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Oral history video aims to preserve Dave Obey's personal take on politics

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Retired congressman Dave Obey is working on an videotaped oral history project that will feature stories of his career. / Daily Herald Media file photo

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WAUSAU — Hours of an oral history video soon will be added to the volume of papers, time and energy retired U.S. Congressman Dave Obey will donate to the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service.

Obey is working with a Madison oral historian in telling his first-person story of growing up in a family of modest means in Wausau, and then entering as a young man first in state politics, then on the federal level. In his 40-plus year career, he was a player in historic events, including the Vietnam War to the federal stimulus package of the Great Recession. He retired from politics in 2010.

Now he's intent on sharing his stories. He has donated 1.8 million pages of the papers he amassed in Washington, D.C., to the Wisconsin Historical Society. He wrote "Raising Hell for Justice," a political memoir. But the oral history project, produced by Anita Hecht of Madison, who has worked as an oral and personal historian since 1995, will offer viewers a more personal insight into Obey's memories.

Hecht has compiled about four hours of footage of interviews with Obey, talking about subjects such as his upbringing, his interactions with Sen. Joe McCarthy and his chairmanship on the House Appropriations Committee during the stimulus package debate.

"I just think it's useful to get this stuff down so that it's preserved and people understand what really went into decisions made by politicians," Obey said. "I like oral history very much because what people say is the first thing that comes to

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mind when they're being interviewed. ... It humanizes politics."

WIPPS is funding the project, and the footage will eventually end up in the institute's collection. It will be part of the David R. Obey Civic Resource Center of WIPPS, slated to open in the fall. That center will be a resource for research and teaching.

Obey said he hopes other state political leaders follow in his footsteps and tell their stories, too. He especially would like to see the living governors of Wisconsin do oral histories of their tenure as the state's leader.

"Tommy Thompson, for instance, I talked to him briefly about it," Obey said. "He was certainly interested."

The project is not intended to convey any particular partisan message, Obey said.

"I think there may be stories to tell that people may be interested in," he said.

Hecht agrees. She has done similar projects, notably on William Proxmire, for the Wisconsin Historical Society.

But she said Obey's personal viewpoint on such a sweeping range of historical events is important to preserve for history.

"He makes politics very personal and accessible," Hecht said. "He (was) able to, with sheer ambition, luck and skill, get in on the ground level of state politics and work his way up. And he did it with great skill, I think, and ethics."

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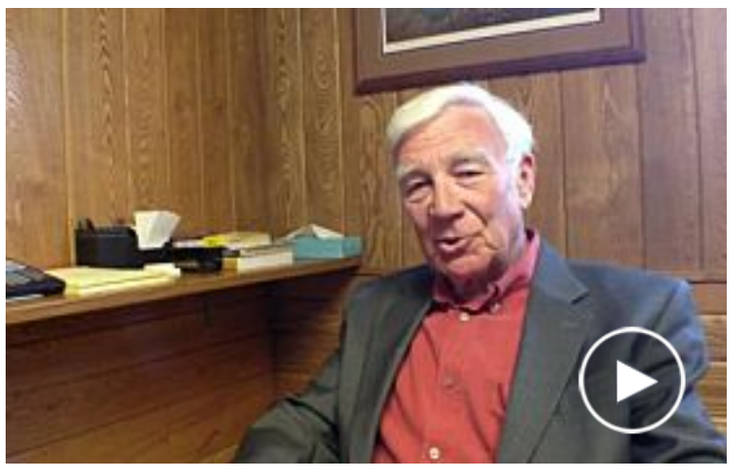

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