

## Introduction

The Regional History Project conducted a dozen interviews with former State Senator Henry J. Mello from June to August, 1998. One of the most prominent and influential legislators in the history of Central California politics, Mello's history narration illuminates the extensive personal archive he donated to UCSC's University Library which documents his political career and the many local and state issues with which he was involved during his time in office.

A Watsonville native, Mello was born in March, 1924, the child of an immigrant Portuguese family from the Azores. He grew up speaking Portuguese and working with his father in the family apple business. He attended Watsonville High School and Hartnell College. He established with his father a family farming business in 1940, founded the Mello Packing Company in 1948, and the Central Industrial Sales Company in 1965.

From the mid-1950s on he was involved in many local charitable and non-profit organizations, worked in Democratic campaigns, and was elected to the Democratic Central Committee. His political career began in 1966 when he was elected to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, where he served until 1974. As a moderate Democrat in what was then a nominally Republican district, he was elected in 1976 to the State Assembly representing the 28th district, where he served until 1980. He was elected to the State Senate in 1980 in which he represented the 15th District and as a freshman senator was appointed to the Senate Finance Committee (1983-1992) and elected Majority Whip (1981-1992), two of the body's most powerful leadership positions. In 1992 he was elected Majority Leader.

Mello was term-limited out of office in December, 1996. Although philosophically opposed to term limits he nonetheless accepted his mandatory retirement gracefully. Upon his retirement one newspaper characterized him as the "great graying grizzly bear of California politics," an old-style Democrat whose career was animated by his bone-deep dedication to his district, and his tireless efforts in behalf of its economic welfare. His former GOP Senator Bill Campbell, described Mello as "the only Democrat in the Senate with any extensive experience as an entrepreneur," one of the last of a dying breed—the citizen legislator. Mello's approach as a Democrat was derived from his mother, an open-hearted, socially liberal Democrat, and his father, a fiscally conservative Republican. Mello said he integrated these two sides

inheritance into his politics. His agenda has included dedication to his constituents' issues such as land preservation, gay rights, an assault on environmental issues. His reputation for "bringing home the bacon" for his district has engendered praise and condemnation; notwithstanding the criticism he always paid scrupulous attention to his constituents' needs, never anything (or any election) for granted, and in a Republican district, never a serious election challenge.

The volume is divided into four sections, including Mello's early life; his experiences in local politics as a member of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors; his election to the State Assembly; and his tenure as State Senator from the fifteenth district.

Mello begins his narration with the story of his early life and family history, with anecdotes about the local Portuguese community, his high school years, and work in his family's apple farming and cold storage business. His initial foray into politics began in 1950 when he was a Democratic voice during the senate campaign between Richard M. Nixon and Helen Gahagan Douglas. His local public service career began when he served as a member of the California Agricultural Advisory Board and as a fire commissioner.

His discussion of his early political career includes his tenure as a member of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and the issues facing that body, including the preservation of agricultural land and related environmental issues, the founding of the UC Santa Cruz campus, town-gown relations, and his relationship with UCSC's founding Chancellor Dean E. McHenry.

Mello served two terms in the State Assembly where he began his legislative involvement in senior issues as chairman of the standing Committee on Agriculture and also became an influential member of the Ways and Means Committee. During his tenure as State Senator, Mello had a singular legislative record, frequently having more bills signed into law than any other senator. His record includes a remarkable legislative record in initiating senior citizens programs, an innovative Prison Arts Program (arts in the prisons), bilingual education, and statewide economic development.

His commentary on his role in obtaining assistance for his district in the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake; in creating a visionary plan for the conversion of Fort Ord; and his efforts in behalf of UC Santa Cruz demonstrate both his consensus-building skills and his great imagination in crafting bills.

During his tenure, Mello carried 727 bills and resolutions, of which 100 were signed by the governor and the remainder integrated into other bills or vetoed. He authored over 120 bills dealing with seniors, including the establishment of the California Senior Legislature; the first programs for Alzheimer's including respite care, adult day health care, and Multiple Senior Services Programs; important changes in laws affecting conservatorship and elder abuse; funding for senior meals programs, and nursing home reform. He has been called the Claude Pepper of California, and is held in high regard by seniors throughout the state for his work in their behalf.

The volume includes Mello's thoughts on the legislative process, the influence of lobbyists, the use of media in campaigns, the culture of the State Senate, and his reflections on the governors with whom he worked. He also discusses his relationship with United Farm Workers founder Cesar Chavez and his views on the relations between farmers and migrant farmworkers.

These interviews were transcribed verbatim and edited for continuity and clarity. Senator Mello graciously provided us with the frontispiece photograph. Copies of this manuscript are in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Special Collections, University of California, Santa Cruz; and the Watsonville Public Library and the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. This manuscript is part of a collection of interviews on the history of Santa Cruz County which have been conducted by the Regional History Project. The Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, head of Collection Planning and University Librarian Allan J. Dyson.

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