

Interview Subject: W. Louis Bissette, Jr.

Interviewers: Brad Blackburn and Melody Dunlop

Interview Date: Tuesday, October 23, 2007

Location: Office of McGuire, Wood and Bissette, P.A.
Drhumor Building
48 Patton Avenue
Asheville, North Carolina 28801

Our interview with Lou Bissette was conducted on a rainy morning in a comfortable conference room of the law firm of McGuire, Wood, and Bissette. Mr. Bissette's office is in the historic Drhumor Building, centrally located in downtown Asheville at the corner of Church Street and Patton Avenue, and within a short walking distance to Pack Square. We admired the scenic photographs of Western North Carolina waterfalls and mountain streams that were part of the décor in the room. As we talked over cups of coffee bearing the name of the McGuire, Wood and Bissette law firm, Lou was relaxed and reflective as he responded to our questions related to his viewpoints on leadership and community. We selected Lou Bissette as a community leader to interview for many reasons including his leadership role as the Mayor of Asheville, serving for two terms from 1985 through 1989. In addition to serving as mayor, Lou's service to the community includes serving as chairman of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, chairman of the N.C. Arboretum Society and the Grove Arcade Public Market Foundation, vice chairman of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation and the Buncombe County Economic Development Commission, and a trustee of Western Carolina University and Wake Forest University.

How many years have you lived in the Asheville area?

I have lived in Asheville for more than 30 years.

What attracted you to Asheville?

In 1974, I had an opportunity to move to Asheville to help start a bank. I had never been to Asheville and it sounded great, and perhaps even romantic to come to the mountains. My first job in Asheville was with the Western Carolina Bank and Trust Company and my job responsibilities included getting to know people in Asheville and making friends for the bank. It was a great job, and in the course of getting to know people in Asheville, I met Dick Wood. In 1976 I became a member of the law firm.

Where have you lived other than here?

I grew up in High Point, North Carolina, have degrees from Wake Forest University, University of North Carolina, and the University of Virginia, and lived in those communities. I worked for Wachovia Bank in Winston-Salem and Charlotte prior to moving to Asheville.

Tell us a little about your experience as mayor from 1985-1989.

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Prior to 1985, the Mayor was elected by the City Council, not by the people. In 1984, the ordinance was amended to allow for a popular vote. In 1983, a good friend from law school days, Larry McDevitt was elected Mayor, and I assumed he would run again in 1985, but he did not. It was through Larry's encouragement that I ran for Mayor in the first popular election. The Council was partisan at that time, but we all respected each other, and made efforts towards consensus building. Prior to running for Mayor, I had been involved in the community in activities with my 2 sons, including serving as President of the PTO at Jones School.

What did you find to be the most difficult part of community leadership and why?

Looking back, one of the challenges then was the Community bond issue in 1987. Everyone was pushing in the same direction to rejuvenate the Downtown. The city built parking garages at Rankin Street and Wall Street; developers began projects on Haywood Street, North Lexington, Wall Street, and Pack Square. However, a lot of people who had lived here all their lives were pessimistic about Downtown renovation.

The bond issue that was proposed to utilize water from the French Broad River in 1989 was also a difficult situation. At that time, the French Broad River had a long history of being considered a dirty river. Grassroot opposition to the French Broad proposal developed. When the bond issue failed, it was a bitter defeat.

The new sign ordinance was passed just as I was leaving office and this was another challenging issue.

How are decisions made in the region?

I think that decisions made today receive a lot more input from special interest groups than when I served as Mayor. The television station and newspaper were under different management then and may have presented more of a positive perspective on our Community and its local governments. I think in some ways, the additional input today is an improvement. In other ways, it presents problems. Today, it appears that the Council has gone overboard in making the development process long and arduous. At times, there seems to be micro-management of details that are better left to staff and City Boards. If good people are appointed to City Boards, the Council should give credence to that process.

Are young people engaged in the work of the community?

There are always young people willing and eager to step up to help with community issues.

Who was a mentor for you?

Dick Wood was a good role model and political mentor, even though we were in different political parties.

What is the best advice you've ever been given about leading?

You cannot lead by yourself. Be a consensus builder, rather than a steam roller.

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