

Interview with Morris Lanning

Interviewed by Ray Larson for the Heritage Education Commission

Interviewed on April 2, 1986

Morris Lanning - ML

Ray Larson - RL

RL: This interview is with Morris Lanning, who has served as mayor of Moorhead from January 1, 1980, until the present time and is currently mayor of Moorhead. This interview is being held at Moorhead State University AV Center in the recording studio on April 2, 1986. The interviewer is Ray Larson, representing the Heritage Education Commission.

Morris, would you give us your personal background, your name, address, age, birthplace, parents' name, nationality, things like that?

ML: I'm Morrie Lanning and I live at 2018 South 3rd Street in Moorhead, [I] have lived at that address since 1974. Prior to that, I lived at a number of different addresses in Moorhead. I'm 41 years of age. I was born on August 27, 1944 in Portland, Oregon. My family was out there during World War II. My father's name is Morris J. Lanning, so I'm not quite a junior; I'm a Morris L. My mother is Joan Marie Lanning, and both of them are living in Moorhead. My father's family is Norwegian, and my mother's family is German with a little touch of Dutch, so I'm kind of German-Norwegian, basically. My parents were both born on the farm down in the Renville-Sacred Heart area of Minnesota and that's where both of them grew up. We first moved to Moorhead in 1954 when I was 10 years old. We have spent a little time here. My father was working on the Kragnes elevator at the time putting the tin on, the ironing, as it's called. We left and came back permanently in November of 1956, and so come this November of '86, I will have lived in Moorhead for the past thirty years. We moved around quite a bit when I was growing up. My father was in the construction business building grain elevators, and I went to about 36 different schools in a span of seven years. We've lived as far east as Ohio--a couple of different cities in Ohio--and then a whole slug of towns in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In fact, it's over forty different communities that we lived in prior to finally settling in Moorhead. I graduated from Moorhead High School, and I graduated also from Concordia and earned a masters degree from North Dakota State University in 1968. I graduated from Concordia in 1966, Moorhead High School in 1962, and ever since my graduation from college, I've worked at Concordia in a wide variety of positions. Currently I'm vice-president for Student Affairs and Dean of Students.

RL: Your masters at NDSU was in what, Morrie?

ML: It was in guidance and counseling.

RL: I remember very well your involvement in politics at the Moorhead High School. I believe that was probably the beginning of your interest, wasn't it? Student body president?

ML: Yes, I was. I really got my interest in politics in high school and I can remember a couple of teachers in particular, I think, that piqued my interest in it. Bertha Rustvold is one that kind of got me started with a good, strong interest in it. The first thing I ever really ran for as a candidate was president of the student body at Moorhead High. That was in 1961 and I was elected. I served in 1961-62, and I remember visiting with you many, many times since you were advisor to the student council. It's kind of a special treat for me to be here in this interview when I really got my start in politics with you as an advisor.

RL: While we're on the subject, do you recall what the issues were at that time?

ML: In high school? Yes, I think I can remember a couple of issues. We were wanting, I think, some dancing and some social hour at the noontime period. As I recall, that was an issue that we talked about back then. Students were also very interested in projects like Save the Children Federation drive. I know we spent a lot of time doing that. I really started my interest, I guess, in reorganizing government back in high school. We reorganized our student council and all of that, and that's carried forward to this day. I guess I'm a reorganizer. We've done a lot of that in the city government as well.

RL: Aside from your involvement and your beginnings in Moorhead High School and as president of the student body, when were you involved with local government and politics? Outside of elected office, were you involved like in party politics or anything like that? Would you elaborate on that, please?

ML: My very first involvement in party politics was in 1968 when a faculty member friend of mine, Jim Coomber, talked me into going to the DFL precinct caucuses in hopes of becoming a delegate for Eugene McCarthy to support him for the presidency of the United States. We were able to, in effect, take over that precinct caucus. A lot of people had never been to a precinct caucus before, and we elected all McCarthy supporters to go to the county convention, the DFL convention. I know a lot of the old-time party people were not very happy about all these young upstarts who came in and took over the party. We went to that county convention, but McCarthy supporters did not prevail and Humphrey was victorious in the Clay County delegation. That was my one and only involvement with the Democratic Party. I really didn't do anything in party politics for about four years after that and the next time I cropped up in party politics was working for a Republican candidate for Congress, John Hoven [phoenetic]. I was Clay County chairman for him and that was the first real job, so to speak, I ever had in party politics. I had never attended a Republican caucus, and I was at home cleaning the house when the Clay County Republican Convention was being held, less than a year later in March of '73. I got a call from Hilding Hay and Hilding said, "Would you like to be party chairman?" They were having a difficult time finding anyone to take that job, and I said, "Let me think about it a little bit." I thought about it for about an hour and called back and said, "Sure, why not?" From that point on I've been active in Republican party politics. So that's kind of where I

got started, and I think that involvement also kind of paved the way for my entree into the city government.

RL: You ran for alderman in what year?

ML: I ran for the city council as an alderman in the fall of '73. There was an open seat. Glenn Sjolander had been city council member for a long time and he retired. My opponent in that election was Avis Aronson who had also been a candidate for the state legislature, an unsuccessful one. That was a very active campaign. I ended up winning and first took office serving on the city council in January of 1974.

RL: Do you want to comment on how you came around from the DFL position in '68 to the Republican chairman in '73?

ML: I think like so many young people, you're just sort of feeling your way around. I was very upset about the Vietnam War and things that were happening at that time and that's what really attracted me to Eugene McCarthy. I became disillusioned with him very quickly along the way and felt that I had made a mistake. When you're young I think your political philosophy is really kind of developing and emerging. I found that my philosophy was really more closely aligned with that of the Republican Party and that's where I started to become active.

RL: How many terms did you serve as alderman from the Third Ward?

ML: I was re-elected in 1977 and served two more years. In the middle of that term I ran for mayor and was elected mayor in November of '79. I took office as mayor on January 1 of 1980 and have served in that capacity since.

RL: Who was your opponent or opponents in the mayoralty election?

ML: The first election was kind of an interesting situation. The incumbent at the time was Wayne Ingersoll and I announced in mid-August that I was going to be a candidate. At that point, it was not known what his decision was going to be. Shortly after that, a week or so after I announced, he announced that he was not going to run. But as the campaign got under way another candidate came along, a woman, Connie Rico was her name, who filed on the last day. So there were two of us in the race, but as the campaign wore on, there developed a write-in campaign for Wayne Ingersoll and so really there ended up three of us running. Wayne indicated that he was not actively campaigning. I've never been sure about that, as there was an active campaign on his behalf. He did receive a significant number of write-in votes, but I ended up winning that election with about 61 or 62 percent of the vote, as I recall.

RL: What motivated you to become involved in government and politics?

ML: I guess I was always fascinated with government and politics. My parents were never active in political circles, and yet we talked politics a lot at home. I had teachers, I think,

that got me excited in it, both in high school and in college. But I didn't grow up in a real political family in the sense of being active in party politics or anything. I just always was kind of fascinated with it and there wasn't any particular burning issue that drove me in. I mean, sometimes people run and get elected because there's a burning issue or two that they've got strong feelings about. That didn't bring me to that point. It was something I was interested in, and I've always been the kind of person that likes community service. I saw it as an opportunity to serve my community and do something I was interested in doing.

RL: Did you have any role models, Morris?

ML: There were a lot of people that I certainly looked up to, and it's hard to start mentioning any names. But I think Ray Stordahl was very definitely a major factor in my first running for office. He encouraged me. He was the first person to really encourage me to run for the city council. And I had always looked up to Bill Dosland and the long time that he had served as state senator and the tremendous job that he had done for our district. As a matter of fact, Ray encouraged me at a recognition dinner that I set up and sponsored for Bill Dosland upon his retirement. That was in 1973, in September. I think those two people certainly were people that I looked up to, along with a whole host of others.

RL: How did your occupation help or hinder your involvement in government and politics?

ML: I don't think that it was a hindrance at all. I think it was helpful. I think my work at the college has helped me make contributions to city government. I think my experience at the college has been very much of help to me in my government service. I think the number of people you get to know working at Concordia or at Moorhead State, for that matter, gives you exposure to a lot of people in the community. I think that certainly helps in your community service efforts.

RL: I realize that your term isn't up and you'll serve many more years, but up to this point, were you involved in making any lasting changes in the community and, if so, what are they?

ML: I think that at the top of the list would certainly have to be the complete reorganization of city government. When I was first elected and served on the city council, we had about 23 different department heads reporting directly to the council and mayor. I thought that was an unmanageable situation back then and certainly still feel that way today. What I started to work on right away when I was elected was putting some kind of an organizational structure together that made some sense managerially. Our first phase of that was to reduce the number of department heads to six. There's no way that nine people can supervise effectively 23 department heads. That's not cost effective, it's not efficient in terms of getting things done. You end up with little empires that get built up in city government. We were successful in getting that reduced to six. We got a charter amendment to do that--built the support for it--but all along from the very beginning I had my eye on eventually seeing Moorhead go to a city manager where there's one

administrative person who reported directly to the council and mayor, but we were patient about that. We then reduced it to four and then, fortunately, finally secured approval from the voters in November of 1984 to go to a city manager system. I was particularly pleased with that vote. It was very, very decisive. It was a two-to-one margin in support of it--more than two to one, in fact--and I think that's going to have a very lasting effect on our community. I think we already have seen the fruits of that change in terms of reducing our costs and making our government more responsive and more efficient. I think that this whole thing is what I consider one of the greatest accomplishments that I've been pleased to be a part of.

Another thing I would mention is that I think in the last couple of years, in particular, and over this span of time that I've been mayor, I've been working consciously to change some attitudes in the community. We went through a period of time where Moorhead was really down in the mouth. Moorhead was down on itself. The negative attitudes came out of the crisis in the school system with declining enrollments and the border blues that we were singing because of competitive disadvantages with North Dakota, tax wise and business climate wise. All of those things really weighed very heavily on the community and we were feeling pretty blue as a community. I think, through the efforts of a lot of people, we've been able to change prevailing attitudes in the community. I think today Moorhead has a much more positive, healthy attitude about itself and we've got a renewed spirit, a rekindled spirit. There's more optimism, much less negativism. I don't claim, certainly, all the credit for that or even most of the credit for it, but I think I've had an effect on that and I feel that that's a significant contribution that anyone in a leadership position can make.

We could talk about a whole host of other things that I'm proud of that have happened in recent years. I think the Interpretive Center and that whole effort is certainly a major accomplishment for Moorhead and for our whole area.

RL: That will open, I believe, this summer, right?

ML: Yes, we're opening in June. It's going to be a tremendous tourist attraction and will, I think, bring a lot of people to Moorhead. It's going to be preserving our heritage as an area for many, many, many years. So I'm proud of that. I'm proud of the work that's been done in keeping costs down in government and improving our infrastructure. Moorhead has a very, very, very healthy infrastructure, and by that I mean buildings and utilities and what not that are in good condition. We've kept up our streets for the most part. We've certainly got things that we have to continue doing all the time. We've got an outstanding police and fire service and I think just overall, Moorhead has really first-rate municipal services and utilities. It's been fun for me to be a part of trying to strengthen those services.

RL: On the other side of the coin, here, Morrie, what do you feel was your greatest disappointment or failure? You still have time left to accomplish many things, but up to this point, has there been anything that stands out as a disappointment?

ML: There isn't anything that comes to mind that I would regard as an overwhelming or major kind of a disappointment. Certainly, over these years in government there have been

plenty of disappointments, but I don't regard any of them to be a major kind of disappointment or failure, as far as I'm concerned, in what's happened in city government. I think that one of my disappointments is that we still face a really serious competitive disadvantage with North Dakota, although great progress has been made in that regard through our efforts, through the efforts of the state, and through improving the national economy. That still is a disappointment to me, that we're not able to bring in the kind of economic growth that we'd like to see. It's coming and it's greatly improved from where it was a few years ago, but it still isn't what we'd like to see. I think that some other disappointments I've had have been what I call "community climate" kinds of things. I've never been very fond of gambling, and it's been a disappointment for me to see the increase in gambling activity. I think there have been some problems that are associated with gambling that, frankly, I think some people were naive about before.

RL: In the years that you have left in your present term, is there any issue that stands out as something you'd like to get accomplished?

ML: I think that some of the things we're working on right now that are really important priorities, as far as I'm concerned, is to improve our convention center facilities working with Fargo. There's no way that Moorhead by itself can build a new, big convention center. We should work with Fargo in that regard, and that's what we're doing. Long before I got involved in city government, going way back to my days in college, I can remember feeling how the two communities sort of blew it by not working together on convention facilities so we could attract some things to our community that we hadn't been able to attract because of inadequate facilities. I think that's a major thing as far as I'm concerned. I think what to do after Enterprise Zone program is a major concern to me. The Enterprise Zone program has really helped us in reducing that disparity with Fargo in tax and business climate, but that program isn't going to last forever. At this point, it appears to me that we're going to need to try to sustain it beyond its original seven year life but I'm becoming concerned about the aftermath and what we can do to continue to try to reduce some of that disparity. Economic development continues to be of concern in trying to bring jobs and some economic growth to the community. So those are, I think, key priorities. I feel that our municipal services are in good shape, and those are some of the priorities that I think will help make Moorhead better.

RL: What role did state and national problems, like war, economy, finances, and depression, play in the community during your years? I believe that you were mayor during the recession years, as we've talked.

ML: There's no question about the fact that the national economy was felt here, probably more than it's ever been felt before. We used to think that we were insulated from national recessions because of our strong agricultural economy, but this last recession proved to us, because of economic conditions on the farm, that our insulation isn't always there and we were not as well insulated from that recession as we have been in the past. It really affected us, no question about it, and the ag economy has affected us. But there still has been some insulation there, and I don't think that we're as bad off or have we been as bad off as some other farming areas have been. Our land values never got driven up like they did in

southern Minnesota, as an example. Our farms are basically larger than they are in southern Minnesota, so I don't think we've had it quite as bad as other farming areas have had. But that certainly has affected us. I think the whole state business and tax climate issues over these years has had a really pronounced effect on us, and we're not insulated from that at all. In fact, we're on the front line when it comes to Minnesota's tax climate and business climate compared with North Dakota's. We go from one of the highest tax states in the country to one of the lowest next door. We go to a state that has a business climate that doesn't rank very well nationally in Minnesota to one that ranks very high in North Dakota, and that has had a real effect on Moorhead.

RL: What do you see as the structure during the time that you've been involved in politics, from your days on the council up to now?

ML: I've always felt that Moorhead's power structure is very diffuse and that there is no small group of people that really control things or that really call the shots in the community. There are many strong influences throughout the community on what happens in Moorhead, and the power is not centralized in the hands of a few. The power in this community, I think, is really decentralized and we've seen time and time again where citizens from different sectors of the community have had a very pronounced impact on the community

RL: During the time that you've been in politics here, Morrie, were there people or was there someone in particular that you've called on for advice or support?

[Begin Tape #1, Side 2]

ML: I would have to say that, no, there's no one or two or a handful of people that I have looked to consistently for advice and counsel. I have tried to listen, and I feel I have listened, to voices from a lot of different places. I think that gets back to the comment I made earlier that the power base of the community is really decentralized, and I think that's good. I think that's healthy, and I think it's bad when any community has just basically a handful of people who do call all the shots or some particular interests that prevail always. I think I've tried to listen a lot to what people are saying on the street, and I sure get a lot of people coming up to me or calling me and offering advice or counsel or opinions about various things. People have not been reluctant to do that. I'm sure there are some that are, but I've had a lot of people who--.

RL: I believe you have a citizens' advisory committee, too, don't you?

ML: Yes, yes, we've got over 200 people who serve on various commissions, boards, committees, and what not, so there are a lot of people involved in city government.

RL: What kind of coverages did you get from the media--press, radio, and television--and do you feel that this treatment has been fair?

ML: I feel that we've had very good coverage, and I feel I personally have had very good coverage from the media. I think for the most part they've been very fair. There have been instances where I have felt that things have been done poorly or unfairly, and a couple in particular that I felt were really unfair handling by the media, but for the most part, I feel very good about it. I've often told people that I don't think you can find a city of 30,000 anywhere that has more media coverage and exposure than we have in Moorhead. When you stop to think about it, we are only 30,000, and we cannot support television stations on our own, and a daily newspaper would be certainly marginal on our own. We have benefit of five television stations, three of whom cover us regularly; I mean, cover all our meetings. We have a daily newspaper. We have, I don't know, nine or ten different radio stations, three or four of whom cover us regularly. We have extensive coverage and Moorhead certainly gets its fair share of coverage when it comes to what happens in city government.

RL: Are there any community changes that you've seen or that you've precipitated, other than what you've mentioned before, like maybe some that aren't politically motivated? Any that you've either been happy about or unhappy about?

ML: Again, I guess I'd refer to the change in attitudes that I think has occurred. Moorhead has a good, positive attitude, I think, as a community today much more so than we did five years ago. I really feel good about the current state of affairs in the community. I think Moorhead is really in a very strong position right now. The changes we've seen in the community, I think for the most part, have been very healthy, positive ones. There have been some that I have already alluded to that I have not been particularly happy about. I have not been happy in the past about some of the relaxation of liquor laws that we've undertaken in the community, and the gambling that is now available throughout the community. Some of those things have not particularly pleased me, but I don't feel that they have dramatically changed the climate or living conditions in the community; but they haven't been, in my view, the best influence.

RL: Have you been involved in any other leadership roles in the community, such as church, school, service clubs, and so forth?

ML: I have been active in the Kiwanis over the years. I think that my community involvements outside of those related directly or indirectly to city government have not been too numerous. I've certainly been active in my church, but in terms of leadership roles in community organizations, I really have not had the time to devote to that. I've been involved in a number of things where we've worked with people in a broader area. For example, I helped start the International Coalition for Land and Water Stewardship in the Red River Basin, an organization I think is going to be around forever and have a very positive impact on how we take care of our land and water resources. That's certainly related to what we are doing in city government, but it's not a Moorhead activity, it's a Basin activity. I've also been active in things like the League of Minnesota Cities, serving on the board there, and currently I'm president-elect of the Minnesota Mayors Association, which is another kind of outside involvement. But other than those kinds of things, my time for others has been limited. I've done some work for the Boy Scouts and a few other community activities, but that's been limited.

RL: You'll be president of the Minnesota League of Cities?

ML: I'll be president of the Minnesota Mayors Association starting in November.

RL: Did your family support or discourage your involvement in the community affairs, basically government and politics?

ML: When I first told my wife that I was wanting to run for the city council, she, I think, could have thrown something at me. But she quickly got over that, and I have really enjoyed the support of my family over the years of my involvement. You really can't be involved in something like city government without having good, strong support from your family. You just can't do it because the family has to pay a price in terms of time that you have for your family, and my family has been very supportive and I really couldn't have done what I've done without a supportive family. I just wouldn't have been involved if my family wouldn't have been supportive.

RL: How did you deal with the stress that goes with public or political office? At some time during your term, there must have been some stressful issues or things that probably kept you awake at night.

ML: What's been kind of interesting to me is that my involvement in city government has helped me reduce my stress in my full-time job. I've told people all along that being mayor is my hobby. I have to work for a living and do have a full-time job at Concordia, but I felt that my city responsibilities have given me a perspective on my job and have really helped lower stress there so that I've been able to put things into perspective much better. I find myself not taking some things as seriously as maybe I did before, or getting so engrossed in the problems of day-to-day working in my working environment. The reverse is also true. The fact that I am living in two worlds, so to speak, and working in two worlds has also helped me as far as stress in the city is concerned. It's given me perspective there, too. It's kind of a strange phenomenon that goes on, but you'd think that when you're up to your eyeballs in two worlds like I am that the load would get to be overwhelming and sometimes it does, but for the most part I find that that helps give me perspective and it really does help reduce stress and makes it easier, I think, for me to keep moving.

RL: Would you like to see your children or grandchildren involved in government or politics?

ML: If they have an interest in it I certainly would. I'm a firm believer in community service. I think there are far too few people who want to take the plunge and get involved in politics or government, and I think people ought to. I think we all have a responsibility to serve our communities. It may not always be an elected office but I would hope that my children and grandchildren get involved in some kind of community service and maybe run for some office someday, too.

RL: The next question relates to people who have lost an election. Now, from what I've gathered, you've never lost an election. Is that right?

ML: I've never lost an election to the city council. The only election I've ever lost in my life was when I ran for a student activities commissioner when I was in college, and otherwise I've been fortunate enough to win every other election that I've been a candidate in. I've felt defeat in that instance, but otherwise I've been on the winning side.

RL: Is there anything that you'd do differently in any of the years that you've been in politics, and if so, why?

ML: I can honestly say that I really don't have any major regrets. When I think back on the major kinds of decisions we've had to make and the important things that we've had to do, I don't have any major regrets. That doesn't mean that there haven't been decisions along the way that I might have made differently, knowing what I know now, but it wasn't on anything of any major consequence. There are certainly some mistakes that I've made along the way, but there isn't any one that I would regard as of major consequence or major significance to the community. I look back over the past with fond memories and no regrets. I've always been the kind of person who has never wanted to be younger than I am and I've never wanted to really go back and do something over or live some aspect of my life or some period of my life over. I feel comfortable with where I stand today.

RL: You might have touched on this before, but among the contributions that you have made, is there any one that stands out as what you feel might be your greatest contribution so far in your involvement in Moorhead politics?

ML: There are the kinds of things I've already mentioned about reorganizing government and making government more efficient, more cost effective and more responsive, improving our services, and renewing spirit in the community. Another thing that I think I could mention is that I think the image of a community is important, and we do get a lot of exposure as a city, as I mentioned with news media coverage, and I think that people outside the community have an image of the place and they get that image by glimpses of things they see. I think that the colleges give us a real image. I think certain aspects of our business community give us an image. I think our city government gives us an image. I personally feel good about the image that city government has given to Moorhead. I think people who live outside of Moorhead, people from North Dakota and other parts of Minnesota, have often remarked to me that they feel that Moorhead city government is run professionally and responsibly--that's the image that they have--and they make comments to me that make me proud of the city and way we do business. I think that's important because obviously our lifeblood depends on students coming to school here, it depends on people coming here to do business, to shop and do business in other ways. The image of a community is important and I feel Moorhead and Moorhead city government's contribution to the image has been a positive one and I'm proud of that. There are a whole lot of other things that contribute to that image, as I mentioned, but government certainly is a part of it.

RL: What about the future, Morrie? Are you inspired to any other higher political office or another term as mayor?

ML: I'm just starting this term, and the voters in 1983 approved a four year term for mayor. This will be the first four year term that any major has served in Moorhead. They have all been two year terms throughout our history. Another interesting aspect is that Moorhead has had a history of mayors not serving very long. The vast majority of mayors have only served two years, and right now I have served the second longest period of time of any mayor in Moorhead's history. The only person who has served longer is Ray Stordahl, who served for eight years. If I complete this term, I will have served as mayor of Moorhead for ten years, which would be the longest period of time that anybody had served. In terms of another office, I've had a lot of encouragement over the years to run for some other office, and at some point I would like to do that. I don't have any particular plans or designs in mind. My attitude about that has always been, "I don't want to build my career around political office." I think that kinds of runs against my grain to be considered as a career politician. I think we need citizen politicians. I think we need people in political office that have done a lot of other things in their lives--owned a business or had a professional responsibility somewhere or worked in some other endeavor for a major part of their life. I think we need people like that to serve in government to give government the kinds of perspectives it needs. So I've never had a career planned, so to speak, but at some point I think it would be fun to run for some other office but what it might be I don't know at this point. We'll just have to wait and see.

RL: We sure thank you for your time, Morrie, and we hope that this interview will be of value to future generations.

ML: I appreciate the opportunity, and the only thought I want to leave on the tape is that Moorhead is really a great place in which to live. I can't think of a better place where any of us could live to raise a family and to live our lives. I'm very proud of this community and proud of what this community stands for and of what it's done. I think the future of Moorhead is indeed very bright. Throughout our history I think we've been blessed with many, many people who have made tremendous contributions to the community, and that's why it is the great place it is to live in today. I hope that fifty years from now or one hundred years from now people feel as good about Moorhead as I feel about Moorhead today.

RL: Very good.

[End of Interview]