**Interview with Rep. Clarence Cannon (D-MO)**
April 1964

"I live on a farm. I'm a dirt farmer."

Regarding the conference committee squabble: "That was a great big piece of fluff blown up by the newspaper men. Everyday they wrote about this vendetta, this bitterness, this enmity that existed between Carl Hayden [D-AZ] chairman of the Senate [Appropriations] committee and Clarence Cannon chairman of the House committee—between those two octogenarians, they never failed to mention that. There never was a word of truth in it. The fact is that I was in the House when Carl Hayden came here years ago. We were close friends—more than close—all the time we were together in the House. And our friendship continued when he went to the Senate. In all the years we have worked together, there has never been a word spoken in bitterness between us, and no word of criticism except in good humor…When the newspapers were full of it, we would meet and I would slap him on the shoulder and we would joke about it. There wasn't a word of truth in it."

Cannon explained it as a problem of the meeting place, pure and simple. He said the meeting place was "way over at the other end" and was a "custom." He said he did not know how the custom got started. "We meet, of course, when the houses are in session. When the bells would ring for a quorum call the Senators ran out the door, slipped into the elevator, answered to their names and came back. But we were two blocks away from the House. Sometimes we couldn't get back in time to answer to our names. It took us so long that we would have to cancel the conference altogether. And it's very hard to get all the members together again. We suggested to them that we should meet nearer the center of the Capitol to make it easier for the House members… (then he went into the story of how the Senate wanted to preserve the old Senate and Supreme Court chambers). They wanted to put the old Senate chamber in cellophane. They wanted to restore it just as it was. You read Thomas Hart Benton [1782-1858] and he tells of how the galleries were crowded. When you look over there, you'll see that the galleries won't hold more than 20 or 30 people. Well, they wanted all—this money—three million or so. I said, no. The Capitol is a workshop and space is at a premium as it is. The Capitol isn't a museum. We have enough museums all over town commemorating past glories and brave deeds long since forgotten. I suggested that it would be an ideal place to hold conferences. That's what we've done, and it has worked out fine. We never formally agreed on it, but we've just gone ahead and done it…Now if a member of either House has to leave, we can put the item he's interested in to one side and wait till he comes back."

Maybe the proposal to preserve the Senate chamber was what precipitated Cannon in his actions. Maybe he had been thinking about the problem of the conference and it was the proposal for restoration which triggered it off. It would be interesting to see when the proposal for restoration came to a head.

Regarding the leadership: He started in by saying that the Speaker should be an impartial judge, a presiding officer like the British Speaker. He says that was the intention. "He

wasn't supposed to be a dictator. But through the years he accumulated a great deal of power. When Uncle Joe Cannon up there was the Speaker he had so much power that the President had to come up here hat in hand and ask him to pass the legislation. And if the Speaker said no, that was all there was to it. In the election of 1912, the only issue was the power of Speaker Cannon. They went whole hog and stripped him of his power." There followed a long discussion of precisely what they did in 1912.

"The leadership is supposed to carry out the edict of the standing committees. The committees are the governing force, the power in their special fields. We have to adopt a division of labor. No man could be a member of all committees…" But his point was that gradually the leadership assumed more power than this, and he disapproved of their new power. He stressed the power of the leadership to dictate committee selections as particularly annoying to him.

He expressed approval of the Republican system for picking committees. He liked it much better because it gave the leadership less power. It was set up by James R. Mann (R-IL, 1856-1922) whom he repeatedly called "one of the ablest men ever in Congress." "The Speaker can use his influence to dictate the selection of members of the Ways and Means Committee and thereby dictate the selections of all these other committees. Usually he consults with the chairmen of the committees, but not always. When that man from Texas was the Speaker—the man who was here for so long, Sam Rayburn—he would go around to some member and say, 'we'd like to put you on the Ways and Means Committee. But when you come to appoint members to the other committees, we'd like to be able to come around and speak with you. If there's any problem we would like you to listen to what we have to say and so on and so forth.' And the member would say, 'Certainly, Mr. Speaker.' That wouldn't happen under the Republican system of zones. On our side, men are chosen for committees because they are politically acceptable. They don't select people for each committee who have the right talent for that particular committee."

He spoke of people serving an "apprenticeship" on another committee. "And when they have proven themselves, their ability, talent, disposition, they are promoted to the Appropriations Committee. The only way to evaluate a man is by the way he votes. That is his record. What he says on the hustings in his campaign and in his platform are no clue to what he will do when he gets here. That's why you have to watch a man and see how he votes in Congress."

It is very rare that a freshman gets on the Committee. John Taber (R-NY) got it because a New York man was selected for the position and he went to the chairman of the Committee (or the chairman of Ways and Means, I'm not sure) and said "'I won't go on the Committee unless I can have such-and-such a subcommittee.' And the chairman—his Chicagoese showing—said, 'Ze can't have it, ze can't have it.' And the man said, 'I won't go on the Committee.' And the chairman took him off the Committee and gave it to John Taber. That's how John Taber got it in his first year."

"My old and dear friend, John Taber, one of the ablest men who ever sat in the Congress. He promised me he would return this session, and I think he intended to, but his health failed him and he decided he'd had enough. So he retired—unfortunately."

On Committee selection he pointed out again that "Uncle Joe [Cannon] had a plan" when he had to fill a position on the Rivers and Harbors Committee; he would not take a man who had any in his district. When he wanted to put someone on the Interior Committee, he would take someone from the coast.

He began the discussion by talking at some length of how the Europeans laughed when they heard about the American Constitution. How they said it wouldn't work and how "derisive" they were. He pointed out that three things were done which "made our system of government possible and made the Constitution workable." First, "on every hill they established a little red schoolhouse. And for the first time in the history of the world they made public schooling for all people not only possible but compulsory. They made it possible for people to be educated regardless of whether or not they were wealthy, etc." Secondly, they established newspapers in every town so that people could learn what was going on and could practice reading. Thirdly, they established the frank. He sees this as the only way for people to find out how Congressmen stand on the issues so that they could vote intelligently. He thinks the frank showed great foresight. It is a key communications item between the public official and the voter. He admits that TV and the newspapers have made it less necessary. But he defends it vigorously against attacks by the newspapers. He personally sends out to all the people in his district a list of the government publications and a frank envelope, and they send back to him a list of the publications they want, and he sends it to them. He pointed out that all the authoritative pamphlets that are put out by the government should get into the hands of the people. Otherwise they will rot. He still communicates with his district via the frank. He says he makes no more speeches "everyone in my district knows what my position is."

On the conflict with the Senate: "One of the members of the House made some adverse comments about Senate morals. The Senators said that it cast a reflection on all the women and all the secretaries who worked on the Senate side. So they rose in righteous wrath and valorously defended the womanhood of the Senate. But that was just an injudicious remark by one of the more humorously inclined members of the House. He didn't speak for the House. However, the revelations in the Bobby Baker [former secretary to the Senate majority, 1955-1963] case have revealed that everything he said was the truth."

"I remember when Champ Clark [D-MO, 1850-1921] was in Congress. He would come back to the district and travel around to various places and he would tell the people what had happened in Congress that year. Now I go back to the district and they tell me what happened in Congress. Why some of these new Congressmen vote and they don't know what they voted on until they read it in the papers." Apropos of changed communications, about which he talked at great length—it was the theme he kept coming back to—"these newspaper men are great news hawks—they ferret out the ins and outs and pros and cons of everything that happens and their newspaper accounts are usually accurate."

But, relative to the conference committee stalemate he said “newspapermen have to print a story every day. And their object is to attract readers. To do that they must provide either indignation or laughter. So when they get people agitated about something, they have served their purpose.”

“Before we used to keep all the doors in the Capitol open to let the air circulate. When I was sitting in the Speaker’s chair presiding over the committee of the whole I could look down the corridors through the open doors and see Bennett Clark [D-MO] presiding over the Senate. He would raise his arm and wave to me, and I would wave back to him.” “Sometimes I wonder if air conditioning was a boon. Before air conditioning Congress would have to get its business done quickly and adjourn in self defense to escape the heat. Now these southern Congressmen would rather stay up here in their air conditioned offices than go back in the heat to kiss babies with jam on their faces, eat chicken out of a basket and give speeches.” Then he went into the Tuesday – Thursday club and how they slowed things down. “They don’t live here. They just come to town three days a week.” He mentioned the short session from December to March and how they accomplished everything in that short period.

He talked at great length about the parliamentarian job. That’s when he took out his own copy of his book and gave it to me. Men had always brought with them a parliamentarian of their own party. Speaker Champ Clark brought him in in 1912. He talked about the problem of coming to power in that year. “The Republicans laughed and said we Democrats had been out of power so long we couldn’t run the House. And you know they were right. I became parliamentarian. Congressman James Mann (R-IL), one of the ablest men who ever sat in Congress, and a great parliamentary expert kept objecting and objecting and going through the *Journal* and making things difficult for us. I could see that Mann was right. So whenever I could see something controversial coming up, I would slip down and go over to Congressman Mann on the floor and we would talk it over—the ins and outs and pros and cons back and forth. Then when the Speaker made his ruling, Mr. Mann would just sit there and wouldn’t object. It suited him.”

When Frederick H. Gillette (R-MA) became Speaker in 1919, he asked Cannon to stay on. This is because he needed protection against Mann who knew everything. “Mann should have been elected Speaker. He was one of the ablest men ever to sit in the House of Representatives. But he had made too many enemies because of the arbitrariness of some of his actions. So Gillette was elected Speaker. He was known as a playboy—he was a bachelor and didn’t get married until after he was Speaker. Well, there was Mann who knew everything sitting on the floor and Gillette who didn’t know anything sitting in the Speaker’s chair. He needed some protection against Mann. So he came to me and asked if I would be his parliamentarian. I accepted and it was the first time the parliamentarian had not been changed with a change in party.” He noted after this that every parliamentarian except Lehr Fess of Ohio has been subsequently elected a member of Congress.

He talked about collecting the precedents. "[Asher C.] Hinds was the greatest. He wrote his book by copying down the rulings in longhand while the House debated."

He related an incident that led him to collect the precedents. He said one time he went to Mann and was having a conference with him and they decided on a certain ruling. Mann said, "'that's all right with me if the Speaker wants it that way.' I said, 'he does, but the problem is that last week he made just the opposite ruling.'" Cannon decided that he should collect the precedents in order to assist in situations of this sort.

"In the olden days there was not much business before the House. The main subject was the tariff, and they spent most of their time on the floor talking about the tariff. We were not a first-rate world power. About one third of the time was taken up in debating procedure. There were about three men on the Republican side and three men on the Democratic side who knew procedures. No point of procedure was settled before each of them had been heard from. So a lot of time was spent on procedure…this collection of mine is a shortcut and makes all that debate unnecessary. The great domestic and foreign questions take up our time now. We have cut out all the procedural debates and with the help of this book, you can turn to the right page and settle the questions quickly.

Regarding the anti-deficiency bill: "We had to amend it several times. They would find loopholes in it. But we have them tied down now. If they spend more in any one quarter than is allocated for that quarter, we can sent them to the penitentiary. They used to control the situation. They would spend all their money and come up to Congress, throw up their hands and say 'we have to have more money in order to operate.' And Congress would have to appropriate the money. Now they can't do that, and we are in control of the process."

He talked about President Lyndon Johnson and the money for Alaska. Cannon wants money for seed farmers in Missouri. "The President came up here and asked me to put through the bill. I said to him, you've taken care of the cases where there's too much water (Ohio flood). Now you should take care of the cases where there is too little water." (He talked at some length about the pasture land, cattle and the drought, and this is where he pointed out that he was a farmer). What he wanted the President to do was give the farmers seed to plant their pasture land, and he began to say that Edward A. McDermott, Director of the Office of Emergency Planning, called him up the next day, but he stopped and said he didn't want to be quoted and he didn't want to quote the President. This demonstrated considerable respect for the office of the President.

He started the interview by talking about the Committee as being the biggest in the history of Congress, and he spoke of how there had been five men to a subcommittee, almost as if that were the norm—ten subcommittees of five men each. Then he spoke of how Congress enlarged the size of the Committee to fifty to help the Committee to do its work.