

“I longed to run for political office and be elected.”



Richard Soash

Part Two

By Toni Lockhart

For the seventeenth issue of *Three Wire Winter*, I, Toni Lockhart, submitted the first segment of a two-part story on Senator Richard Soash. It included information about his childhood experiences growing up in Routt County and his life as a rancher. Last May, as well as just recently, I visited the Colorado State Capital and spent some time with the senator to find out more about his political career. I asked

him what event in his life influenced him into going into politics.

“The specific event that prompted me to get into politics happened when I was about twenty-five. I attended a political meeting held for Colorado Congressman Wayne Aspenall, of the fourth district from Palisade, Colorado. Why, ever since I was a little boy, he was a great hero of mine, as well as of others on the western slope. I hadn’t been out of college long when I attended

one of his meetings at the El Rancho Cafe.

"We had a nice dinner, and everyone stayed around and listened to the congressman give his speech. This was followed by a question and answer session, and I wanted to ask him a question, the kind you read in farmer's magazines. It was one that I was just prompted to ask; the type he had heard a thousand times. When I got up to ask the question, I couldn't get it out. I had this terrible stage fright, and, for me, it was agonizing. It seemed to go on for hours. Finally, Congressman Aspenall, who is probably the ultimate congressman as far as politicians I've met, helped me ask the question and then answered it himself. I was so embarrassed afterwards that I thought to myself, 'God, Soash, here you are with these folks you've known all your life, a college educated man, and you stand up to ask a question and you can't do it.'

"I decided then that I would learn to be a public speaker. In order to speak publically, I would practice speeches while I was in the field driving my tractor, and I would pretend the clods were people. However, when I would begin to give a speech to my tractor, why, there wasn't much to discuss without talking about politics. Therefore, to have things to say, I began reading and boning up on the subject. This resulted in me becoming more interested in politics and also more impressed with my abilities to speak. Eventually, I became involved in party politics as a Democrat and became a precinct committeeman.

"I longed to run for public office, be elected, be down in the halls of the state legislature to speak there. It took a while, but eventually I accomplished that. Two times I ran for office and lost. In 1972, I ran against a six-term state senator and lost by three hundred votes out of thirty-two thousand. The next time I ran, it was against Representative Wad Hinman, and, at that time, he'd been in office for eight years, and I lost by two hundred votes out of eighteen thousand. But the third time I ran, it was an even race and I won with approximately 56 percent of the votes. In the last election, I received about 65 percent of the votes."

Next, I asked the senator what his actual duties included.

"My responsibilities in Denver are to attend the legislative sessions. They usually last between five and five and a half months out of the year. During this period, I have to be in Denver five days a week. On a typical day, in the morning, we debate on the different bills and vote on them. This is called 'floor work'. In the last eight years, I've lost only one bill on the senate floor. It was a couple of years ago, and I shouldn't have lost that. I have, however, passed more bills than

any other Colorado Democrat, and that is something I am very proud of and feel that has been my most important contribution. In the afternoon, there are committee meetings. Up until this year, I served on three committees.

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"Some may ask why it usually seems as though it takes so long to pass a bill, but it doesn't always take so long. Sometimes it can be done quickly. It depends on the nature of the bill and its significance. The bills about state-wide issues are the ones that take a long time, but it is with good reason. If it constitutes a major change in the government, all angles need to be considered. There are many ramifications from major changes that affect all kinds of people, so we ought to take our time and let everyone have his say. If we act hastily, we would do things that tend not to be as beneficial as we might think; therefore, the major issues are thought out before acted upon.

"We receive a 'princely' reimbursement of around \$14,000 a year for services, plus we get \$40 per day per diem, while actually in Denver. Even at that, it's costly to maintain a separate residence, and it's also difficult to maintain a homelife because my family remains in Steamboat while I'm in Denver five days a week. It's hard to discipline the kids over the phone, and I'd like to be there to give them advice on little things that can come up in the course of a week.

"I travel between 30,000 and 40,000 miles a year, at least that's how many miles I put on my car. With the coming election, I'll probably go to 50,000 or 60,000. A car usually lasts me three years maximum. There's just no way to keep them in one piece for longer than that. During the time when the legislature is in session, I get paid for a trip to Denver, once a week at twenty cents a mile, but that is only in effect during the session, or if I have to make a special trip for a committee meeting. If I have to travel to my district for some reason, there is no reimbursement for that. For instance, if my constituents in Pitkin County call and ask me to speak to them, the state doesn't reimburse me for that.

"Like I said previously, I have passed more

bills that any other Democrat during the last years. For the large part, I think it is because I get along with people and can be reasonable with them. I don't ever give up a vote on an issue that is important to this region. I feel I have to be honest with people and understand them and most likely, they will return the favor, thus gaining mutual trust. Let me say that I do not find my job difficult, and probably the hardest part about it is finding the time and money to travel around my district in the manner I think is necessary. Even though it is the most difficult, it is the most important.

"Another important thing I do is keep in contact with my constituents, especially if one has a problem with the state government. One time a lady who is a widow working for the extension service in Summit County called. She said she was upset because the Colorado Department of Revenue had written her and said she owed additional taxes in the amount of fifty dollars. She was confident she had paid it, and she wanted me to check into it. We found out that there was a clerical error, and the state owed her about two hundred dollars. If you can help out directly with a problem concerning the state government, it is a more important function than passing bills and carrying a debate on the floor.

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"In the next election, there will be a number of issues we'll be looking at. One that is important to me, and one that I'll be working on, is the mine safety issue. So far, I've introduced three bills on the subject. My district is the leading coal mining area of the state and, it's an alarming thing, but since 1977, the total number of federal coal mine inspectors has gone from twenty-nine to twelve. Over the same period of time, the joint budget committee has cut back funding for mine safety inspection. As a result, the lost time accident ratio (which is measured by the number of accidents that cause workers to lose time per 200,000 man hours of work) has increased tremendously. At the present time, we have the worst lost time accident ratio in the area, and it is double the national average. In 1981, we led the nation in the number of fatalities. We had twenty-two deaths in the coal mines of Colorado which is greater than any other state even though we only produce a small portion of the nation's coal. Therefore, I am going to rewrite those statutes which I have worked on every year since I've been a senator. We are also going to introduce a separate bill, one for underground coal mine safety and one for surface coal mines.

"As far as the entire western slope goes, I think the most important issue that we are going to have to deal with is water storage. The problem we've gotten into with water storage is that in order to protect our water allocation under the Colorado River compact and the International Treaty with Mexico, we need to build some storage projects. We passed bonding bills in 1977 and 1978 that would enable us to build these storage projects (in Colorado), and we would have completed those projects if the economy had remained stable. Since we need industrial partners in these projects to pay for the bonds, and because their participation is lacking due to the economic down-furry, we have to go back to where we started and find a new



source of funding. That is the most important Western Slope issue and probably the most important state-wide issue. Beyond that, we're going to have to deal with sites for the disposal of hazardous materials. That's a difficult issue to address, and something the senate has been trying to do for the past five or six years. We are going to have to face up to it; we just can't go out and dispose of those kinds of waste materials without proper preparation.

"My opinion of the present and future economic situation? I think that, generally, businesses will rebound eventually. I don't, of course, have a crystal ball, but I would suspect that it is going to be a long process, and we can look for hard times to continue for another year or year-and-a-half. We need to remember that all the natural resources are available in Routt County and Northwestern Colorado and at some point, those energy sources are going to be developed. Because of that, I think the long term outlook for this section of the state is good. The overall unemployment rates has plateaued at about 8 percent, which is high for Colorado. Since Colorado is one of the developing states, the economy has the ability to expand (in contrast to the midwestern states who must depend on industry). Hopefully, we can bring in some highly technological industry to this area as we have the transportation and the natural resources that are necessary, along with the heavy industry (power plants and coal mines) already here. I feel it could be important to us to supplement our natural resources with this high technology. On top of that, we have a strong tourism industry that will continue to develop as long as we are careful to maintain a reasonable environment.

"For the large part, I think my success is because I get along with people and can be reasonable with them."

"Statewide and nationally, however, I think we will see a lot of changes. For example, in 1977, we passed a bill, the Kadiecek amendment, which I voted for, that consisted of limiting the increase of state spending. Because of this amendment, we've done a good job of budgeting. We've held our expenditures in line, and we really haven't created any new pet projects. When we begin to cut the budget this year, the thing that will make it painful is the fact that we're going to be cutting into the meat of some very important programs. We don't have a lot of superfluous things we can

cut out and that's going to be difficult. We may have to cut into school finance, and that is not going to please the teachers, students, or the parents of this state. That is only an example, I don't know if that will happen. However, it's a good possibility because about two-thirds of all the money we spend goes toward education, so if we have to make any substantial cuts, there is no way to avoid education."

In the upcoming election, Senator Soash plans to run for a U.S. congressional seat. He explains: "On February 2nd, 1984 Congressman Ray Kogovsek announced he would not seek reelection. I decided at that time that I would seek the Democratic nomination for congress from the third district. This has long been an ambition of mine, and I feel I have an excellent opportunity to win the district and serve in the Federal Congress.



SOASH'S DISTRICT (No. 8)

- Garfield County (Glenwood Springs and Rifle)
- Rio Blanco County
- Moffat County (Craig)
- Routt County (Steamboat, Hayden, Oak Creek)
- Jackson County (Walden)
- Grand County (Kremmling)
- Larimer County (Estes Park)

I would like to express my thank to Senator Soash for taking time out to speak with me. His intelligence, style, and sense of humor made this story a pleasure.