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## Carrying Water To The Elephants

It was almost like going back in time, having lunch with Don Eldridge the other day.

When I first met him in 1961, he was a veteran member of the state House of Representatives and operator of an office furniture store in Mount Vernon.

He went on to become speaker of the House for two terms and then a member of the State Liquor Control Board, a position he left last year when his nine years were up. Currently, he's doing public relations work for Puget Power.

But Don Eldridge is a good example of what we oldtimers are talking about when we say the calibre of the Legislature has gone down in the last few years from what it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

Eldridge was smart and he was tough and he was honest. He didn't take advantage of his position for any "perks" he didn't feel entitled to. When the State Patrol came around and offered him a car and driver during his speaker tenure, he declined, saying he felt they were needed on the highways instead.

He also ran the driest speaker's office I've seen. He never allowed a drop of liquor in his office and it wasn't that he was a teetotaler (which he was not). "I just didn't think it was right," he said.

Though he was never one of the inner circle around Gov. Dan Evans, he carried out Evans' programs for him.

"As I look back," he said, "I have always been conservative both fiscally and socially. I had to swallow hard a couple of times over some of Dan's

programs, but I had such a great deal of respect for him. I was never close to him, like some of the others, Joel Pritchard, Slade Gorton, Mary Ellen McCaffree. I was carrying water to the elephants and I was not included on the team. But I enjoyed it and we got through the sessions okay."

Evans rewarded Eldridge with the liquor board appointment and to the surprise of many, the Senate confirmed him. There were a number of Democratic senators who urged that confirmation be withheld, and just let Eldridge serve on the board until after the 1972 election, in the event a Democratic governor was elected. That governor could then name his own person to one of the most sought-after jobs in state government (no other position has a nine-year term).

But Eldridge impressed many when he threw out of the speaker's office some senators who slipped over there and tried to make deals for "yes" votes on his confirmation. He never asked for anything from the Senate and he never offered anything — vote me up or down, he said, but don't leave me hanging.

When his term expired on Jan. 13, 1979, he cleaned out his desk at the board offices but Gov. Dixy Lee Ray asked him to stay on "a few weeks" while she considered his successor. He wound up staying on until he just up and left in May.

As a board member he was as fair and flexible as he was a legislator. Too bad he's no longer in state government. There's a shortage of Dan Eldridges.