

# Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian,  
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

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## Interview #1: From Mississippi to the Senate

(March 26, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

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**Ritchie:** You came from Mississippi, and you mentioned that you and [Felton] "Skeeter" Johnston [Secretary of the Majority and Secretary of the Senate] came from the same home town. Where was that?

**Nichols:** That was Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the northern part of the state. It's about seventy-five miles out of Memphis. During my childhood, the Delta was the richest part of the state. Now it's reversed. Cotton was king at that particular time. My father was a plumber. And he had quite a business. He was connected with a leading builder that built school houses and barns and that type of thing on plantations. My father did all of his plumbing work.

There were five of us in my family. I never worked a day in my life until I came to Washington, all of my working was with my father. My father was well liked by the better white community in Clarksdale. He sent four of us off to college. I went to Alcorn College, which is located in Lorman, Mississippi. That's down past Vicksburg. It's between Vicksburg and Natchez, Mississippi. I finished my high school there. I went to two years of college -- I left Alcorn before my junior year of college -- and transferred to Howard University.

**Ritchie:** Why did you do that?

**Nichols:** A classmate of mine (we finished high school together at Alcorn) came directly here. He had relatives here. I continued at Alcorn for two years and then I came to Howard because I had decided at that particular time that I was going to pursue a medical degree. At that time, Howard had a program where you didn't have to have a bachelors degree before you were admitted to Med school. When I was at Alcorn, I was a musician and as such had many outside experiences playing towns around the state. Frankly, I did not

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have a major in college, and after a long discussion with my high school classmate, made the decision to go to Howard University.

When I got to Howard I had to take the sciences required for entrance into the Med school. I had them in high school, but I needed chemistry and zoology. I came to Howard in September, 1930. That was the beginning of the Depression.

I was admitted to Howard and was doing quite well. Howard had a quarterly system at that time. I took some very heavy subjects when I came, including chemistry, zoology, and French. People wanted to see a person that had that kind of a mind that he thought he could take such a heavy schedule. Anyway, I wrestled through until the spring. I was looking for work, and no work was to be found. So I was getting ready to return back to Mississippi, because everybody that was up in this section of the country was heading back home. But a man across the street had a delicatessen. He had been watching me and he liked what he saw. He offered me a job the week before I was supposed to return home. I accepted the job. After that, the second day I worked for him, I was put in charge of the delicatessen, because he didn't want to get up to do the necessary stuff [laughs]. I spent three years with him at that delicatessen. He gave me a room where I could live. I ate out of the delicatessen throughout the week, and on Sundays I would go out and get a decent meal.

**Ritchie:** Were you still going to school at the same time?

**Nichols:** He would let me take a couple of hours for school. If you were taking chemistry or a science, you had one hour of lecture and two hours of lab work. But it got to the place where I had to drop out. It was either eat or leave school. During those days I was living in the 1600 block of R Street. At that particular time there was only one black family on that block. They had a fraternity house right across the corner from 16th and R -- white kids had the fraternity house -- they used to come up, and they would be hungry. I would let them slide on the sandwiches and stuff like that. I listened to them, and they told me how it was that they went about getting in the government, how they got a government job.

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So when I got ready to take my vacation, the first time I returned back to Mississippi, I told my father what I had heard. They said you had to have somebody that knew something about you who would give you a good reference. My father listened to me, and he went down and talked to this contractor -- I've forgotten what his name was -- and the contractor said, "That sounds interesting to me. I would like to talk with that youngster." My father set up an appointment for that Saturday, and I went there to his office, he had a great huge office, and he listened to me tell what I wanted to do. He said, "Young man, when you go" -- no, he said, "Boy, when you go back to Washington, you will have a letter or a call from Senator [\[Pat\] Harrison](#)'s office." He said, "I will take care of the rest of it." And he did. He wrote a letter, and some years later I happened to go into the file marked "Jesse Nichols" and pulled that letter out. I just happened to see that file.

But I said, "If I got a chance to know the senator, I could take it from there." And it panned out just about as I expected.



Senator Pat Harrison

Senator Harrison at that time, and Senator [James Byrnes](#) of South Carolina, were the two most powerful men on the Hill. The senator would be talking with everybody in the front of his office and they couldn't do anything with him, and then they'd call me out from the back and say, "Come and get him and take him home." They said, "He'll listen to you." And that was unusual for a man of his stature to listen to a colored boy. But that actually happened.

He was a member of the Burning Tree Country Club, and he would call up the Finance Committee office and say, "What you doing, Jesse?" I would say, "Senator, I'm doing so-and-so." He would say, "That's fine, get the car and let's go to the ball game." Or go to the Burning Tree Country Club. I carried him out there and he said, "You got anything to do?" I said, "I've got something to do at the office." He'd say, "You need to take a day off. Take the car and go on home." We were just like that, Mr. Ritchie, up until the time that he passed. He passed on a Monday, and on that Saturday prior to the Monday, he sent me down to get Senator [\[Walter\] George](#) to bring him out. Senator George said that two thirds of his conversation was to make him promise that he'd look after Jesse Nichols as long as he was in the Senate.

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So Skeeter Johnston made this job for me. At that particular time, the [Russell Senate Office] building was being renovated, installing air conditioning. We had storerooms up in the attic, and the people who were installing the air conditioning were turning all of the papers, the hearings, and reports and stuff into a pile. So I started digging them out and separating the tax bills and tax

hearings from the tariffs, and at that time Finance had Veterans stuff and I had to take that out. At one time, Skeeter would take his vacation and I would take mine. Sometimes we would work it that I would come in on a Friday and fill the requests for hearings and that type of stuff, and I wouldn't see him perhaps until the next Friday. We had a wonderful working relationship.

**Ritchie:** Had you ever met Skeeter Johnston before, when you lived in Mississippi?

**Nichols:** No. Skeeter had a brother and mother that lived in Clarksdale. They had a big department store where his mother worked. She knew my family. My family, as I say, was a very prestigious family. To look at us here in the Senate you would think we were two brothers. When he became Secretary to the Majority, after he came back [to the Senate], every time there would be a change in the [committee] membership, the first thing he would do was to get to that senator and say, "I've got a friend, Jesse Nichols, over there. I want you to do so-and-so." And when they came in at the first meeting, what they wanted to do was to meet Jesse Nichols.

Then we had a period of time when the Republicans came in [to the majority], in the 80th Congress, Senator [\[Eugene\] Millikin](#) became chairman. He was a very brilliant man. In fact, I think that we only had one senator who was not gifted in the law or some outstanding field other than just being a regular senator, and that was [Harry Byrd](#) of Virginia. I knew that I would never be clerk of the Finance Committee, but I helped so many people, so many lawyers, so many tax people to get their stuff. We had this little calendar, somebody would come into the office asking about a bill and they'd say, "Well, I'll look it up in the calendar." The fellow would say, "No, let's ask Jesse." I didn't have to look at the calendar, I'd tell them where it was, or what the number was, and so forth and so on. I worked on every Social Security bill up

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until '71. The same thing with tax bills. The Senate shifted, as I said, from Democrats to Republicans [in 1947] and the first thing that the Republicans did, the first line of business, was to let it be known that Jesse Nichols is the document clerk librarian. That was the first order of business. It switched back and forth [between parties], but I kept that job.

**Ritchie:** I wanted to go back just a little bit and ask you again about your education. You mentioned that you had four brothers and sisters.

**Nichols:** Yes.

**Ritchie:** Did they get a chance to go to college, too?

**Nichols:** Yes. My oldest brother dropped out. He followed in line with my father. He was a plumber. He went to Tuskegee and took plumbing. He became a master plumber, eventually winding up in Los Angeles. My baby brother, who is twelve years my junior, he received his Bachelors degree from Howard and also he graduated from the School of Dentistry. And that was a rather unique and interesting story, that particular instance.

Senator [\[John\] Stennis](#) came on the scene as the senator from Mississippi. [\[James\] Eastland](#), I think, came on before Stennis. I got a call one morning out of the blue. He said, "Jesse Nichols?" "Yes." "This is Senator Stennis. I just wanted to know why we great Mississippians had never met." He wasn't on the Finance Committee. He talked, and I thought: I know I've got something that the senator wants. He said, "Well, what are you doing there right now, Jesse?" I said, "I'm doing such-and-such a thing." He said, "Well, drop that and come on upstairs." He was on the fourth floor. He said, "I want to talk to you." He told his office staff, "When that man comes in, don't stop him, let him come in." And we talked, just like you and I are talking here. And it developed, it finally developed what he wanted. I was a cabinet maker, and Skeeter Johnston told him, "If he says he can do it, he can do it." What it amounted to was hanging a mirror over a wall where you had about an inch and a half of leeway over the mantle, up or down. And I did that. Mrs. Stennis said, "Just send the bill to the senator." So I came back to the office and got my letterhead out and I prepared

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the bill [laughs]. He sent a check and he called me, and said, "The next time you do something like that, you can just call me and tell me when you are going to do it, and I'll be there to help hold." Because Mrs. Stennis had told him that I had had my brother to help.

The reason that I tell this story is because my brother was trying to get in the School of Medicine at Howard and they passed him over for three years. It wasn't because of his grades or that type of thing, because he was good. So Senator Stennis asked me again to do something, and I said, "That's a funny thing, senator, you called just as I was getting a telephone call from my brother." I said, "He's getting a run-around up at Howard University trying to get into the School of Medicine." He said, "Well, I will write a letter to Dr. Johnson," who was Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the president of the school. I said, "Senator, I know all about those letters and things. You can write your letter in such a way that you can read between the lines." He said, "Well, Jesse, I will send Miss. So-and-so, my private secretary, to your office. I will dictate to her and she will come down and read you the letter, and if you're not satisfied with what I said, then you dictate a letter to her and I'll sign it." I said, "That's fair enough, senator."

So I had the advantage of both the senator and the school, because I knew that Senator Stennis was assigned to the appropriations over Howard University. To make a long story short, my brother had received a letter telling him that he didn't have the qualifications. It was kind of a way that if your uncle was a doctor and had gone to Howard, or a cousin, you got in. So Senator Stennis sent that letter to Dr. Johnson, and Dr. Johnson called the head dean and showed him the letter and said, "I want you to find out what happened on this youngster's case. They traced it down, and then they said, "Well, he failed such-and-such a thing." They called my brother up, and he said, "No sir." He had his transcripts. So he had to report back to the senator, and he did. Then they called my brother and said they made an error, somebody in the recording office had recorded somebody else's grade in his file. They had been sending that wrong information out for three years, to McGill up in Canada, to Meharry [Medical College in Tennessee], and to Howard. So my brother got admitted that fall. They gave him his choice of either dentistry or medicine. My brother,

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when he graduated from the Dental School, they gave about seven awards. He got three out of the seven.

I put him on a plane for Los Angeles. My people had moved from Mississippi to California. My two sisters were teaching out there. They both had received their Masters degrees. When my brother got into professional school, we all contributed to see that he had nothing to do but study. Then he went out to California and some dentist was leaving to go to a convention in Belgium, and he took charge of the dentist's office. They were so impressed that when he took the dental exam -- like the bar exam -- and he passed it, they assigned him to be in charge of the Hubert Humphrey Dental Clinic for the County of Los Angeles. He's still there. He's retired now.

**Ritchie:** When did your family move from Mississippi to California?

**Nichols:** They moved, I would say, in a period from around '43, somewhere along there. I had one sister to move with her husband first. He was a physician, and a graduate from Meharry. And then the rest of the family migrated to California. I have two cousins now in Mississippi.

**Ritchie:** I was going to ask you, how different was it living in Washington, D.C., than living in Clarksdale, Mississippi? And what did you think about the city when you first got here?

**Nichols:** Washington?

**Ritchie:** Yes.

**Nichols:** I didn't find it too much different when I came here. I went through that period when everybody and his brother was poor. I never saw so many long lines of people, hunger lines, and people selling apples and that type of thing. This fellow that I told you about, who had the delicatessen, he was actually in the rackets. He was a racketeer. But he was impressed with the way that I carried myself so he never would let me pursue any of those things. He had other people to do that kind of work. He sold gin and backed numbers and

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that type of thing. So, I really didn't have to work too hard, compared to what they were doing. I started out at a salary of \$12 a week. As I said, I got my food and I lived pretty comfortable then. I was able to save money.

When I started in the Senate, the appropriation for each one of those committees and the salaries of the employees of the committees was left entirely to the chairpersons. [The salaries are published twice a year in the Report of the Secretary of the Senate.] That's the reason I knew that Skeeter got a salary up to \$3600, and they had a slot where Skeeter was able to create this job for me. As I said earlier, I felt that if I got a chance to meet the senator, I could take care of myself from then on. Senator Harrison asked me one day, when we were riding home on a Friday night, "Jesse, I'd like you to come by in the morning and take me to Burning Tree." Everything in the car got quiet. He sat up on the right front seat. I said, "Senator, it so happens that I've got a job to do tomorrow." He said, "No, we're not working tomorrow, you don't have a job to do." I said, "Senator, you don't think I can live off the little salary that you pay me." Everyone got quiet, Skeeter wouldn't open his mouth, and Mrs. [Catherine] Blanton, who was the Senator's secretary, she was sitting there. He sat up there chewing on his cigar. After a while he turned around and he said, "Mrs. Blanton, what are you paying Jesse?" She swallowed and swallowed. I was getting eighty dollars. They told him that, and he said, "Hell, that ain't no money. Give him some more money." I drove about two or three blocks, and he turned around and said, "Jesse, I want you to take me to Burning Tree tomorrow morning." I said, "What time?" [laughs] But those were some wonderful years.

**Ritchie:** Pat Harrison sounds like a fascinating person. I've read about him. . .

**Nichols:** He was.

**Ritchie:** But what kind of a man was he? How would you describe him?

**Nichols:** The senator was a lawyer. He loved sports. It made no difference what kind of sports it was, if you could listen to him arguing with me

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on the front seat of the car, trying to get me to come to a wrestling match or something like that. I didn't care nothing about no wrestling match. But he would go even if nobody else would go. All he wanted to do was play bridge, play golf, and go to all the football games. When the Redskins first were playing, I went to most all of those things. Mr. [Clark] Griffith gave him a gold card. When any other person went along with him as a guest, they all paid the fare. One particular person would pick the tab up. He'd hand me his gold card and say, "Go on." We went on where the president and all those big people were.

But wherever he went, he'd be turning around to make sure that I was taken care of. He'd say, "You take care of him first, and then you can talk to me." I was smoking at that time, and all the cigars that they gave for gifts, if it wasn't a certain brand, or he couldn't trade them in -- the secretary did the trading -- I would be the recipient of all the cigars!

But there was a wonderful history back behind Senator Harrison and President [\[Franklin\] D. Roosevelt](#) that's worth looking into. Roosevelt tried to defeat Pat Harrison. He tried to defeat Walter George and several others. But Pat Harrison played a terrific part in getting Roosevelt the presidential nomination. At that time the chairman of the Democratic Party became the Post Master General.

**Ritchie:** Oh, Jim Farley.

**Nichols:** Farley. Harrison worked with Farley to persuade Democrats to nominate Roosevelt for president. There was a fellow who was president of one of the railroads, and they had a whole car, and they would leave and they would go out to California and all around, just these four or five men on one car. The senator didn't have no money, but he was the life of the party on that particular train. But they persuaded Jim Farley to take a vice president from Texas.

**Ritchie:** [\[John Nance\] Garner](#).

**Nichols:** Garner. To take Garner as his running-mate, and they pulled it off. That's the type of politician that he was. But they [Roosevelt and Harrison] had words. Before they had words, Harrison used to like to have, after a big tax bill, he liked to have all the reporters sitting around in the office and they'd shoot questions at him. At that time, the District of Columbia had three commissioners, and it was time for the president to appoint a new commissioner. One commissioner always came from the Corps of Engineers. Senator Harrison was being facetious and he told the gentlemen that he happened to know who the new commissioner was. He would just leak a little information to them. He gave them



the name of George Allen. George Allen had helped run the senator's campaigns, and that type of thing. At that particular time, George Allen was the night clerk out here at the Wardman Park Hotel. He leaked George Allen's name and they broke out of the office, jumped in their cars, and headed down to the White House, and grabbed the president, and told him they knew who this new commissioner was. He never heard of him! So he wanted to find out where they got that information. They told him that Pat Harrison had given it to them. So then the president had to call him to ask him who the hell George Allen was. [laughs]

Those little stories lead up to something big. George Allen was appointed commissioner of the District. George Allen could tell funny stories to keep you laughing from the time you sat down. He used that to get in with [Harry Truman](#). Harry Truman played poker, and when he became president George Allen would ride down on that presidential boat, and he'd tell jokes. There was another fellow who was over the radio, TV was just in the process of coming in, that gentleman became General [Eisenhower](#)'s liaison over in the War Department. Butcher was his name, Harry Butcher, and Harry Butcher and George Allen and a bunch of them leaked the name of Eisenhower to President Roosevelt [for military command in World War II]. Does that sound strange to you? That happened. The President listened to George Allen, and as I've said, if you've followed, he came from being a night clerk. He knew some rich fellow that was an oil man, who died on a plane from California coming over here. He worked himself up to be on the board of that particular oil company, I forget what company it was, but he was instrumental in getting President Eisenhower

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to buy this place up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But that's the kind of stories that came along that people in general didn't know anything about.

**Ritchie:** Harrison had a reputation as a great story teller and humorist. Did he talk about Mississippi a lot?

**Nichols:** Oh, yes. [Laughs] At one time the senator lived on Cathedral, right off of Connecticut Avenue, where there's a turn-off to go back down to the park [Rock Creek Park]. He would have people coming from Mississippi to tell him what was happening, and so on. He would be listening and they were talking and all at once this fellow said, "Senator, you know that nigger so and so down there?" And the minute that they'd do something like that, or say something like that, he'd change that conversation right quickly and start talking about something else. He didn't want to tell them that "I respect this man that's driving this car. He's no chauffeur." I wasn't his chauffeur, see. He was just that type. They would send him this food from Mississippi, this smoked sausage -- I haven't had any

since he passed -- and syrup, you had that Louisiana syrup which is different from maple syrup, different as night and day.

The second day that I went to pick him up, the first thing that he told the cook, he said, "Fix Jesse's breakfast." He hadn't even met me then. She came in and said, "You had your breakfast?" I said, "Sure I had my breakfast." She said, "Well, the senator wants you to have your breakfast." Then she started making these waffles, and pancakes, and started cooking that sausage. By the fourth day I told my wife, "Don't fix no breakfast for me." [laughs] So, Mrs. Harrison came in there one morning when I was sitting down reading the paper. She said, "Jesse, since you're sitting down reading the paper and eating up the food, you can make yourself handy by bringing in some wood for the fireplace." Just at that time the senator had come down the stairs, and he said, "What did you say, Edwina?" She said, "I was telling Jesse that since he's sitting down here doing nothing, eating up the breakfast, he can make himself useful." He said, "As long as Jesse is around me, if he stays away all day long, don't you ever ask him to do nothing. He works for the committee. He's not no servant." He said, "I buy the food and hire these maids to cook it. You ain't got nothing to worry

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about that kind of thing, but don't you ever ask Jesse to do anything." He was just like that.

He almost killed himself. He used to drive a great big Chrysler coupe and he drank pretty heavy sometimes at the office. He tried to make that turn off River Road into Burning Tree and cut down a telephone pole like he took a saw and cut it off. He never touched a car since then. If somebody else wanted to take him somewhere, you know, they'd be down at the Washington Hotel or someplace, he'd say, "Nope, I don't ride with nobody but Jesse." When he died, Les Biffle -- do you know Biffle? [Secretary for the Majority, later Secretary of the Senate.]

**Ritchie:** Yes.

**Nichols:** He came up and touched me on the shoulder and said, "Don't never worry about another job. Anything that you have to have, you come to me." I had never asked him in my life for nothing. And that's the way the different people wanted to do it.

You see, President Roosevelt had interceded in the selection of the majority leader [in 1937]. You probably heard about that one. The Senator from Arkansas died.

**Ritchie:** [\[Joseph\] Robinson](#).

**Nichols:** Robinson died. They were on the [funeral] train coming back, and Roosevelt interceded on behalf of Senator [\[Alben\] Barkley](#). And Barkley beat Harrison by one vote.

**Ritchie:** How did Senator Harrison react when he was defeated?

**Nichols:** He didn't like it. But as I said, he was a poker player and he'd keep those kind of things to himself. I almost burned up a brand-new car coming from Burning Tree to get him to the Senate when they were voting on a civil rights bill - - no, it wasn't a civil rights bill, it was a poll tax bill, because

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civil rights wasn't at that time. He said, "Hell go. I can buy another car." He said, "They need me there for this vote." I started through a red light, and he said, "Whoaaaaa." [Laughs] That's the only time -- I was young and I would try things just to see what would happen. I have had that fellow George Allen and the senator in the back of the car, going to Burning Tree, and I have made fifty and sixty miles going down Constitution Avenue, just to see what would happen.

**Ritchie:** Did you ever get stopped?

**Nichols:** Never -- oh, we did have one incident where George Allen was the commissioner and he had issued an order that the District would not fix any tickets for anybody, regardless of who they were. We had a delegation coming in from Mississippi, it had something to do with veterans and we went down to the Veterans Bureau. The senator got out of the car and he turned around and he said, "Wait right here, Jesse." I said, "I can't wait here, senator." He said, "Wait right here, Jesse." So I just parked the car and sat there, and got my newspaper and started to read. A cop came by and everybody else started flying running, but I just stayed there. He said, "Move." I said, "Put the ticket on the car, if you're going to give a ticket." At that time, people up here [in Congress] had the low tag numbers. The cop got out of the car and said, "Let's see your permit." I gave him the permit. And he put the ticket on my permit!

I got back to the office and I was furious. A staff member said, "Don't worry about it, Jesse." I ignored it, and a couple of days after that they issued a warrant for me. So I told them that they better get it straight. They called down there and they said that they had issued that edict that nobody would get tickets fixed. I said, "Well, if you don't get it straight, tonight I'm going to give it to the senator himself." And I told him, "If I give the ticket to the senator, you know what's going to happen." So the fellow said, "All right, we'll take care of it." So what they did, they printed a little story that Jesse Nichols had been driving in Washington for so many years and didn't have no accidents, no tickets, or nothing, and he needs to be commended! [laughs]

**Ritchie:** Well, when you started to work for the committee back in 1937, in addition to driving Senator Harrison, what were your responsibilities for the committee?

**Nichols:** I was assistant to Skeeter. I became, as I said, as an outgrowth of working on those hearings in the attic, getting those things in some kind of an order, I began to learn something about the work. Now, my job was to put down all the working papers of the committee. Skeeter would come in and say, "Jesse, we're going to have Senate Bill so and so, or House Bill so and so, tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock," and he'd go on about his business, but he had taught me what would be expected. So that morning before the hearing, I set the whole shebang up in the committee, the reports -- most of them were from the House, that some bill had passed, some tax bill. After that happened, I would take charge of anything that the senator wanted. The senators' staff stopped at the door. They couldn't come inside the committee room itself. All of the executive sessions, and I was in on all of them, I set up all of the working papers. And when we did have a conference, I would do the same thing. Take them over to the Capitol, or to the Ways and Means Committee on the House side.

But he gradually taught me what would be expected. In other words, I created that job. Because I was the first -- as far as I know -- the first black clerk in the Senate. For a long time I didn't have privileges of the [Senate] floor, until [Russell Long](#) became chairman. That was the first thing that he did when the Senate assigned him to the chairmanship, was to notify his administrative assistant that he wanted Jesse Nichols' salary to be what it should be. That's a part of the story that I would not want to put in here, because Senator George had brought Elizabeth Springer, you probably heard of her. Well, Elizabeth, I taught her. I didn't teach her the secretary part, but people would come in and ask for something, and I was sitting down. I had this library up and down stairs with documents, and she would say, "Sit down, just keep your seat. I'll get that." So she would go there and get something out and hand it to them, making it easy on me. But I knew what the story was, so when I'd clean up, I'd change the files. They used to come in and ask for something, she'd go to that other place, and they'd say, "No, no, you handed me something wrong." They'd say,

"No, Jesse, you tell her where the so-and-so is," and I'd go get it and hand it to them.

When we came over to the new [Senate Office] building, we were the first to move in the Dirksen Building. They gave us the choice of any room other than the room

they had especially for Appropriations. Appropriations had a series of subcommittees. We had no subcommittees. Before that, I had this huge library and that had to be moved. I was the last person on the staff to come over, because I had to see how all this library was packed. She said, "What we want to do -- we're not trying to get rid of you or nothing -- but I told Senator George that we want to have everything catalogued. I said fine. The Library of Congress sent an expert to come over and catalog the books. He said, "What we can do is we'll start from scratch." I had a whole section that was tariffs, one section that was taxes, and Social Security had a section. I had the reports, the hearings, and a combination of the reports and the hearings. She came in and said, "Now, what are we going to do?" We were going to get all of the books and bring them into my room and put them on the floor and then we were going to start from there. I said fine.

So they told the rest of the staff, "Don't worry, but we're going to do some physical work." So they were all standing around -- we had about eight people then. So she said, "Now, what I want you to do, Jesse, is just bring the books in." I'd go to the bookcase like this [rises, walks to the bookcase and extends arms over a long shelf of books] and get a whole bunch of them, and drop them down, and then I'd go to this bookcase, and drop them down. [Laughs] The stack got about this tall [reaches above his head]. The newspaper people used to like to come around and sit and talk and ask questions, and one reporter came in there and said, "What'cha doin'?" She said, "We're going to catalog this collection." He said, "No, that ain't what you're doing, you're trying to mess Jesse up. He's the only one that knows where this damn stuff is to start off with. See, that's what you're trying to do." So it confused the expert from the Library of Congress, who said "But you've got to know where things are." They pointed to me and said, "This man knows, why don't you let him do it?"

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So we moved over, when I got here, the truck brought this stuff and put it in the middle of the floor and there it was. I had to go get it, put it like I wanted it, put the numbers on it, and I said, "Now let me catalog it." I put it like I wanted it, and that's the way it is today. When I retired, it took two people to try to do the job that I was doing. Two people.

**Ritchie:** When you started, they were in the Russell Office Building, the Old Senate Office Building.

**Nichols:** Yes, the building they named after Senator [Russell](#). We were on the third floor, 315 in that building.

**Ritchie:** How many rooms did they have in those days?

**Nichols:** Ah, the chairman would have a reception room, his office, and maybe another office. That would be for the chairperson. He had more than an ordinary senator would have. In that building, we had the room with the back door to the Caucus Room -- that's the only other way that you could get in there. I saw many, many an event take place, coming through the Caucus Room, because they had to come back through our backroom. Most all of the [\[Joseph\] McCarthy](#) hearings were in our committee room.

**Ritchie:** Sort of as an escape route, I guess.

**Nichols:** Yes.

**Ritchie:** And in those days, was there a big table in the center of the committee room that they worked on? They didn't have a podium?

**Nichols:** No, they had a podium, we worked on the podium.

**Ritchie:** And then the witnesses would sit facing the committee?

**Nichols:** Mmm-hmmm. Now when we came to the new building, the Dirksen Building [named for [Everett Dirksen](#)], they had installed a speaker system. We didn't have that in

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the old building. So I was instructed on the use of the system. My job, besides waiting on the senators -- in other words, if we had a hearing going on, if a senator came in, I would walk over and tell him, "Senator, we're working on such-and-such a thing, the page is so-and-so," or I'd hand him a copy of the witness' statement. If a witness was testifying, I'd tell him exactly who the witness was, a little something about him. In other words, so he wouldn't be coming in there cold to start off. I learned how to use the speaker system.

We had one particular hearing when Russell Long was chairperson -- he backed you up, I mean the staff. The room was filled, and Senator [\[J. William\] Fulbright](#) was on the committee, and Long said, "Jesse, you keep the time. In this particular hearing we're going to give each senator five minutes [to question the witness] and when the five minutes is up, regardless of who it is, you stop him." We had these little pink pads around. It got to be Fulbright's time, and he was exceeding it. I let him go two minutes over, and then I went and slid a pink slip in front of him. He happened to look down, and said, "Mr. Chairman!" Senator Long looked around and said, "Senator Fulbright?" He said, "Somebody just handed me a pink slip telling me my time is up." He said, "Did Jesse tell you that, Senator?" And Long looked over at me and I bowed my head. And he said, "Senator, your time is up." [Laughs] So after the hearing, I told Senator Fulbright, "Senator, I gave you

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two minutes extra, I tried my best." He said, "I know that, I just wanted to have some fun and that was a good time for me to do it." So the newspaper fellow said, "That Jesse is something, he even tells Senator Fulbright when to shut up."

But I got to the place where I could adjust that microphone to enhance the senators, you know what I mean? My whole life was taking care of them. Then after I had done fairly well, there were different other committees that picked up the staff members from other departments in the Capitol building. But you know most of those people that they picked up had some kind of connection with the restaurants or something.

**Ritchie:** I wanted to go back and ask you, when you came to work for Senator Harrison, the other senator from Mississippi was [Theodore Bilbo](#).

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**Nichols:** No, at that time he wasn't, he came later.

**Ritchie:** Came shortly after that, in 1940, I guess. Did you ever have any dealings with Bilbo?

**Nichols:** Only once or twice. I had run into him once on the elevator, and another time in the cabinet shop. They had a cabinet shop in the old building, carpentry shop, and I was interested in cabinet making. I used to spend a lot of time down there. But that was the only time.

**Ritchie:** What was he like, by comparison to Harrison?

**Nichols:** Oh he wasn't in the same league. Senator Harrison had helped Bilbo, I think after Bilbo was governor. But they fought like cats and dogs. Harrison had all of the patronage, and Bilbo had none. Bilbo, I think strictly in his heart, he wasn't the type of person that he portrayed himself to be. But Senator Harrison represented the people of the state of Mississippi, the people who stood for something. [Stennis](#) did too, Stennis did the same thing. And Eastland, his office was right across from me. He only stopped one time to say something to me. But when Skeeter died, I had retired by then. I stayed off about six months, and I was keyed up because I was really into the job. I had attended all of the executive sessions and all conferences, so they found a little old job for me with the investment bankers. They wanted somebody like me. I wasn't really interested in it until they told me that they wanted me to set up a mailing service and they had a lot of equipment and machinery. They would pay somebody some fabulous salary to teach me how to do this. I always did like machinery, and after I found out what the thing could do, I became interested in it. So when Skeeter died, Eastland sent his chauffeur and his Cadillac to take me to that funeral. Other than that, I had no dealings with him.

**Ritchie:** Could you tell me briefly about Skeeter Johnston, what kind of a person he was?

**Nichols:** Well, Skeeter -- and I learned this after I became connected with the committee -- in my home town they had a high school and they had a

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junior college. Well, for a long time, they didn't have a high school for colored people, and my Daddy spent a fortune sending us away from there to school. I went to Greenwood one time. My grandparents were from Oklahoma, and I went to Oklahoma for the first two years in high school, and then I went from Oklahoma to Alcorn. But Skeeter could go directly from high school to junior college [in Clarksdale]. He finished there and then went on to Old Miss.

He was good. He was a good secretary. He went around with the senator on campaign trips and that kind of thing. I think he made an excellent [Secretary of the Senate](#). He knew my family, and when he went away to war [in the Second World War] he told his wife, "Anything that comes up that you've got to have in the house, you call Jesse first and talk with him. If he can't work it out then you get in touch with my brother." So when he became Secretary for the Majority and Secretary of the Senate, he helped me by looking out for me.

When my youngster, who had taken commercial art in a school up in New York City, came back from the service, he wanted a job. He had his portfolio, and Skeeter had called the Public Printer on his behalf. He made one error, he didn't tell the Public Printer that this kid was black, see. So when he went over there, the Public Printer had promised him that he'd give him a job, but he kept him over there half a day. He knew he had to sooner or later talk to Skeeter. I went back to work, and Skeeter called and said, "What happened to Nicky?" I said, "You know damn well what happened to him." He said, "The son of bitch! You tell Nicky to come on down here tomorrow. All this stuff that I've got under me, he's got a job somewhere." Well, the word got out that Jesse's son was going to come and take over the job that was under Skeeter. I told the fellow, "Cool it, I wouldn't let him have it in the first place."

My son is the art director of Food and Drug [Administration]. He got that on his own. I did help him get a job. It so happened that he found out about a job down at the Smithsonian Institution. Senator [\[Clinton\] Anderson](#) from New Mexico was on the Board of Regents. I happened to speak to the senator. He said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Jesse." But he went to the phone and called his office and told his secretary to come down. She came down and he said, "Jesse wants something, but I don't know what. Whatever he wants,

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you see that he gets it." So she called somebody down at the Smithsonian -- the senator had put him down there, I didn't know that.

So they kept my son for one year. The time came up to renew it, and they said, "If you know anybody that can speak for you, you'd better do it, because your time is going to be up." So there was an executive session, and Senator Anderson said, "Jesse, how's that boy doing?" I said, "Funny thing you asked me that, senator." He said, "Why?" I said, "I just got this call from him, and the fellow down there says his time is up." He went to the phone. See, nobody could use that phone when we had an executive session but me and the senators. I answered all the phones too. But he went to the phone and called his secretary and said come down here. She stuck her head in the door, and I went to the door. She was out there and he went on outside, and called me out there and told her, "Something is happening down there, but whatever it is, you get it straightened out." So she called down there and the guy said he didn't know what was happening. She said, "You'd better find out what was happening, the senator put you down there, blah, blah, blah." [Laughs] But they straightened it out. Then my son went on from there.

The next best friend that I had on that committee was [Bob Kerr](#) of Oklahoma. He and I were just like that [holds two fingers together]. He told his secretary, "If this man comes into the office and says he wants to see me, regardless of where I am, you let me decide whether I can see him." I went there one time, something very important was happening and he was looking for Senator Anderson, and I knew where Anderson was. He wanted that vote. I said, "He's in there on the john." I knocked on the door, and said, "Jesse's out here." "Send him in." [Laughs] So I went on in.

**Ritchie:** Senator Kerr was sort of like Senator Harrison, wasn't he? A big man.

**Nichols:** A big rich man, but a little man, a lonely man.

**Ritchie:** What do you mean by that?

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**Nichols:** His wife was an interior decorator, and the senator had bought this huge, beautiful place facing the Potomac River. But he had no home life. And this is a lonely place, after you finish the day and you don't have friends and that kind of thing. He was lonely and he would talk, and he would listen. I saw he and [Paul Douglas](#) square off when something came up. I was standing right between the two of them. But Kerr was a magnificent fellow. When I wanted to get a raise in salary -- I asked [Harry Byrd](#) once for a raise, and he just looked at me and

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grinned. You know those salaries are published, twice a year, so I got all of my statistics together and I went and talked to Senator Kerr. And he liked that. He said, "What do you want me to do about it?" He said, "When I get to be chairman, you're going to be taken care of." I said, "I'll leave it entirely to you, senator." We had this meeting and he stayed behind and the chairman stayed behind, and Elizabeth stayed in the corner, pretending she was busy. He talked. He had the figures and he showed the chairman. He did it in such a way that it didn't offend her. She didn't know where it was coming from. She came back outside and hit me on the leg and said, "They're talking about you in there." I said, "What?"

Every time the other people got a raise [Byrd], I didn't get one. Byrd would do it for him [Senator Kerr], but he wouldn't do it for me. But Byrd was not in the class with [Millikin](#), or [Wallace Bennett](#) of Utah, and naturally wasn't in the class with Paul Douglas. I used to serve them peanuts, somebody down in Georgia would send peanuts in great big boxes. I'd serve coffee and Paul Douglas used to like to take his package of peanuts and empty them into his ashtray and then he'd eat them one by one. And when he was making a point he'd look over at me and wink his eye at me, as though I knew what he was up to. I know that when Senator [Daniel Inouye](#) first came before the committee for something, they ignored him. Douglas, after everybody else had asked a question, then he beautifully told what the senator had done in the war and how he had lost his arm. That's the type of person he was.

Well, I think I'd better be going.

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**Ritchie:** Yes, I don't want you to get a parking ticket. Next time we'll arrange for you to park in the Senate lot. But this has been a fascinating session.

End Interview #1

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