally the reporter wrote a note that said, the Dems are saying Senator Dean is going to make his retirement announcement today. And he handed it to me so that no one could see it but me, and I just looked at it and I stuck it in my pocket. I thought it was a trick. I thought they suspected that and they were trying to get me to play my hand, and I ignored it. Well, later in the day, I was sitting at my desk and our whip came back and said, "I just heard that Mark Taylor has stated that Senator Dean is going to announce his retirement tonight."

Bill Heath: 01:31:56 So I went over to the Senate side to some of my--

Mel Steely: 01:32:01 Taylor being the lieutenant governor?
Bill Heath: 01:32:02 Right. And I went over to the Senate side and talked to some of my buddies over there. I said, "Listen y'all, if you perceive that Dean's about to make some kind of announcement, let me know. I'd like to either call it up on my computer and watch it, or I might come over." And so a little bit later they call me on my cell phone. They said something's happening, said all of his family's down here. And I said, well, if he... Oh, so I went over and I ask Senator Dean, I went down to his desk and knelt down beside him and kind of put my arm around him. I said, "Listen Nathan, the word is, you're going to make an announcement tonight. Is that true?" And he looked at me like, what are you talking about? And I said, well, "Mark Taylor has said you're going to make a retire." He said, "We hadn't talked about that." And I said, "Well, I just wanted to share with you what I knew."

Bill Heath: 01:33:04 And I went back across the hall, but I again reminded my buddies that y'all call me now. So I got the call a little bit later on, and I was actually over there when he made his retirement speech. And that's how I ended up in running for Senate. It wasn't something I intended to do. I do think it was the right thing to do.

Mel Steely: 01:33:35 Tell me about the race.

Bill Heath: 01:33:37 Brutal.

Mel Steely: 01:33:37 You had two of them. You had a primary battle, and then you had a general election. Tell me about the primary first?

Bill Heath: 01:33:47 There were three Republicans in the primary. Myself, James Garner and Mason Roundtree. James Garner had actually run for this Senate 31 seat two years ago and almost won it. It seems like he lost by like 385 votes out of probably 20,000 votes cast, or something.

Mel Steely: 01:34:11 So he had the experience with Dean that you'd had with Murphy in the first race.

Bill Heath: 01:34:15 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:34:15 You came very close.

Bill Heath: 01:34:16 That's right. And he had every expectation to do exactly what I did, to come back the second time and finish the job. I personally don't think that he could... Now James Garner, I got to know James whenever he announced to me that he was going to run against Senator Dean, and I actually helped him
meet a lot of the other senators and the political guys from the Senate. I helped him into knowing the people in the Republican Party.

Bill Heath: 01:35:01 His main issue, which I think is what drove the success that he had in the first race, was the flag issue. Nathan Dean had voted to change the flag, and that was sort of a hot issue in West Georgia. Certainly in Haralson County, where you've got the Haralson County rebels. The Haralson County High School is the Rebels. So they very much like that flag.

Bill Heath: 01:35:37 So Garner ran again. Then there was also an attorney who had been recruited by a congressman and a senator. A US congressman and a state senator had actually recruited Mason Roundtree to run. I suspect that they saw Senator Dean as been vulnerable since he had almost been defeated, and Mason's brother is a political consultant, brought a lot of money to the table. That was who they intended I think, I think that's who the party intended to be the next Senator from the 31st District.

Bill Heath: 01:36:11 He got a lot of endorsements from folks, and in fact it was John Linder that recruited him. He had an endorsement from John Linder, and that was fine. When we got in into a runoff, I think Mason Roundtree maybe abused that endorsement a little bit. And I called Linder about it, and his explanation to me was, "Look, I endorsed him. I made a commitment and I'm going to stick with it. I'm not going to withdraw my endorsement now." But he said, the only conversation I've had with him was way before you ever entered into the race.

Bill Heath: 01:37:16 So it was a brutal primary. I ended up finishing second in the primary, I don't remember the numbers. It was 31%, 32% of the vote, just maybe 127 votes ahead of James Garner who finished third, and Mason had maybe 37% or 38% of the votes. So we went into a runoff. Fortunately for me, Mason was tired and took a little vacation. I went to work where he did the best, and we ended up winning the runoff again by a narrow margin, but it was like 139 or 40 votes.

Mel Steely: 01:38:13 Were there any particular issues in the campaign? Or was it pretty much a personality?

Bill Heath: 01:38:15 During that campaign, of course I was attacked as being... Just seeking higher office-

Mel Steely: 01:38:26 Being an opportunist.
Bill Heath: 

Yeah. And of course my experience was beneficial, the experience in the House. There was also an issue during the primary, and what really emphasized this during the runoff is do you want another lawyer in the legislature? Mason’s profession is as a lawyer, and lawyers don’t rank real high in favorable professions. So that was a hot issue.

Mel Steely: 

How about the general election?

Bill Heath: 

I thought the general election was... I thought it was close. The lieutenant governor and the Democrat Party dumped, according by my estimate, approximately $100,000 into the general race. I think they funded maybe nine different mail pieces. All of them were attack. All except for the first one were attack pieces.

Bill Heath: 

The guy that I was running against, Lester Tate, from Cartersville, had run against Nathan Dean actually back ten or twelve years ago, and almost beat him the first time, ran against him a second time and got destroyed. Then he ran for us for a House seat up there against Representative Jeff Lewis. And so I knew that he had some experience running campaigns. I knew he was getting tons of money from the trial lawyers. The Democrat Party was dumping tons of money into his race. He was running vicious attack, radio ads, TV ads, mail pieces, and I was trying to recuperate from having overspent in the primary, in the runoff.

Bill Heath: 

Because I got into that race late, was behind the curve on fundraising for the Senate race. And I had to actually put a bunch of my own money, lent the campaign way too much money, and I was trying to recoup that money, and not wanting to end up back that deeply in debt again. So I was running scared. I hope that it didn’t show that much, but I certainly took Lester Tate seriously.

Bill Heath: 

In the end, it turns out that he wasn’t a very favorable candidate. I think the final results was like 65 / 35 or something. Could have had a lot more fun during the campaign, had I known I was up. Actually, we did the one poll, and it showed favorable numbers, but not that favorable.

Mel Steely: 

Enough to keep you scared?

Bill Heath: 

It kept me working hard.

Mel Steely: 

Yeah. I think Mr. Murphy had had a similar experience with Kenneth Smith, way back early. Then when he defeated him, as
you did Tate, he tried to coast after that, which should be a lesson to you. Be careful from now on.

Bill Heath: 01:42:26
Exactly.

Mel Steely: 01:42:26
See, he didn't take you seriously and you almost beat him.

Bill Heath: 01:42:29
Well, I would take every candidate or opponent seriously. I think it’s important to remember, you're two years from retirement in this profession, at any time.

Mel Steely: 01:42:46
The 2004 election in November was historic by any measure. Republicans took the White House, they gained in governorships, increased in the Senate and the House in Washington. We increased in the Senate in Georgia, and took over the House in Georgia. Were you aware of while this was going on, of this historic thing? I mean, did you feel like-

Bill Heath: 01:43:13
I felt it. But you don't coast because you feel like things are... We're making that kind of transition. I think Bill Clinton was the demise of the Democrat Party, and certainly here in Georgia and throughout the Bible Belt. I mean, people just disagree with those type of values and actions, and to try to just brush it off as "Well, everybody does these things, and it's no big deal." I think people expect more from their leaders, and hold us to a higher standard.

Bill Heath: 01:44:21
I think the war on terror... There was a lot of talk about that. And I engaged during my campaign, I engaged with quite a few people, who were obviously not going to vote for me anyway, but their only response, comment, was, "We don't need to be sacrificing the lives of our young men and women and overseas fighting." And those folks seem to not realize that we were attacked first and lost three thousand some odd lives in just a matter of hours, here on our own soil. Never in the history of the United States have we been attacked like that.

Mel Steely: 01:45:17
Pearl Harbor's the closest.

Bill Heath: 01:45:18
The closest, but still there were not as many lives lost in Pearl Harbor as we had in New York City and Washington that that morning. So all those things were going on. I think I was so focused on my own campaign, that I maybe didn't think about those things. And like I said, had I known that I was doing as well as I was, I would've probably had a little more fun and engaged in a few more debates. And, like I say, I could have just enjoyed the campaign a little bit more.
Mel Steely: 01:46:05 Is there anything that you're aware of that we haven't covered, that you want to cover and get on the record? I'm not talking about your Senate years now, because those are to come, but up to this point? Think we've got it mostly covered?

Bill Heath: 01:46:25 I do. I've never been one to gloat, and probably tend to speak less.

Mel Steely: 01:46:35 You've been remarkably successful though, against some very strong candidates. And even though you did well against Mr. Tate, I moderated a debate on a forum, and he put up a good performance, a very creditable looking candidate. And with that money and all, I would think you were right to take him seriously.

Bill Heath: 01:46:54 Well he was trained to be a good debater. I mean he is a courtroom--

Mel Steely: 01:47:06 He's a trial lawyer.

Bill Heath: 01:47:07 He was a trial lawyer. He didn't like me call... Well, I think he would have used anything he could to try to tarnish me in any way. He actually writes editorials in the Bartow County paper there in Bartow County, and refers to himself, proudly, as a trial lawyer. I think he knows that most folks do not appreciate that profession, and he didn't like me calling him a liberal trial lawyer. But he knew it was coming. In his first mail piece before I'd ever even engaged with him, he said that I would call him a liberal trial lawyer, and he was right.

Bill Heath: 01:47:54 But I mean, yeah, he was trained to convey whatever position he chose to represent. And he did a good job of it. But I think people still appreciate sincerity. I mean, we all enjoy a colorful, upbeat speaker. But the sincerity probably goes much further than being a good speaker.

Mel Steely: 01:48:31 I think so. Thank you.

Bill Heath: 01:48:35 You're welcome.

Mel Steely: 01:48:35 For giving us this time this morning. We appreciate it. Very much.

Bill Heath: 01:48:38 Glad to do it.