

Interview with Jack Sonntag Jr., February 16, 1994

[There are four people in the room and each speaks at least once: The interviewer, Alison; the interviewee, Jack; Alison's husband, Dick (referred to by Jack as Rich); and Jack's wife, Betsy.]

Alison: This is February 16, 1994. I am speaking with Jack Sonntag Jr. Okay, tell me about growing up in politics.

Jack: Well, I didn't really grow up in politics because Dad didn't get into politics until probably I was about fourteen.

Alison: What do you remember about that first campaign?

Jack: Didn't like it. If I tried hard enough I could probably remember the name of the fellow he ran against. There were phone calls. I don't know if obscene is the right word, but certainly derogatory toward Dad. I can remember Dad having to replace signs. Signs piled up in somebodies yard. They'd call up and tell us -- just a nasty kind of campaign and atmosphere. I can remember after Dad was elected, well, even during the campaign, how many nights Dad was out. He was gone it seemed like almost every night. So I was never enamored of politics in those teen-age years.

Alison: Now, that was before the days of answering machines. Did you end up taking any of these calls?

Jack: Oh, I think we all did... I think Mom probably took as many as anyone, because of being home. So, that's what I remember [about] the early years in politics. And, of course, I was a teenager at the time, so I wasn't too in tune to the detail of the political arena. I was more interested in sports and going out and putting up signs was not my favorite thing to do.

Alison: Did you do a lot of that?

Jack: We did some. I don't know. Dad always seemed to have so many people that would help.

Alison: Do any door belling?

Jack: I don't remember doing that. No, I don't even know if Dad did in those days. I don't think door belling was a way to campaign in those days.

Alison: That's interesting. Tell me about growing up. Tell me about the kind of childhood that you had and things you remember.

Jack: Childhood -- probably normal. A lot of athletics. The trauma, as I remember, was having to move. When you leave the sixth grade and you're going to go to the unknown junior high, at least you're going to go with all your friends. But not in this case, we moved out to the west end, 12th and Meyers. I had to go to a different junior high than all my friends. That's a traumatic thing when you're a seventh grader.

Alison: Did you feel your parents were strict with you?

Jack: Oh, yeah. I think so. In fact I'm sure I didn't get my drivers license at sixteen and when I did I couldn't drive Mom's car anyway.

Dick: None of us could.

Jack: No, I recall that. I had to buy an old 1946 Pontiac for \$50.00 to get to and from college when I was going to UPS.

Alison: Did your dad come watch you in sports? Was that something he enjoyed watching you do?

Jack: I think he did when he could. Mom never did. I think even to this day she would be too nervous to go watch even grandsons, or anybody, participate in anything -- not just sports, but even a drama or any kind of thing.

Alison: Worried too much, maybe about how you're doing?

Jack: I suppose.

Alison: Now, both Brian and Dick said that they felt a special responsibility growing up as the son of a politician, because they didn't want to do anything to hurt him politically.

Jack: Oh, absolutely. I'll never forget the one time when I let my license tabs expire, when he was the county auditor and got picked up. I was going to college and you cut a lot of corners. Boy, of course, according to Dad that could be a headline in the newspaper if anyone got a hold of [the information that I had been picked up]. But we got over that somehow.

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[To Dick] You do remember that don't you. Boy, you didn't want to ever get in trouble.

Dick: I did a lot of the bad stuff. You didn't. You were busy playing baseball. I heard that lecture frequently. You may have heard it once or twice.

Jack: Absolutely, if you did anything wrong it was certainly going to make the newspaper. In those days it may have. Nowadays, it wouldn't make this newspaper.

Dick: We have a newspaper?

[Laughter]

Jack: That was when we had a local newspaper.

Alison: Tell me a little bit about your dad.

Jack: I always remember two things that Dad impressed upon me. One was how hard it was to get a job, and the second one was, if you do get a job, you better be able to hold it. You better be the best worker there. In fact people used to tell me as I was getting out of high school, "Hey your dad knows a lot of people. He can get you a job." I went to him and asked him if he couldn't help me get a job. I was going to go to college and I was going to pay my own way. I knew that he wanted me to get a job. He was always telling me to get a job. Before he helped me get a job, which he eventually did, he made me go down on the tide flats and spend two whole Saturdays applying at every mill and every Westcoast grocery, everyplace. [I was] filling out applications, trying to get an interview. [He wanted] to show me how hard it was to get a job.

Alison: Did that make an impression on you.

Jack: Oh, yeah, because the second part then, once he did help me get a job -- That impressed me so much, how hard it was to get a job, that I wasn't going to lose the job no matter what it took. He helped me get on the road crew. I think I made an impression on the guys out there because I had to. I got hired back there without Dad's help several years after that.

That [experience] will always stay with me. That [work ethic] came from Dad. I don't think a kid feels that way, especially if someone helps him get a job. I don't think you realize [how hard it is to get a job]. You probably would think it was pretty easy if your dad walked you into a job, but Dad didn't do that.

Alison: He probably did you a big favor.

Jack: Yes, and the first day on the job, the Sunday night before I was to start, I tore the ligaments in my ankle playing baseball. I went to work and I couldn't get my boot on. You couldn't tell Mom [if you had been injured]. You probably could have told Dad, except, in this case, I was reporting to work for the first time and he'd helped me get this job. I had to go. The supervisor took one look at me out there and brought me home. So that was some trauma there. I was off work at the very start. I think for two weeks I couldn't go back.

Of course, that meant, according to Mom, there'd be no more baseball. [The injury] was baseball's fault. And, "why does a kid have to play baseball?" At that particular time, she probably had a point. I ended up getting to work there most of the summer.

Alison: What a trauma. You must have thought, "I am not going to tell Dad I can't go to work."

Jack: Oh, yeah, but when you snap an ankle and the more you're on it the worse it gets. It just kept getting bigger and bigger. I was secretly treating it at night at Ranko's [family friends] house before I came home. In those days the coroner was our family doctor, and for every injury you put heat on it. That's what he had me do, after we went to him with this. He had us put hot water packs on it, and that just increased the swelling. Of course, any kid knows that now. You put ice on [an injury]. I don't think we ever did put ice on [the ankle].

Alison: So, you paid your own way through college by working in the summers.

Jack: Uh huh, and working during school too. I always had one job. Sometimes I got some help from the team I was on. I

got a partial scholarship. A lot of times I worked two jobs. When I went to Seattle Pacific, I almost always had two jobs.

Alison: That's tough.

Jack: But in those days, Alison, you could make a wage that could get you through college. Now, kids can't do that. The wage didn't keep up with the tuition.

Betsy: Like one [job] was houseboy, so he'd get room and board.

Jack: That was about the best job you could have in college, because your biggest expense was room and board, and I lived in the basement of a sorority house for two years. [I] did the dishes, emptied garbage cans and did all the chores. There were two of us who lived there and we had about four other fraternity guys who came in and helped at each meal and they'd get their meals free. We got our meals free and I got to live there. That was a big expense [saved]. And having the job right there [was important]. I didn't have to go anywhere to sell shoes or pump gas or anything. And I think we got twenty-five dollars a month besides. I remember buying a pair of cords down on the Ave. That was kind of big-doin's for me. In those days you could go to school in jeans or cords, it didn't matter. You just wanted to get the diploma and get out of there, at least I did.

Alison: This was at Seattle Pacific?

Jack: Uh huh.

Alison: Is that where you eventually graduated?

Jack: Uh huh. Two years at Olympic and two years at Seattle Pacific.

Alison: Olympic on the Peninsula?

Jack: Uh huh.

Alison: Okay, let me rephrase this next question a little bit. Did you ever think about becoming an elected official? Was that ever something you even considered doing?

Jack: I don't think so. As close as I ever came was running for student body president at Olympic College. That's a lot different, I think, than trying to be an elected official. Even after that experience I still don't think ...

Dick: You flirted with [running for] county commissioner a little bit.

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Jack: Who talked to me about that? That's not Stortini and those guys, was it?

Dick: Yeah, if I remember right.

Jack: Somebody did because of the name familiarity, [but] I had no background. I wouldn't [have been] an appropriate candidate.

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Alison: So, becoming a school teacher -- is that what you were always aiming at when you started into college?

Jack: I was probably like a lot of freshman. I had spend two years in the Marines. I had probably only been in the Marines two or three hours when I decided I didn't want to be a Marine

forever. I wanted to do something else. [The decision to go into] teaching didn't come right away. It came after meeting a couple of teachers, maybe one in high school [and] in ... the junior college and then my advisor at Seattle Pacific... And it dovetailed nicely with coaching. If you wanted to be a coach, you had to be a teacher. I guess I never really thought about being a coach. I just wanted to be a teacher.

Alison: Because you had teachers that you felt made a difference in your life.

Jack: Yes, just working with young people [is] a great privilege. I still feel that way, it's a privilege. The responsibility is enormous, but I'd do it the same way. I'd do it all over again. I'd just probably leave out the Marines.

[Laughter]

Alison: Why did you go into the Marines?

Jack: Well, I thought it was time for me to leave home and I tried UPS [the University of Puget Sound] for a semester and wasn't doing well there. You kind of got the feeling that maybe when you hit eighteen you were supposed to do something else -- move out or go to college or something, and I wasn't doing either. I was just there, I guess. I thought maybe the folks wanted me to find another place, and rightly so. ... And when you join the Marines you probably think you've got to prove something, too. You don't join the Army like a normal citizen... So, when you look back on it, I must have thought, "Well, I'm not doing very well. I'll show somebody [and] make it in the Marine corps."

Alison: So, it wasn't your favorite experience.

Jack: I'm sure it was a great experience for me. I know it was. It was just at the right time to go out and become totally involved in a discipline for two years and then to be sent overseas for a year. It was the right thing to do at that time.

Alison: It must have been hard on your Mom.

Jack: It was. I didn't know it would be at the time. Rich probably knows more about that, but that's Mom ... I can remember my dad driving me down to the recruiting depot on Broadway and dropping me off and we just shook hands. He said "Good luck." He did come through and visit down in San Diego. I'd been gone about six months. It was sure good to see him.

Alison: Do you think it was hard for your dad to express emotion, to let people know how he felt?

Jack: Yeah, I would think so, especially to us.

Alison: I get the feeling he was really proud of his sons, but didn't say that to them too often.

Jack: That's probably a good observation. I'm not so sure that isn't the rule of a lot of dad's toward sons. That might be more difficult for dads to show than moms.

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Alison: Okay, growing up, how did it feel to be a boy here? What kind of a place was Tacoma as you grew up.

Jack: Well, I didn't know about any other place at the time, so I thought it was pretty good.

Alison: Very different from today.

Jack: I wouldn't want to be a kid growing up in Tacoma now. I'm glad my kids are as old as they are. Tacoma was a different place ... years ago.

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[A question about the political power structure]

Jack: I thought, in years ago, that county politics revolved around the county commissioners. I think that they were pretty powerful. I thought in the days that Dad was County Auditor that he almost answered to them. And most of the officials answered to the three commissioners. That would have been who, in my impression, was in control during Dad's time. That, of course, would have been before city manager type of government, county executive, just three commissioners with the whole of Pierce County divided into three areas. I don't know if Dad fit into the power structure at all. If he did, he wasn't in the top echelon of that certainly....

We always had a strong Democratic state, county at least, and Dad used to say that in local government you don't need politics. You shouldn't have to declare one [party] or the other. I think that [philosophy] was really evident in the friends and support that he always had, and Brian probably has and Rich would too. Just a real diverse backing of people, even though Dad used to say that you [had] better run on the Democratic ticket if you want to win in Pierce County.

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It would bother [Dad] that people could only see either Republican or Democrat. He used to say that things are not black or white, they're gray and ... he didn't have a lot of patience for the person on either end. He used to say that the person who pulls all the levers for Republican is the same as the person who pulls all the levers for Democrat -- picks a lot of losers.

Alison: ... Would you consider him a flexible person?

Jack: I think politically, absolutely.

Alison: Personally?

[Laughter]

Jack: I think growing up, probably the least flexible person in your life is your dad.... Probably not personally. There's a question here [about] when the structure may have changed. I think the change came in the ... seventies when that racketeering investigation opened up a lot of sore spots and some personalities. I think since then we've probably done a complete turn around....

Alison: Okay, number nine. This was one I was suggested to ask. As the head of the family, how have you felt about your brothers being in politics all these years?

Jack: Oh, I'm pleased with [it]. I'm proud of them. I think they've done well. The comments that I get -- of course Rich on the school board now. I'm [asked] if I'm related. "Are you related to Rich?" "Oh, yeah, I'm his brother." "Geez, I really like what he's doing." So, I kind of get the glory even though I don't have to go to the battlefield. Rich goes to the battlefield. And the same with Brian. No question, they have a genuine concern for people, for the people they represent. I think that's why they win.

Alison: Gosh, you'd like to think so wouldn't you.

Jack: I suppose many years ago, any of us could have been carried somewhat by Dad's name, but Dad's been gone twenty-five years, so it's not Dad's name anymore. It's Brian and Rich. I'm

really pleased with what they've done.

Alison: That's great. Never wish they'd shut up and sit down?

Jack: Oh, no. And, back to an earlier question, I was probably afraid of politics, too, because of that earlier experience with Dad -- and some of the things that even Rich and Brian have run into. You are so vulnerable out there, as they well know. And Dad did too. You can be on the end of an innuendo or accusation with no backing, no way to substantiate it and people throw it out there -- I think people get desperate to get these positions. Some of these positions pay pretty well. Maybe that's it. They would win at all costs. I've seen it with all of the family. I don't know if I could be thick skinned [enough] to take some of those accusations and falsehoods directed at the family.

Alison: I know what you're saying. It's so scary, because it's one thing to hear it on the telephone, it's another to read it on the front page.

Jack: And it isn't just our family. I'm more sensitive to that, but you read about some of the mud-slinging on some of the other races, the name-calling, the viciousness of campaigns, you wonder why people get in the middle of that.

Alison: Makes you wonder why are we electing either one of these bozos.

Side two of tape

Alison: We've pretty much covered all the questions. Is there anything else you think I should know, or anyone else you think I should talk to.

Jack: I think you should talk to Clay Huntington, if you want to know about Dad. He and Dad were good friends. Clay was really an active citizen in so many areas. He knew Dad from other aspects, not just the political. Dad was probably the first Chairman of the Tacoma boosters when it first got the pro team in Tacoma. That was probably his main love, baseball. And I think it is for Brian, too. Dad took Brian to watch the San Francisco Giants play, and a lot of that came from way back with Clay Huntington.

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[Conversation about Jack Sr.'s love of baseball and the fact that he coached junior league ball]

Alison: Were you around when he coached?

Jack: He coached the first team I played on when I was twelve years old. In fact that was the one when we played the team from the South End for the city championship, at Franklin Park, under the lights -- big doins'. ...

Alison: Was he a good coach?

Jack: Oh, yeah, Dad really knew -- baseball was probably his first love and that was probably his best coaching sport.

Alison: Did he coach other sports.

Jack: I don't think so. He coached semi-pro baseball when he was younger. They had quite a city league here, which was probably the equivalent of a minor league baseball team -- awfully good players. From time to time, I run into someone who remembers him from playing or coaching.

Alison: Was he a good player.

Jack: I think so. I never saw Dad play other than play catch, and we sure did a lot of that.

Alison: Did he ever play with all three of you? Were you ever close enough in age that he could play with the three of you together?

Dick: Never.

Jack: I don't think so. We were so darn spread out. I don't remember Brian.

[Laughter]

Dick: You shared a bedroom and never saw each other.

Jack: I can hardly remember him. He's fifteen years younger.

Dick: When you came home from the corps, he came to one of us and said, "Is that my brother."

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Dick: Dad never played any sport with me and he never played any sport with Brian other than catch.

Jack: He used to go watch Brian pitch. I remember that because I was coaching at Foss when Brian was at Stadium and then he transferred to Wilson in his senior year. There were a couple of years there, junior/senior years, that I would go from Foss High School and see him play once in a while and Dad would be there. Dad probably saw Brian play more than any of us and probably enjoyed that a lot -- watching Brian pitch. He probably

hoped we would all become pro baseball players, like all dad's. He [must have] realized Rich and I weren't going to do it, but maybe Brian was the last chance. I remember Dad used to go watch him quite a bit.

Alison: That's cool that you went over there, too, as a high school coach.

Jack: Well, a couple of times they played right at Heidelberg [which is adjacent to Foss High School] and I wasn't coaching baseball. I coached football and a little basketball, and this was the Spring.

[Extraneous conversation]