

Travels with Charley

by Michael (O.J.) Nelson

This is the first of two stories on the First District candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Man At Work: Keep Thone in Congress," read the billboards along Hwy. 77 between Lincoln and Beatrice.

And Charley Thone was at work last Friday, campaigning for re-election from the First Congressional District. In six days he will face Darrel Berg, the Democratic nominee in the general election.

Before the day was over the Nebraska congressman had delivered a luncheon speech, held a press conference, shook hands on a small town's main street, taped a television interview, appeared on a Beatrice radio station talk show and put in appearances at two banquets.

The billboards could easily be read as the red Chrysler barreled down the road. But Thone didn't take time to look. His wife was driving, which gave him a chance to reread and edit a speech he was to give that noon.

The speech, however, wouldn't be given. The luncheon format would be too casual for a formal address. It would be similar to the open-line radio talk show for which he was now heading.

It was almost time for the show to begin when Thone walked into station KWBE. He exchanged pleasantries and handshakes with members of the managerial and news staffs. Then, after the owner's wife brought him a gigantic glass of milk, he made his



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Congressman Thone . . . on the campaign trail.

way to a sound studio, sat down and took off his coat—exposing a set of leather suspenders.

Drinking milk must be one of his habits. Thone said he has been an avid milk fan for the last 25 years.

"I remember when he was here two years ago," the owner said after the show had begun. "He always wanted milk. Never coffee, just milk."

When the show started, Thone told the audience that the major issue in this campaign was his record: whether he had voted as his constituency wanted.

During the hour-long show he fielded 10 phoned-in questions on the war, the economy and amnesty for draft-dodgers.

He said he favors a speedy end to "the lousy, rotten Vietnam War." If the United States involves itself in any future Vietnam-type conflicts, he said, he would advocate a military victory instead of the current "no-win policy." However, he added, he would respect diplomacy and would oppose the use of nuclear weapons in such a conflict.

He said he is opposed to mass amnesty for Vietnam war draft-dodgers. Each draft-evader's case must be judged individually he said.

"Do you think it's fair or healthy for all of Nebraska's Washington delegation to be from the same political party?" asked one caller.

"Are you a Democrat?" asked the GOP congressman.

"Yes," she replied.

"I thought I detected a bit of partisanship in your question," he said, laughing.

He said he favors a one party delegation. If it were split, he explained, the Democrats would cancel out the Republican's votes and vice versa.

"You get the goddamnedest questions on these call-in programs," he declared after the show. "But it's nice to have people who are concerned and interested in the issues."

More questions were to follow. Thone only made a few opening remarks to the Beatrice Chamber of Commerce's "Meet the Candidates" luncheon. The floor then was turned over to the audience.

Thone seemed well acquainted with many of those present. Although inquiries were written on cards, he correctly guessed questioners' identities several times.

"I'll bet Bill asked this one," he said after scanning the first card. It concerned tax credits for persons paying for their childrens' college education.

A man shouted from a table at the back of the room: "We're not poor enough that we can get money from the government for our kids' education, but we're not rich enough we can write it off our taxes as something else."

Thone told the crowd he's co-sponsoring legislation which would provide tax breaks for college students' parents.

He said he is supporting another piece of legislation which, if passed, would help students. He said he opposes proposed increase in the minimum wage from \$1.60 to \$2.20 an hour. Such an increase, he said would hurt students who might be looking for a summer job.

But if the increase passes, and he said he believes it will, he will continue to fight for a student wage amendment.

"Most of you," he told the businessmen, "can't afford to hire students at \$2.20 an hour. But you

could hire them at a lower price, and I want them hired."

After the luncheon, Thone had to wait for his wife, Ruth, to finish talking with a small group. She seemed to be campaigning as hard as he. "She's the best campaigner in the family," he says.

He met her (he calls her "Ruthie") in 1952 when he was a young attorney investigating Communist infiltration on the NU campus. Ruth then was editor of the *Daily Nebraskan* and had decided to investigate the investigating committee.



She interviewed him in the fall of that year, but she said it was three or four months before he asked her out.

"It took him a while to get the message," she said. They were married in 1954.

But the post-luncheon greetings were not to be the last that afternoon. On the way back to Lincoln there was one more stop: Hallam, population 312.

Mrs. Thone parked the car on the main street. A campaign aide opened the trunk ("This is a rolling campaign headquarters," he said) and grabbed some campaign cards.

Although there is not even a Thone bumper sticker on it, the rolling campaign headquarters description is accurate. The trunk is filled with Styrofoam hats, boxes of bumper stickers, pamphlets, leaflets and other campaign paraphernalia. All trumpet Thone's candidacy.

Ruth took one side of the street and her husband took the other. Like everywhere else he'd been that day, there were handshakes ("Hello, I'm Charley Thone, your congressman.") and hearty laughs mixed with a bit of politics.

One reception was not so friendly. A grocery clerk almost ignored him as he tried to talk with her. One reason might have been her political affiliation: on the door was taped a "Berg for Congress" flyer.

Walking back to the car, Thone said: "An election every two years might be difficult, but it forces you to stay in touch with the people."