



Oral history with Jeremiah J. O'Keefe

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Biography

Mr. Jeremiah O'Keefe was born in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, on July 12, 1923. His parents were J. Ben O'Keefe and Teresa Slattery O'Keefe. He was the second of four children and attended St. Alphonsus Catholic School. With his family, he moved to Biloxi at age thirteen because the home he was born in and lived in was lost to the family during the Depression.

Mr. O'Keefe attended Sacred Heart Academy for high school. During his senior year, he was co-captain of the football team. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was attending Soulè Business College. He quickly entered the U.S. Navy and received his wings in the U.S. Marine Corps in May, 1943. Having shot down seven Japanese airplanes, he became an Ace Fighter Pilot. Following World War II, he obtained a degree in Business Administration and went to work with his father in the O'Keefe Funeral Home in Biloxi.

In 1954, Mr. O'Keefe was selected Outstanding Young Man of the year and later the Outstanding Citizen. He was elected to the Mississippi State Legislature and served one four-year term. In 1973, he was elected mayor of Biloxi and served eight years.

He and his wife Annette Saxon O'Keefe have thirteen children, forty-three grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Mr. O'Keefe has been active in civic affairs and political activities his entire life. He and his wife established the O'Keefe Charitable Foundation. Additionally, they founded Gulf National Life Insurance Company to sell policies primarily designed to pay final funeral expenses. Mr. O'Keefe acquired a number of other smaller companies and Gulf National became the largest such insurer in Mississippi with over 200 affiliated funeral homes.



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Transcript

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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program at The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mr. Jeremiah J. O'Keefe and is being conducted on March 17, 2000. The interviewer is Worth Long.

(A portion of the interview relating to testing the tape recorder has been omitted from this transcript.)

Long: Could you tell me your name and where and when you were born, please?

O'Keefe: Yes, I'm Jerry O'Keefe. My really full name is Jeremiah Joseph O'Keefe, and I was born in Ocean Springs over across the bridge, Jackson County, on July 12, 1923. And I was the eldest of three sons of my father and mother. I have one sister older than me, and we grew up there in Ocean Springs.

Long: What were they named?

O'Keefe: Well, Alice Mary O'Keefe was my eldest sister. She was a year and a half older than me, and then my brother John Bernard O'Keefe is a year and a half younger than me. And then the youngest in the family was Joseph Benjamin O'Keefe. And he was some eight years younger than my brother John,



so, there was a pretty good gap in between the third child and the fourth child. Yeah. And we all grew up over there.

Long: And your mother and father, could you tell me their names?

O'Keefe: Yes. Uh-huh. My father was named Jeremiah as was his father, but they started calling him by a nickname, Ben—Ben O'Keefe—and he went by Ben. Most people didn't know what his real name was. He usually signed his name J. Ben O'Keefe. And my mother's name was Teresa, T-E-R-E-S-A, spelled without an H, Slattery, and she was from Irish extraction, also. And I usually like to tell the tale, her grandfather and my dad's grandfather were both in the Civil War on opposite sides. (Laughter.) Her grandfather died as a soldier in the Civil War, not from injuries, but from illness according to the records that I read. You know. So, we don't know just what the nature of the illness was. And then my dad's grandfather, he served in a Mississippi division, and I don't know how much action either one of them had. I noted that in the Battle of Gettysburg, there were troops from Wisconsin and troops from Mississippi engaged in that battle, and I often wondered if they were ever shooting at each other. (Laughter.) And never did learn. I really hadn't done the research on it. But it would be an interesting circumstance should that be the case. You know. But we grew up in a very quiet time over there, a very poor time.

Long: When you say, "poor," you mean?

O'Keefe: I mean economically poor. We lived in a mansion a block from the Catholic church and a block from the school, and we would walk to school and walk to church, and all that. There weren't a lot of automobiles then. This was 1923 and beyond. And I remember walking to school the first day, and my mother left me down there, and the first recess when I decided I didn't like school (laughter), and I went and hid in a ditch. And across from the ditch was a little residential grocery store combination that these two ladies, the Rosenbeaux Sisters ran for many, many years. And they saw me hiding out in the ditch, and (laughter) they came and got me and took me home. So, after that I think I was under pretty close surveillance in the kindergarten from then on. You know. I went to a little Catholic school abutting the Catholic church over there. Some of that building is still there. There was only three rooms in it, and it went from kindergarten through the eighth grade. So, you had two or three grades in every room. And so, it was a very peaceful, you know, growing-up time. It really was. My father was in the undertaking business, following his father and his grandfather. And his grandfather had come to Ocean Springs from Ireland during the potato famine. We don't know the exact date, but some time in the early 1840s and settled in Ocean Springs and then after—he was an Irish farmer, and probably a poor one. (Laughter.) But he did amass some land holdings in Ocean Springs, and I know there were comments made when I was a child, "Well, the O'Keefes are rich with property, but they don't have any money. They're poor." (Laughter.)

Long: We used to call that "land poor" (inaudible).

O'Keefe: That's right. Yeah. And so, he farmed some land over there before the Civil War. After the Civil War he opened this little livery and undertaking business. And they ran the livery and undertaking business, and the wife lived next door, who would be my great-grandmother, and she ran a boarding house. And they took in boarders. And so, that tradition went on for another generation. My grandfather and his wife operated the funeral home, and the wife operated the boarding house. And they took the front off of the old house and moved it out on Government Street in Ocean Springs and built a beautiful antebellum with the big Greek columns out front on it, and I was born in that home.



Long: So, that was—if the home was built before you were born, just about what year are we speaking of?

O'Keefe: Yeah. The home was finished in 1906.

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: And I was born there in 1923. And then we lost the house in 1936, I think it was. So, I was thirteen years old when we lost our home, and we had to leave the home. You know. And it was a crushing blow to all of us. And my sister recalled the story that I—I did not remember it, but she said the two of us were sitting on the front steps crying, that we'd been in that house all of our lives. And of course, my sister had been born in the hospital in Biloxi, but I and my two younger brothers were all born in that house. And we had lived there up until that time. And we were distressed that we had to leave the house and move to Biloxi. And Ocean Springs people were very social conscious, and they thought everybody in Biloxi was a shrimp picker, and they looked down on them, really. And we didn't want to move to Biloxi, but that was—

Long: That was kind of—

O'Keefe: We had no choice.

Long: Was that a class attitude? (Laughter.)

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. Throughout the city of Ocean Springs, I'd say, the vast majority of the population thought they were more uptown than Biloxi. You know. A stratus, or something. A social idea, and my—

Long: Did that have anything to do with who married whom, or who dated whom?

O'Keefe: Yeah. My aunt tells the story that my wife who bore thirteen children that she and I had together, I met her in that home. And the O'Keefes had another home down Jackson Avenue, about a block and a half from where I was born. And my dad and his brothers and sisters owned this house. It was rental property. A beautiful little house called Seven Gables, and it dated back to around 1900 or beyond. And Mrs. Saxon who was a young widow bought the house. Her husband had been a banker in Georgia and then Chicago, and then he died early on. And Mrs. Saxon brought her daughter Annette to our home, and my Aunt Mary said, "Oh, come meet Jerry. This little girl, here, is going to be going to the same school, and she's going to be your playmate." So, we were in school there through, you know, the seventh grade, and then I moved to Biloxi. And then five years after that after high school, we were married. Less than five years after, [we] married.

But I was going to tell you the story about my sister and I crying on the front porch. And my sister said we promised each other when we got big and we were grown up that we were going to get enough money and buy this house back from that mean old Willie Dale. So, Willie Dale was a master mechanic, and he was a contemporary of my dad. And he lived about four or five blocks east of us on the same street, Porter Avenue. And Willie Dale bought the house at auction, you see, when we lost the house. And forty-eight years later, I bought the house back. And Willie Dale still owned it. So, I went to see Willie Dale, knocked on his door. Of course, I'd known him all through those years. The house had been for sale many, many times over a number of years. And I was not able to buy it financially, although the house was available; I wasn't available financially. (Laughter.) And so, I knocked on Mr. Willie's door, and said, "Mr. Willie, I want to buy our house back." And we arrived at a price. And I said, "But there's one other



condition." I said, "We're going to have a coming-home party." I said, "Mr. Willie, you've got to come to the party." I said, "We're going to have a big party out in the yard, and we're going to have a tent and a band and a lot of food and a lot of fun, and we want you to come there and sign the deed." And I told him the story, see, that my sister had related to me that I'd long since forgotten.

Long: The front porch?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Right. So, it was a great homecoming, and that was about fifteen years ago. Yeah. So, it was really a very poignant occasion, you know, and one that I enjoy telling. And so, we moved to Biloxi after the sale of that house. And my mother and my aunt didn't get along too well. My father's sister never married, and she was a superintendent of schools. In fact, she was the [first] female superintendent of schools in the state of Mississippi.

Long: Where did she go to get her education?

O'Keefe: She was at Newcomb in New Orleans, adjunct of Tulane University. Uh-huh. And she taught French and English and became the superintendent, and so, she and my mother both lived in the house. And it's not too good having two women under one roof, and they were not friendly, at all. And so, it was a great relief to my mother to get out of that beautiful, old home because of the unfriendly atmosphere between herself and her sister-in-law.

Long: Um-hm. Were they two Irish women?

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. They were both Irish, now. Listen. (Laughter.) The Irish are very bad about that. You know. (Laughter.) To this day, in Northern Ireland, you can certainly see that. You know.

Long: Right.

O'Keefe: Yeah. So, we moved over to Biloxi, and my sister was under the influence of my aunt, and she continued to commute back and forth to Ocean Springs because she only had like two more years to go in high school. And I went to the Sacred Heart School up here which at the time was co-ed, and played football there, and enjoyed Biloxi.

Long: What did you play? I mean, what was the name of the school, and—

O'Keefe: Well, it was Sacred Heart Academy, then, and it was boys and girls, and it was run by the Sisters of Mercy out of St. Louis. And I played my sophomore year; my freshman year, I wasn't allowed to play. My parents wouldn't let me. My sophomore year I played, and we had a big Irish—a big [Polish] coach from Minnesota named Chet Nadowlsky[?].

Long: Chet Na—

O'Keefe: Nadowlsky.

Long: Nadowlsky.

O'Keefe: OK. And I've forgotten just how to spell that. And so, he coached. I didn't play much that year, and then the next year the nuns announced they wouldn't be able to have a football team because they



couldn't pay a coach. So, I went to the nun in charge and then to the parish priest there, said, "Would you mind if I organized the football team?" I said, "We have the uniforms, and it won't cost the school anything, and I'll take care of getting a coach for free, and it won't cost anything, if you'll let me do that." So, I kind of took over the football team. (Laughter.)

Long: General manager.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Laughter. And one of our recent graduates, he was working, but still interested in playing football. And he and I'd played football together a year or two before. So, he was assistant coach, and then we got another guy to coach us, and we had two coaches, never did get paid. And of course, I worked in the funeral home that was across the street from the church. And behind the church was the school, so, it was all just one little, tight neighborhood there. We lived behind the funeral home, then the funeral home was next, then across the street the church, and then the school. So, everything was right there, and I worked in the funeral home during all of those years. I would sleep there two and three and four nights a week when I was in school. And would go on funerals and do all of that. You know. Carry flowers and chairs, and, but I had use of the automobiles. So, and we had a big limousine, and in fact, it was a 1929 Buick. (Laughter.) That's going way back.

Long: Yeah. That was impressive, too, wasn't it?

O'Keefe: Yeah. A big, big, old touring car. You know.

Long: Was there a wheel on the back? I mean, did they have one on the trunk?

O'Keefe: Now, I don't recall. It might have been.

Long: This was what color car?

O'Keefe: It was a real dark, dark green. Uh-huh. And so we would go to the football games, and the coach had a station wagon, and I would get the limousine from the funeral home, and that was the whole football team. You know. They would squeeze in, and we'd go off to play the game. You know. So, it was an interesting period of my life there. Of course, I was an altar boy and assisted as an acolyte at the masses in the church there. And my father was the second oldest of his family. He had an older brother and then, let's see—he was the third oldest, and then his sister was next, and then my dad, and then Jody who was the youngest. But my dad was called on to run the business. His father died when he was about fifteen, and so, the business fell to him because his older brother was off at college, and not very responsible. And so, my dad was very conscientious and hardworking. And he and his mother, my grandmother, ran that livery and undertaking business. You see. And they still had mules when I came along. And some cars and some horses and mules. Because we used to do drayage business; meet the trains, you know. And bring lumber and coal and passengers to the hotels. And at that time Ocean Springs had a pretty good little tourist business. So, they would meet the trains and bring the people in.

Long: Where did most of these people come from?

O'Keefe: New Orleans. Yeah. But also from the Chicago area.

Long: Was there a particular season in which they came?



O'Keefe: Yeah. They would come, I guess, primarily in the summertime. And they used to have springs over there like they have at Hot Springs, Georgia, that people had the idea that they were curative. And people would come down there for the warm springs of Ocean Springs. You know. And I don't think there was any validity to the idea, but that's what they did. And so, my family was always in the business of serving other people. You know. And I guess that kind of set a tone for my life in a way. And when I finished college—well, to retract a minute—he quit school about that time, and he didn't finish high school. But his older brother and older sister both went on and got a college education, but he was always having to support them. (Laughter.) They were always broke, and he was always loaning them an automobile, loaning them money or one thing and another. So, when it came time for me, when I finished high school, my dad didn't want me to go to college. He just didn't see the value of it, and I wanted to go. But we couldn't come to an agreement on it. He wanted me to go to a business school, and so I went to Soulè Business College in New Orleans, which was a little privately owned school, by this French family over there. So, I was going over there when Pearl Harbor happened. In fact, I was playing in the first Shrimp Bowl. That's an annual event here where they have the best high school teams that play in the Shrimp Bowl. And the Knights of Columbus—this was their first [Shrimp Bowl] game. They were just starting it as a fund raiser for the Doll and Toy Fund. And the Bay St. Louis Knights of Columbus were playing against the Biloxi Knights of Columbus. And I had been over there in school, you know, in New Orleans. I didn't know this coach, the one that did the coaching for the game. They got him from Ocean Springs or Pascagoula, somewhere in that area, and he never did send me in. So, in those days, it wasn't as organized as it is, now, so, I just substituted myself, and went in. (Laughter.) Relieved another backfield guy. We used to use the old Notre Dame System?

Long: Um-hm.

O'Keefe: And played a few plays and then came out again and this—

Long: That was the old Knute Rockne system.

O'Keefe: Yeah.

Long: Single wing.

O'Keefe: Uh-huh. That's right. So, a friend of mine, Kenneth Sablich that I had played ball with at Sacred Heart saw that I had substituted myself. So, he came to me, and he says, "Look, Jerry. In the next half, the next time we get the ball, and you get ready to go in," he said, "how about taking me with you?" (Laughter.)

I said, "I will. I will." So, we did that. (Laughter.) And so, when the game was over, that's when I learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Long: Right. So, this was a holiday, bowl-game kind of thing.

O'Keefe: Yeah. This was on Sunday, the first Shrimp Bowl game, December 7, 1941. So, I went down, you know, when I got—I'd go to New Orleans. I was going to Soulè. So, on Monday morning I'd get on the train and go to New Orleans. And I got over there, and then I started looking at the recruiting and went down to the Navy and ended up getting into the Navy aviation program. You know. And of course, we heard of Pearl Harbor, and we didn't even know where it was. I had never heard the name before. You know.



Long: How hard was it getting in that program? You wanted to be an airman?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, it was a strange thing. They always required two years college. But at that time there was such a push to mobilize manpower and it was so critical that they dropped the two-year requirement for some months. And they would give you aptitude and intelligence tests and if you could pass, they'd go on and give you an opportunity and a shot at it. You see. So, you know, I was nineteen years old, and I got my wings, and I was a lieutenant in the Marine Corps. You know.

Long: And you trained where?

O'Keefe: Well, Georgia, first, at pre-flight school in Athens, Georgia. And then Dallas, Texas, Naval Air Station and then Pensacola Naval Air Station. And that's where I got my wings, and I opted to go in the Marine Corps rather than staying in the Navy. And never regretted that, either. So, I was, you know, living life in the fast lane. I really was.

Long: Would the flying be different in the Marine Corps as opposed to the Navy?

O'Keefe: Well, all the training was the same and everything. And the Navy trained then, and still does, all of the pilots who eventually become Marine pilots. But a lot of the Navy pilots then went out on carriers and some of the Marine squadrons went on carriers, also. We were all carrier trained. It ended up that I took off from carriers on two occasions. I never did land on one although I was trained to do it, and knew how to do it, but I never had to do it. Yeah. So—

Long: And you served? Where did you actually do your service and your flying?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, we were out at Guadalcanal and Hawaii for a few months. And then Guadalcanal and then Espiritu Santo which is in the way South Pacific, and then up to Okinawa. And that was really the only substantial action that we were in. And that was the last biggest battle of World War II.

Long: And what were the planes that you flew at that time?

O'Keefe: And we flew a Corsair which is a gull-wing plane, and it's wings were like this (gesturing), a very distinctive silhouette. You know. And a huge plane, 2800 horsepower, and it just devastated the Japanese Air Force.

Long: And could you change from—could you carry guns under your wings?

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. These planes were equipped where you could carry napalm bombs, you could carry conventional bombs, you could carry eight rockets under the wing. Not all at one time, of course. And then you had fifty-caliber machine guns in the wings.

Long: Yeah. I understand, for instance, in the Battle of Midway that people had the right thing on at the right time. So, they had changed their armament, correctly.

O'Keefe: Yeah. And sometime, there are so many goof-ups. You know. Like, I know one time they told us at Okinawa to attack this radar tower, or radio tower. And all we were equipped with was rockets. Well, if you can imagine how hard it is to hit a little piece of steel, you know, structure with a rocket. You know it's



just next to impossible. And what you'd need, you know is a firebomb to burn it down and melt the steel or an explosive, a heavy bomb to blow it up rather than a rocket.

Long: I see. But your job was as a delivery person to deliver the armament to the target.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, our biggest job was to prevent the Japanese—see that was the southernmost island of Japan, and the Japanese would come down daily and nightly to attack the ships in the harbor, and the men on the ships, and it was our job to prevent them from coming. So, we would—there were destroyer escorts that ring the island. They had radar; we didn't have radar on our planes. But the destroyers did have the radar, and they were the ones who told us where to go. You know. "The enemy is coming from such and such a location." And they would tell us where to go, and we'd go meet them. You see.

Long: So, how many planes in the squadron?

O'Keefe: Twenty-four. And of course, there were spares, and that, and usually have about twice that many pilots. And of course, most of the pilots killed, were killed in operational accidents rather than getting shot down. And so—

Long: Did you actually participate in that type of combat?

O'Keefe: Yes.

Long: Could you tell me about that?

O'Keefe: Yeah. We would go out usually in groups of four. And we would be assigned to a particular ship. And we'd get out and fly circles above that ship. And we would lean our mixture back of the gasoline where we were conserving fuel because we never knew how long we were going to be there or when the enemy might arrive. And then they would say, "Got something happening here. Go out so and so." And then you'd put the full mixture to it, and you'd increase your speed. And so, that happened on a Sunday, and I was flying with my commanding officer, and my executive officer and several others. There were about—I think there were sixteen of us in the flight.

Long: This was 1940?

O'Keefe: This was 1945.

Long: Five. Um-hm.

O'Keefe: Yeah, April 21, I believe it was. And these planes in huge numbers came from Japan, and we attacked them. And my executive officer ended up shooting down six of them on that flight. And my commanding officer and I each shot down five of them, so we got sixteen between us, and then the rest of the squadron got about five or six more. And so, that was written up in Time magazine, and had a caption over it that said, "One deal, three aces." (Laughter.) That was a long time ago.

Long: That's great. Did you end up shooting down mostly zeros? Or—



O'Keefe: No. These were slower planes, and this is toward the end of the war. You know. And they didn't have as many of the zeros or tonys or the better Japanese planes; were few in number at that point. These were vals and nates, N-A-T-E and V-A-L-S; vals and nates.

Long: And you were flying a Corsair.

O'Keefe: We were flying a Corsair. And so, that was on Sunday, and then Saturday of that same week, we ran into another group, and we had twelve or sixteen planes, again. And we saw five bandits, but nobody saw them but me, of our group. So, I asked permission of the leader, my commanding officer, if I could investigate. He told me, "Go ahead." And so I took my wing man, and we went after them. And when we got close enough, we could determine for certain that they were bandits. They called them bogeys[?] if you were uncertain, bandits if you were certain.

So, then I called back and said, "They're bandits, and we're attacking." See. So, my wing man shot down two, and I shot down two. And then the CO and the rest of the squadron got the one remaining plane. So, I was the leading fighter pilot at Okinawa at that time for some weeks. And then later on, two other pilots in our squadron each got seven, also.

Long: Right. Now, what constituted an ace?

O'Keefe: Well, they usually referred to an ace as having shot down five aerial kills. So, I had five plus two.

Long: Uh-huh. So, was there any ritual that they performed when you came in?

O'Keefe: No. And it's kind of a point of envy of other pilots who might have been better pilots, but just weren't there at the time, you know, and didn't have the opportunity. And there's nothing official about being an ace. It's just a legend, I guess you'd say, maybe from World War I. Yeah.

Long: Well, it's something significant. That means you survived. (Laughter.)

O'Keefe: Yeah, five. That's right. Yeah.

Long: You survived.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Of course, before I went overseas, I got my wife Annette to come out to California. She and her mother and my mother came to California and we—

(End of tape one, side one. The interview continues on tape one, side two. There is a brief area of repetition which occurred in migrating the interview from DAT format to cassette tapes.)

O'Keefe: —other pilots who might have been better pilots, but just weren't there at the time, you know, and didn't have the opportunity. And there's nothing official about being an ace. It's just a legend, I guess you'd say, maybe from World War I. Yeah.

Long: Well, it's something significant. That means you survived. (Laughter.)

O'Keefe: Um-hm. Yeah. Five. Yeah. That's right. Yeah.



Long: You survived.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Of course, before I went overseas, I got my wife Annette to come out to California. She and her mother and my mother came to California, and we got married there, and we lived there in California for about three months. And then, I went overseas and she went back home to have the first baby who was born in January, 1945.

Long: So, you honeymooned in California.

O'Keefe: That's right. And that was my first door-to-door selling, and canvassing. We couldn't find a place to live. And so, I said, "Well, we've got to find something." We were in a motel. And I said, "I'm going to go to the nicest neighborhood in town and just knock on doors." So, I went down on the Pacific Ocean, the homes overlooking the ocean, and starting knocking on doors. And this pretty little blonde came to the door. And I told her what our plight was, and we were just married, and we had to have a place.

And so she said, "Well, my husband is a Marine pilot, too, and he's out in the Pacific. And I have this nice house here all by myself, and I hadn't thought about it, but I will rent you a room and a bath." And so, her name was Berkley, Ruth Berkley. And we're still friends after all these years, and they were a little bit older than Annette and me. And they retired up in the Washington, D.C. area, and we still contact them when we're up in that area. And so, but that was my first canvassing, knocking on doors, you see, to get that place to live, and it worked.

Long: Yeah. I guess ties to a later political career that you had.

O'Keefe: Right. Yeah. And starting an insurance company, you see, that I built from the ground up.

Long: Well, tell me about the insurance company, first. About the event that happened first. And could you just tell me about your vocational and business interests.

O'Keefe: Right. Yeah. Well, after the war, I came back; of course, I didn't have a college degree, and my dad was operating the funeral home here in Biloxi, across the street from the church, and I was working part-time, on the weekends in the summertime, going to college. And we had this—

Long: I'm sorry, but which school was that you were attending?

O'Keefe: I was at Loyola University that I enrolled in right after the war.

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: Um-hm. Immediately after; September of 1945.

Long: Now, you had been involved in a business school in New Orleans before.

O'Keefe: That's right. Yeah.

Long: What did you enroll in this time?



O'Keefe: Yeah. In business again, yes. And that's what I eventually got my degree in with a major in accounting.

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: Yeah. So, I was going to insist then that I was going to go to school. Of course, we had the GI bill. I don't know if you're familiar with that. You're younger than I am, but it was a great way to get an education. You know. Because you got a monthly check and some money also for tuition and books, not enough to survive, but help.

Long: Right. I graduated with the GI bill. (Laughter.)

O'Keefe: Yeah. OK. Well, you're a lot younger than I am.

Long: Yes, it was the Korean Conflict.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Right. I see. So, this old, black man had worked with my dad over in Ocean Springs, and about the time we were losing the house over there and earlier—in fact, my father told him one day, he said—Willie McInnis was his name—he said, "Willie," he said, "I can't pay you anymore." He said, "I'm going to have to let you go. I just don't have the money to pay you."

Willie said, "Nobody else can pay me, either." (Laughter.) He said, "I'll work, and when you can pay me, pay me." And he stayed with us all along.

Long: Did he have a family?

O'Keefe: No. He and his wife never had any children. They sure didn't. But he said, "I'll just work for nothing. Nobody in town can pay me, either." And I mean, it was tough times. You know. And so, my dad and Willie were real close and confided in each other. You know. And Willie told me, he says, "Your daddy don't think much about you going to college. You know."

I said, "I know that."

And he said, "Yeah." He says, "Your dad told me. He said, 'You know, Jerry is going to get so much education, he ain't never going to want to go to work!'" (Laughter.) But that really wasn't it, but during that time my father was an extremely conservative business person, and had a lot of difficulties, a lot of problems, healthwise and all of that. And when I was in college, I started visiting these funeral homes in New Orleans and meeting the guys that owned them and managed them, and what they were doing, and they were all in the insurance business, and I determined, well, I was going to go in the insurance business as an adjunct to the funeral home. And we had what they called burial associations in Mississippi and Louisiana, but it wasn't a fully funded life insurance company. You know.

Long: Was that like a benevolent—

O'Keefe: Right. Similar to that. And really kind of a not-for-profit thing. So, I used that as a base to start Gulf National Life Insurance Company, and I'd go door to door knocking on the doors and hiring people as it grew and so it's become the biggest in Mississippi, and we operate where funeral homes are our agents, and we get them a Certificate of Authority. They sell the policies and so, we work with about 200



funeral homes in Mississippi, about half of them owned by black people and half of them owned by white people, and it's the biggest of its kind of insurance company in Mississippi, all of which I've given to my children, now. They own the company, and I've given all my stock away.

Long: But it was founded in what year?

O'Keefe: It was founded in 1958. Um-hm. And so, these people in New Orleans knew me. And my father and Mr. Bradford were contemporaries and competitors, and they wouldn't even speak to each other. And my dad's health was real bad. And I wanted to go off to embalming school when I finished college. And my dad said, "I don't want you to do that." He said, "I need you to come over here now, as soon as you finish college." And he said, "You know, if it's so bad that you've got to do everything, including the embalming, well, then, you'd better find something else to do."

And so, I didn't go to embalming school, but I had visited all these funeral homes in New Orleans and had the insurance in my mind. And so, I started that company ten years after college.

Long: Yeah. Was it co-founded? How did you—

O'Keefe: No, I did it by myself. Uh-huh.

Long: Is that right?

O'Keefe: Yeah. And I borrowed the money, but at that time it only took \$25,000. And you can't start a company for that, now. It takes a million and a half, now, just to start, but at that time—and then I gradually increased the net worth of the company so that we could sell larger policies. You know.

Long: So, this was mostly a kind of debit.

O'Keefe: That's correct. That's right.

Long: What kind of insurance did you sell, then?

O'Keefe: Well, that was primarily \$500 and \$1000 to be used for final expenses. You know. Um-hm. And that's the core of the business, today.

Long: A burial policy.

O'Keefe: Right. That's right.

Long: Like they used to call it. What did they call that policy? A term life? Or—

O'Keefe: Well, we usually sell whole life, fifteen-year or twenty pay; ten, fifteen, or twenty pay. Um-hm.

Long: And then the old practice was that the—

O'Keefe: You'd have to pay the premiums forever. (Laughter.) You know. You never could pay it up, and you were prohibited in law by giving a paid-up certificate because there were no assets to back it up. It



was just money coming in; money going out. No reserves. You see. Very unstable and unscientific and not actuarially sound.

Long: Right. And your agents would go around, what? Weekly or monthly?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Monthly. Um-hm.

Long: Monthly. For what? To collect?

O'Keefe: That's right. Yeah. Um-hm. A lot of it on mail pay. You know. And a lot came into the office, and we bought small little companies around the state, you know, and consolidated them. And some eighteen or twenty companies we bought. And so the insurance company became a lot larger than the funeral business. Yeah. And the funeral home business—I bought Mr. Bradford out, and that was a momentous occasion. That was in 1958, also.

Long: OK. Now, your father was alive until what year?

O'Keefe: He died in '54, four years earlier. And had he been alive, he never would have allowed me to do that. It just wouldn't have worked. (Laughter.) I don't think he could have handled that.

Long: What was his attitude toward the success of your insurance venture?

O'Keefe: His attitude? Well, of course, he died in '54, and I didn't really start the company till '58, although I was building up the old burial association during his lifetime. Yeah. And, but he was very, very conservative. If he hadn't had a stroke and died, I probably wouldn't have stayed in the business because his—and I was, you know, having children all the time.

Long: Um-hm. Now, tell me about your mother and her attitude toward enterprise.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, my mother never did pay any attention, really, to the economic or the business side of the business. She really didn't. She lived to be 101 years old, and my dad was fifty-seven when he had a stroke. And then he died two years later at fifty-nine.

Long: I see. Who administered the moral training? What we call character training?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, both of them. Both of them were involved in that. They sure were. They were both very devout Roman Catholics, you know, [they] believed in Catholic education and Catholic morals and principles. And so, that's a strong background in our family. My wife was raised in a very strong Catholic family, too. And so, about half of our children are—they're all baptized Catholics, but a lot of them don't practice, you know, the faith, anymore. Yeah.

Long: Because of?

O'Keefe: Well, I don't know. I guess they just drifted away for one reason or another. You know. And my son, Jim, who's my second oldest son; he wants to be a minister, himself. In fact, right now, he has a small congregation down in Long Beach, and that's always been his ambition. He went off to embalming school, and he worked in the funeral home for a while. And I thought he would stay there, but he was not satisfied with it. He went on to other things.



Long: Well, what did your other children choose to do in life?

O'Keefe: Well, my oldest daughter, she was going to Catholic school. And she and, I think, four of her classmates, all went into the religious, to become nuns. And she stayed in there for about six years, and then got out and got married and eventually became a very successful attorney. And her husband is a Ph.D., and they raised two boys. And then my son Jody, he runs the O'Keefe Foundation in Ocean Springs which is a charitable foundation that we established about three years ago.

Long: It's named for?

O'Keefe: Well, really, my wife Annette and I funded it with about six million dollars, and we gave away about four million more, and that was a result of a big lawsuit that we were involved in which I'll tell you about. And so, the children have all done various and sundry things. And of course, I ran for the Mississippi legislature in 1959, and I defeated an incumbent. And undertakers have a little unfair advantage of other people, you know, (laughter) because so many people know the undertaker in a small community. He may not know everybody, but everybody knows him because people will be there at a funeral, and he'll be directing the funeral, and one will say to the other, "Who is that over there? That man there"

"Well, that's the undertaker. That's O'Keefe." And I defeated an incumbent attorney who later became the mayor and later became a judge and is now retired and he and I are friends. But I just outworked him. You know. And my background was going door to door knocking on doors, and I knew how to do that.

Long: Canvassing. (Laughter.) You knew how to canvass.

O'Keefe: And that's what I did. And I canvassed for O'Keefe. You know. And then all my kids, you know—and I'd have a little green and white cap for them to wear. And we'd go to these rallies, and they'd all have little handouts, you know, little campaign cards. And when I'd finish giving my speech, I'd go out in the audience. They'd say, "Oh. O'Keefe, don't give us another one. We already have six." (Laughter.)

Long: Don't oversell us.

O'Keefe: Yeah. (Laughter.) Your kids have already given me six of them.

Long: Right. Tell me, what party, and what was the party politic of that time?

O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, at that time, everybody ran as a Democrat. There just weren't any Republicans in the legislature at all. There were not any black people in the legislature, then.

Long: And this was what year, now?

O'Keefe: That was the famous era of Ross Barnett, 1960 to '64. And of course, I didn't support him; he was a bad racist. And so, I wasn't a very popular figure with the administration because I didn't support him. But I made a good mark in the legislature. I was voted the outstanding freshman legislator, and I did well; made a lot of friends, and represented this county well, I think. And I was the only representative at that time, and that's when we got reapportioned. And that's when the first black people were elected. And so, the next four years, we had seven representatives from this county, and so, it wasn't appropriate for



me to run, again. I had ten children when I ran, and four years later, I had thirteen. (Laughter.) And it just wasn't the thing for me to and try to run the business, too. You know.

Long: But you talk about reapportionment. That followed the census? Was that—

O'Keefe: Yes. Uh-huh.

Long: Uh-huh. And was there a loss or gain in population at that time?

O'Keefe: I don't know. What it was was a shift in population. In other words, the legislature was apportioned after the white South got control of Mississippi, again, after Reconstruction. So, they wrote a new constitution in 1890, and they gerrymandered where the representatives would come from to make sure that they would have continuing control. And that continued on from 1890 until 1964.

Long: Did they also have an all-white primary during those early times?

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. Um-hm. Um-hm.

Long: So, what did that mean in a place where you just had Democrats?

O'Keefe: Well, the Democratic nomination was tantamount to election. In other words, there wasn't a general election.

Long: Right.

O'Keefe: Yeah. And that constitution prevailed. It's still there; it's been amended a bunch of times, and it was supposed to do that every ten years, but from 1890 to 1964, it was never done, but then the courts forced it, you see, during those four years that I was there, and then they reapportioned it. So, it was—

Long: Now, what gave political power to those who were disenfranchised during that time? How did they assume?

O'Keefe: Well, it was, of course, the Civil Rights Act that Lyndon Johnson got in right after the assassination of Kennedy. You know. That was a turning point in the South. No question. You know.

Long: And that happened after what incident in the South? Was that—

O'Keefe: Well, that was just the thrust that Lyndon Johnson went in office—

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: Yeah. And he was a lot more effective than Kennedy in making things happen, and he passed that Voting Rights Act of 1965, was it?

Long: Yes, it was '65. After Selma.



O'Keefe: Yeah. And of course, a lot of counties, now, like Harrison County, black people registered and voted for many, many years.

Long: But, was there a poll tax?

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. There was a poll tax.

Long: Tell me about that.

O'Keefe: I think it was two dollars a year, and that eliminated the—that Civil Rights Act. And an interesting thing, thinking about that. The postmaster was appointed in Ocean Springs during Reconstruction—I think it was in the mid 1880s—who was a black man, and at that time it was required that they get a bond. And the man couldn't get the bond, and my grandpa stepped up to the table and got that bond for him. Put up some property or some money to secure that bond. See? So, I've always been proud of that. Yeah. And that's going way back.

Long: Yeah. So, we're talking about a changing politics that you were involved in, that you came in. Can you tell me, what was your first involvement and was that going to the legislature?

O'Keefe: Yes.

Long: OK. And then what after that?

O'Keefe: Well, I was out for a while and I didn't run, again. Then my son Jerry Jr. ran four years later. Now, I got out in 1964. He ran in '68, and he was elected and served eight years, and then I ran for mayor and was elected and served two terms, and I didn't run, again.

Long: That was in 19—

O'Keefe: Seventy-three to eighty-one. Um-hm.

Long: So, you know this town. You know the pulse.

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. I surely—

Long: Of Biloxi.

O'Keefe: Uh-huh. I really do.

Long: What's it really like?

O'Keefe: Biloxi is really a pretty doggone neat town, and it's got a lot of culture here and a lot of character that no other town in Mississippi has because of the religious background, the foreign background that's here that it makes it different from other towns in Mississippi.

Long: When you say foreign, could you describe those ethnic—



O'Keefe: Yeah. Well, of course, the French founded it, you know, in 1699, and then the Spanish had a strong influence here for a number of years. So, you had a lot of French and Spanish background. Then, around the 1900s the Yugoslavs started coming in here, coming in from Baltimore and coming here direct from Europe to work in the seafood industries.

Long: Dalmation[?] Shore fishermen.

O'Keefe: And all of that gave it a flavor that you don't find, for instance, up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. You know.

Long: Right.

O'Keefe: And it's so different from Gulfport, our abutting city down here to the west. The influence of Gulfport comes from the railroad, and there wasn't anything much there until they built the Illinois Central Railroads. You see. And that influence came down through the state of Mississippi where Biloxi was already here, and Ocean Springs was already here. And—

Long: And the basis for their economy was what, here?

O'Keefe: Was the seafood business. And of course, like the wealthy people in New Orleans who wanted to send their son off to a good education, would send them to the Jesuits in Springhill College in Mobile. Before there was a college in New Orleans, they had the Jesuits in Mobile at Spring Hill. And they would send them over on the schooners, and they would stop in Ocean Springs and then go on to Mobile, and they'd stay over there the whole school year, you know, and then maybe come back in the summertime. But the east / west influence and the Catholic influence is in Biloxi, Pass Christian; where the north / south influence is in Gulfport. It's a whole different way of life and a whole different social structure and attitudes over there.

Long: Yeah. So, the railroad was like a river, bringing in north / south cultures.

O'Keefe: Yeah. And strangely enough, you know the Irish were the blacks in the '80s and '90s in America. They were the slaves that built the railroads. And you know, they used to say that three Irishmen are worth one slave. And you know, when they had to put people up, they'd rather go out and pay three Irishmen than they would put up one good slave because a slave knew about agriculture and animal husbandry and all of those things where the Irish didn't have those skills. And so, they were laborers, you know, the Irish were, and they built—and they're really the predominant nationality in Mississippi is the Irish. Yeah. From building the railroads.

Long: And then also yeomen, yeomen farmers, they had also worked as farmers.

O'Keefe: Well, they got off the railroads. (Laughter.) But that's what brought them there was the railroad. You know.

Long: The railroad.

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah.



Long: Also, at the Smithsonian, we talk about Gandy[?] dancing. And what is this Gandy dancing? I didn't understand that Irishmen had worked on the railroads to that extent.

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah.

Long: They used to jump up on the old Gandy shovel, and they'd call it Gandy—they were railroad maintenance.

O'Keefe: Yeah. They used to have a rhythm. Did you ever see that done, when they were moving the rails?

Long: No. Tell me about it. How would it sound?

O'Keefe: Uh-huh. Mmmm. (Humming.) You know, they'd kind of hum and sing because they all had to push that rail at the same time to move it. You know. And I don't know just how they did it, but, I remember hearing some of it.

Long: Right. Now, did any of your family ever do that kind of physical labor, that you can think of when you look back?

O'Keefe: No. No. They sure didn't.

Long: Mostly entrepreneurial.

O'Keefe: Yeah. That's right. Yeah. My uncle, he was a sugar chemist. That's what he learned over at Tulane, and he went down to Cuba, and then later his younger brother went down there, some years later and died down there. He [dived] into some shallow water and broke his neck. He was a young man, thirty-two years old, I believe. And so, he came back to Biloxi, and of course, my dad was well known, being an undertaker, as I mentioned to you earlier the prominence that the undertaker has in a small community. And so my dad and others really got my uncle John elected mayor. And then he only served two years and resigned to become appointed adjutant general under Hugh White who was a governor from '36 to '40.

Long: Tell me about the advent to the economy of the air base, of the military base.

O'Keefe: Oh, that was tremendous. You know. This area was so poor, you know, as I mentioned. We were starving to death in Ocean Springs. We had to move to Biloxi, and my dad came over here and bought a home, a residence, across the street from the Catholic church. And he bought that the month before I was born. He bought that in June of 1923 and started the undertaking business in Biloxi, and then we moved over, see, about thirteen years later. Twelve or thirteen years later. And Biloxi was only a little bit better off than Ocean Springs. Both communities were very, very destitute, but when the military came, and they started coming in here in late '39, early '40, I believe, you know, the streets were just swarming with military people and activity everywhere. And the economy really picked up. It really did. In fact, I've told people that other than the opening of Keesler Field, the biggest economic thing [that] ever happened is the casino industry here that's really brought a lot of prosperity. Yeah. But I was laughing earlier when you were saying how long this took because after many, many years, I had been invited out to speak to a group of pilots out at Keesler Field, and I told them as I started my talk, I said, "You know," I said, "I've been out of the military fifty years, and nobody's ever asked me to give a speech about my



military career. And then when I got started," I said, "I got so happy listening to myself that I talked for almost an hour." (Laughter.) It was funny.

Long: Yeah. But that's important, being an ace, but not just being an ace, but I guess serving your country was important.

O'Keefe: Yeah. That was really a defining moment in my life, I believe, and I think that led to me being interested in civil rights. And the way that happened was there were two pilots in the squadron who were Jewish. One was named Tonnelson and one was named Edelson. And there were no black people in the squadron at all, pilots or noncommissioned people. And it just never occurred to me, you know; it was just something I never did think about. So, when I started at Loyola, and about half the student body there were just coming out of high school. Well, I was three years older. I'd been three years in the military, you see, plus that year at Soulè; so, I was maybe four years older than half of them. And there were a lot of other veterans coming in at the same time, but they wanted me to get active in this business fraternity. It wasn't a social fraternity, and I said, "Well, tell me more about it, and let me read your documents." They wanted me to come in it because they wanted me to run for president of it. And I read, you know, where they didn't allow Jewish people, and they didn't allow black people. They had to be Caucasians, and that was the first awakening to me. "Well, damn!" You know. And so I told them I didn't want to be a member; I didn't want to be an officer until they changed that, and they did change it, and then I was the president of PKE for a year, I guess. Yeah. But that was my first time I ever thought about, you know, maybe I have to have some responsibility. And I'd never thought about it before, really. It just never had come to the front, you know, where it was right in front of me that way. Yeah.

Long: You mentioned a person earlier who had worked without pay for your—

O'Keefe: Yeah. For my dad.

Long: For your dad, and who probably later—tell me about the relationship at a later time.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Willie McInnis worked for my dad all those years while I was growing up in Ocean Springs, and then continued to work for him over in Biloxi. He would commute from Ocean Springs over here every day. And then my dad died.

(End of tape one, side two. The interview continues on tape two, side one. There is a brief area of repetition which occurred in migrating the interview from DAT format to cassette tapes.)

O'Keefe: —for him over in Biloxi. He would commute from Ocean Springs over here every day. And then my dad died. And he continued working for me, and a good man. You know. And he got diabetes and kind of went blind. Really untreated diabetes. Yeah. Willie McInnis. Yeah. And his brother-in-law also worked with us. And his name is Henry D. Seymour, and H.D. we called him. And H.D.'s daughter runs a very successful restaurant in Ocean Springs called Jocelyn's Restaurant. So, of course, I knew her as a child. And I knew her daddy and her mama and her Uncle Willie. You know. And so, we eat there a lot, and she's a good person. I don't know if you've been over there or not.

Long: No. I'll go. (Laughter.)

O'Keefe: But you need to go. You need to go. (Laughter.)



Long: It sounds like it might be good food. Yeah. OK. I'm not going to take up much more time. What I do want to do though is to kind of have you in brief—I guess I'll do it in this way. You talked about—you mentioned the fact that you were going to say something about a suit, and I (inaudible) want to add that.

O'Keefe: Yeah. OK. Well, I'll tell you about that. Let me tell you about the Ku Klux Klan and my activities with them. They were going to put on a parade here when I was the mayor. And I didn't learn of it till after a permit had been issued to them to use the, what at that time we called the International Plaza which is the old Coast Guard base right at the foot of the bridge just before you go to Ocean Springs. And they had given him a permit, this Klan group. And so, I told them they had to revoke the permit. And they said, well, they were going to go in there anyway. And they did, and I had them arrested. See. And we went through court and all of that. And of course, there wasn't anything we could charge them with, but then I was out of town, and they painted the city hall with spray paint, you know, that "O'Keefe is a nigger lover," and all of that.

But another interesting thing, back before that, when the schools were ordered integrated by the courts that separate was not equal, there was a group that started here, like all over the country, a lot of similar Klan's groups. And this one, they put pamphlets all over the community, and it was called the National Heritage Crusade. And I got one of the pamphlets, and it was a terrible thing, inflammatory, you know, and against the blacks. And I mean, it was awful. And they were going to have a meeting in the Biloxi community center, down on the beach. So, I went to the mayor and asked him to—this was in about '55—asked him to cancel that meeting. And he said, well, he couldn't do that, and he just couldn't face up to it. You know. And so, I got a group of my friends, seven of them, to meet at my home. And I said, "We want to infiltrate this meeting, like the communists." And I said, "I don't want any of you sitting together. You spread out in the audience." And I said, "After their opening remarks, then I'm going to make a speech." And I said, "I'm going to end up my speech by saying the word 'Gulfport.'" And I wanted to say, "Gulfport," because there was great animosity and jealousy and competitiveness between the two communities. And they had such bad fights that they wouldn't let Gulfport and Biloxi play football for about thirty years because of the seriousness of the riots that would follow. You know. So, Bob Rice, after whom the place in Gulfport is named, had run for mayor of Gulfport and been defeated, and he was going to be the president of the National Heritage Crusade. So, I gave a talk, you know, that we don't—"I fought the war, and many of my friends did to prevent this kind of thing. And we don't want this in our town. And," I said, "we're not going to allow it." And I said, "This organization is defunct before it even begins," I said, "because in this great land with 200 million people, the only person that they can get to head this campaign for the National Heritage Crusade is a disappointed politician from Gulfport." You know. And when I said, ["Gulfport,"] they all booed. You know. And all of my guys stood up, and the whole audience stood up. And we walked out. Everybody walked out, not just me and my seven, but the whole audience. It didn't leave anybody there but the four organizers, Bob Rice, a guy by the name of Carvin, Judge John Sekul who was the sitting city judge at the time, and one other person; I've forgotten who the fourth one was. (Laughter.) They were the only ones left. So, that was the end of the National Heritage Crusade. (Laughter.)

Long: That's an interesting turn of events.

O'Keefe: Yeah. (Laughter.) So, I was going to tell you, we got into involved with the Lowen[?] Group. The Lowen Group is a consolidator of funeral homes. They didn't originate the idea. A man by the name of Bob Waldrip originated the idea in Houston, and called [it] Service Corporation International, and they started buying up funeral homes. And then the Lowen Group out of Canada started doing the same thing. And they didn't buy any in Mississippi until they bought our competitor in Gulfport; that was the first one, Riemann Funeral Homes, our very serious competitor. And we had, as I mentioned earlier, bought a number of small insurance companies in the state of Mississippi, and one of them was the Wright and



Ferguson Insurance Company in Jackson, Mississippi. And they owned, the family did, the Wright and Ferguson Funeral Home. So, when we bought the insurance company, we wanted a continuing relationship with the funeral home. And we had that by contract, you see, for seventeen years. And it had been reaffirmed on two other occasions after the initial contract. And Wright and Ferguson sold their funeral home business to the Lowen Group, and they promptly put their own insurance company in direct competition with us. So, I called them in Canada and wrote them and said, "Look, you're stepping on my toes, and" I said, "we don't have to do that." I said, "We don't have to fight." I said, "You know. We can accommodate each other." And I said, "I'd like to come up to Canada and sit down with you." And I did so, and we discussed it.

And they said, "No. We can't agree with you. If you'll sell us your funeral homes, then we'll work out something on the insurance company."

I said, "Well, I didn't come up here to sell." You know. And, "I'm not going to sell." So, I went back home and continued prodding them to honor our contract, and they wouldn't do it. So, I sued them. And then they proposed a settlement that we agreed to and signed it, a fifty-nine-page document. And they were going to sell us the insurance company that they had bought from Riemann in Gulfport. We were going to sell them two funeral homes, and they were going to go out of the insurance business. That wasn't their thing; their thing was funeral home ownership. So, that was fine. All the parameters, and we just had to have it appraised, the properties, by independents. And it went on for more than a year, and they would never finalize it. So, we went before the judge in Jackson, and we said, "How about appointing an arbitrator? Let's get this thing settled." And, it wasn't that big a deal. You know. Maybe a two or three million dollar payment, one way or the other, would have settled the whole thing. And, no, they didn't want an arbitrator.

So the judge said, "Why don't y'all meet one more time to see if you can do it?" So, I went to their national headquarters for the United States; [it] was in Kentucky, Covington, Kentucky, right across the river from Louisville. So, I went up there and met with them, and we couldn't do it. They just wouldn't agree. They were determined not to agree. So, we amended our suit and just went for damages. And it went on for years, about five years. And it finally, they didn't think it would ever go to trial.

Lowen told my attorney, said, "O'Keefe will go broke before he ever gets me to court." And at that time I had developed a chain, myself, of seven funeral homes, and I had to sell four of them—no, eight funeral homes, and I had to sell four of them to keep the lawsuit going—but it did finally go. And then the jury went out and awarded us 500 million dollars. (Laughter.) And we settled it for about 120 million, something like that, of which we got 55 percent before taxes and that was when we started the O'Keefe Foundation.

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: Yeah.

Long: But you had suffered damage in that you had to sell your assets in order to continue.

O'Keefe: Yeah. We did. Yeah, and it was a long protracted fight, and now the company has since gone bankrupt. They just went crazy after that. They had gone out and buying funeral homes that they shouldn't have bought and paying too much money for them, you know, just to prove how big they were. You know.



Long: So that accounts in part for your recent philanthropy.

O'Keefe: Yes.

Long: Since 19—

O'Keefe: Yeah. In the last three or four years.

Long: I see.

O'Keefe: Yeah. That's when we started this O'Keefe Charitable Foundation; we made some substantial gifts, and then I, you know, set up all my children. And the way we set that Foundation up; we had put six million in there initially, and now, when I die, they'll get about two million more. And we gave our children stock and money, and when each one of those thirteen children die, each one of them will leave money to the O'Keefe Foundation. They don't have a choice on that. Then we have 37 grandchildren; when each one of them die, they each have a charitable remainder trust, which will go to the O'Keefe Foundation. So, for the next hundred years, it'll be getting more money. You see. And of course, we're insisting that 15 percent of the philanthropy goes to African-American causes and 15 percent go to Roman Catholic Church and its agencies or schools, and the rest at the discretion of the board. You know. So, I don't know what else to tell you. I get interested in hearing myself talk. You know. And then I talk too long. (Laughter.)

Long: I enjoyed several phases, especially your aviation. We looked at your early childhood, your aviation career, and then especially coming back to the local politics. I appreciate this interview. It goes into the Mississippi Oral History Program.

O'Keefe: Oh, yeah. Good.

Long: And you'll get a copy as in the case of (inaudible).

O'Keefe: Yeah. Um-hm.

Long: And then you'll get a tape that they'll send you either from here at Bridges or from The University of Southern Mississippi. And I appreciate this interview. It was a good trip on this St. Patrick's Day across a cultural landscape.

O'Keefe: Yeah. Yeah. That's right. (Laughter.) That's right.

Long: Thank you so much.

O'Keefe: OK. Thank you. It was a pleasure to meet you.

(End of the interview.)