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An Interview with Mary Lee Leahy

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Illinois Statecraft Oral History project

Interview # ISG-V-L-2008-015

Mary Lee Leahy, a life-long attorney who also served on the 1970 Illinois Constitutional Convention, in the Governor Walker administration as Director of DCFS, and on landmark Supreme Court cases, was interviewed on the dates listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Illinois Statecraft* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: March 25, 2008 Location: Illinois Information Service Studio, Springfield, IL

Date: April 23, 2008 Location: Illinois Information Service Studio, Springfield, IL

Date: May 27, 2008 Location: Illinois Information Service Studio, Springfield, IL

Interview Format: Digital video

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue, Director of Oral History, ALPL

Technical Support (cameraman, etc): Mark Suszko and IL Information Service staff

Transcription by: _____

Edited by: Rozanne Flatt, ALPL Volunteer

Total Pages: 107 Total Time: 1:36 + 1:58 + 1:34 = 5:08 / 5.13 hrs

Session 1: Leahy's early life, Pickering Supreme Court Case & run for Con Con

Session 2: The 1970 IL Constitutional Convention & years with Gov. Walker

Session 3: ERA fight in IL, and landmark Rutan Supreme Court Case

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on June 9, 2008.

The interviews are archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in
Springfield, Illinois.

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Abstract

Mary Lee Leahy, *Illinois Statecraft*, ISG-V-L-2008-015

Biographical Information Overview of Interview: Mary Lee (Cullen) Leahy was born on April 28, 1940 in Chicago Illinois, and grew up in the Rogers Park neighborhood on north-side Chicago in a strong Irish-Catholic family. A very successful debater, she graduated from Loyola University in 1962, studied as a Fulbright scholar at Manchester University, England in 1963, and graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1966, having married Andrew Leahy in 1964. She began her law career with a Chicago law practice, specializing in teacher tenure cases. In 1968 she participated in the defense of the landmark Pickering v. Board of Education Supreme Court case (arguing for a teacher's freedom of speech), helping win the case by a 9-0 decision, and also helped defend protesters at the Democratic Convention in Chicago that same year. In 1970 Leahy served as a delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention, and in 1972 she participated in the effort to unseat Mayor Daley's delegation to the Democratic Convention in Miami in favor of an opposing slate of delegate sponsored by Jesse Jackson and William Singer. In 1973 she was nominated to be Governor Dan Walker's Director of Illinois' Environmental Protection Agency. The legislature rejected her candidacy, but she was later appointed as director of Children and Family Services.

Following Walker's defeat for reelection in 1976, Leahy began a private law practice in Springfield, where she carved out a career representing state and union employees. Most notably, she represented several women (pro-bono) involved in the state's fight to pass the federal Equal Rights Amendment, and in 1990 represented the plaintiffs in *Rutan v. the Republican Party of Illinois* (a political patronage case) before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning a 5-4 decision. She has also successfully represented veterans in protecting their state employment rights.

Topics Covered: Growing up in an Irish catholic family; Chicago, Illinois; Pickering v Board of Education; U.S. Supreme Court; Chief Justice Earl Warren; Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1970; Delegate accreditation fight in 1972 Democratic Convention; Mayor Richard J. Daley; Governor Daniel Walker; Director, Department of Children and Family Services, IL; 1972 gubernatorial campaign; 1976 gubernatorial campaign; Roberta Walker; Victor deGrazia; David Green; Jerome (Jerry) Miller; Major Richard J. Daley; Department of Children and Family Services, IL; Equal Rights Amendment fight in Illinois legislature; *Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois*; U.S. Supreme Court; preferential hiring for veterans;

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