

Gerald Behn, Oral History Interview – 2/24/1976
Administrative Information

Creator: Gerald Behn
Interviewer: Bill Hartigan
Date of Interview: February 24, 1976
Place of Interview: McLean, Virginia
Length: 11 pages

Biographical Note

Behn, Secret Service Agent from 1939 to 1967 and Special Agent in Charge of the White House detail from 1961 to 1965, discusses the Secret Service before, during, and after the Kennedy administration, among other issues.

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Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Background prior to joining the Secret Service
2	John F. Kennedy's (JFK) security detail
7	JFK assassination
9	Secret Service protection for people other than the President
10	Behn's positions after White House Secret Service detail

Oral History Interview

With

Gerald Behn

February 24, 1976
McLean, Virginia

By Bill Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: ...the purpose of my visit is to interview Jerry Behn on behalf of the Oral History Department of the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Mr. Behn is a former member of the Secret Service and was Special Agent in Charge of the White House detail, making him head of the detail of men responsible for the safety of the President of the United States and his family. Jerry, just to establish a little background, what was your background before you came into the Secret Service?

BEHN: I had, I was going to say I had just graduated from college, but actually I hadn't graduated. I was taking a 5-year police administration course, and the last year and a half of the five years was with the Michigan State Police. Well that summer--that was the summer of '39--the state legislature--while we were with the state police we were being paid so much a month--knocked that appropriation out, and they weren't going to pay it, so they gave the class I was in our diplomas about two months early. And right after that I got an offer for a job, which I took, with the Secret Service.

HARTIGAN: Your first responsibilities with the Secret Service, of course, were not with the White House detail.

BEHN: No, no, no. I was sworn in Detroit. Actually, I was only in the Detroit field office about two weeks, and I was transferred to Washington field office. I was here about one month, and I was then assigned to the FDR, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] detail down in Charlottesville, Virginia.

HARTIGAN: What year was that?

BEHN: That was still '39. I think I went down in Charlottesville in October of '39.

HARTIGAN: So in other words, you have been working on presidential detail since Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

BEHN: Right. Protective details.

HARTIGAN: When did you first come in contact with President Kennedy and his organization?

BEHN: The day after the 1960 election up in Hyannisport.

HARTIGAN: Were there any special plans that you had to work out or your organization had to work out to fit the specific needs for President Kennedy in order for you to fulfill your duties?

BEHN: Any specific plans? Not any more, I don't think, than we'd have to do for anybody else that had become president.

HARTIGAN: I mean, in terms of their normal activities each president, I'm assuming, that you served under had different likes and dislikes and characteristics and things they did. Did President Kennedy have anything?

BEHN: No, not really.

HARTIGAN: The thought that I had, he probably was one of the most avid swimmers you had, in the ocean, for example.

BEHN: Well, no actually, as I remember now he didn't go swimming in the ocean too damn much. Met him up at Hyannisport; that was November. He didn't go in up there. Down in Palm Beach I think he went in the ocean

[-2 -]

maybe once or twice, as I remember, and the rest of the time was in the pool.

HARTIGAN: What prompted the question, I think you're probably guessing, is the

newspaper reports that mention that the Secret Service had to get skiers when Ford [Gerald R. Ford] became president because he was so active on the ski slopes. That's what really prompted the question. But you didn't have any special problem?

BEHN: No.

HARTIGAN: In a general sense, Jerry, would you describe the responsibilities of the Secret Service White House detail?

BEHN: Well, very simple, Bill, to protect the President to the best of our ability.

HARTIGAN: And his family?

BEHN: And his family, yes. At that time, I'm thinking about the law changes, but at that time, as I remember, it was the President, his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; John F. Kennedy, Jr.], and the Vice-President [Lyndon Baines Johnson] was not included at that time, as I remember.

HARTIGAN: You're right. That didn't come out until after JFK's assassination.

BEHN: Right. Although...

HARTIGAN: I think he could have it by request.

BEHN: Now, wait a minute. Because Johnson had agents with him when the assassination took place. Youngblood [Rufus W. Youngblood] was with Johnson. So I'm not sure now when that law....

HARTIGAN: Well, it's true to the fact the history indicates that he did have a detail with him. I've been wondering if that wasn't the preliminaries to it being mandatory. Wasn't there a period when it was optional? But the fact is he did have a detail with him.

BEHN: He did have a detail with him, and I don't think it was optional. I think it was mandatory, but now I forget when that law went into effect.

HARTIGAN: But, from your point of view, yours was strictly the White House.

[-3 -]

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: Who on the President's staff did you work through, Jerry?

BEHN: Mostly Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], a great majority of the time. As a matter of fact, thinking back, he was our contact. That was it, regardless of who else would contact us about something, we'd always check back with Kenny. He had the final word.

HARTIGAN: In other words, there are many people giving orders, but only...

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: ...only one that could clarify.

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: Did you have any unique problems with the Kennedy organization versus other presidential organizations?

BEHN: No, I wouldn't say so.

HARTIGAN: The structure of them?

BEHN: No.

HARTIGAN: The only one I recall during the changeover in the organization there was a great difference in the ages of the staff from Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] versus the President Kennedy. Did you notice that?

BEHN: I really didn't notice that, Bill, because I don't think as far as we're concerned it made that much difference.

HARTIGAN: No, I know it didn't in terms of your particular function.

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: We noticed it from other queries that were made.

BEHN: Oh, is that right?

HARTIGAN: Yuh, maybe we were so young we didn't know it was showing. Jerry, in terms of some of your experiences in traveling with the President of the

United States--I'm speaking of President Kennedy now--do you have any observations that you'd like to make that would be of interest to one studying the history of the Kennedy administration, the history of President Kennedy himself, and bearing in mind that sometime in the future, the distant future even, these students of history will be looking into our library for this information? So with that thought in mind, are there any observations that you'd like to make in terms of his activities, from your point of view?

BEHN: I don't believe so, Bill. His traveling, as far as you compare it with other presidents, involved practically the same problems as far as we were concerned, probably a little more of it. That's all. He traveled more than Eisenhower. Eisenhower traveled more than Truman [Harry S. Truman]. Truman traveled more than Roosevelt. Johnson probably traveled more than Kennedy. And so on. But the problems I don't think have changed too much. Maybe they are now. I don't know about today. At that time they were the same problems basically. Different locations. That's all.

HARTIGAN: In describing preparations for a president's trip, an interesting point that I ran into, and I never really had the chance to have a discussion about it, was that a president visiting a foreign country still is under the jurisdiction of our Secret Service by law--that the Secret Service cannot absolve themselves from protecting him no matter where they go.

BEHN: True, although they don't have that much power in a foreign country.

HARTIGAN: Well, this is what I thought made an interesting conversation. The diplomacy sometimes that has to be used in carrying out your legal obligations--any interesting stories along those lines?

BEHN: No. At that time most of the foreign countries we went to were very cooperative. They still looked upon it as their responsibility. Naturally, we were in their country. But they were very cooperative as far as we were concerned. We could suggest things. They'd be glad to do it. They might suggest something that we'd overlooked. It was fine with us.

HARTIGAN: There was never any problem though as to...

BEHN: Oh, there was problems, sure. What, hell, you always have problems, but they're always solved.

HARTIGAN: Jerry, as you know and everybody else knows, there's been a series of accusations, for good or

[-5-]

bad, by people, particularly women who have indicated that they have had meetings with the President on any number of occasions--some have gone as high as thirty

and forty times that they've met the President. Would care to comment, starting possibly with Judy [Judith Campbell Exner] out in California, Judy Campbell?

BEHN: Bill, as far as I know, I know I never heard that name while I was down there. And as far as I know, I've never seen the gal. And the same goes for the recent one, Mary...

HARTIGAN: Meyers. [Mary Pinchot Meyer]

BEHN: ...Meyers. Never heard the name, and as far as I know, I never saw the gal around the White House or any place else.

HARTIGAN: Are these situations, from your experience, unusual with presidents?

BEHN: Yeah, they are. As far as I know it's the first time it has ever come up in connection with a president, isn't it? I don't remember anything on, well on Roosevelt, or Truman. Certainly never Truman and Eisenhower, except with that chauffeur over there in Europe...

HARTIGAN: Staff sergeant?

BEHN: Yeah. But, no I never heard of those two gals in my life until it came out in the papers.

HARTIGAN: Isn't that a bit unusual that in a situation like the White House--what I'm getting at--it has got to my attention by various people that it has become somewhat of a joke more than a legitimate charge, because just by virtue of the numbers that it's coming out in.

BEHN: Right. I think that Judy Exner or Campbell...

HARTIGAN: Campbell.

BEHN: ...or whatever it is, is trying to sell a book of fiction probably. And this last story was leaked out by a guy who's what, a mental case or was a mental case.

HARTIGAN: Just to finish up on this recent case, this Meyers girl was supposed to be or is, in matter of fact, the sister of Toni Bradlee [Antoinette Pinchot Bradlee] the former wife of Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] from the *Washington Post*. Would that enlighten or refresh your

[-6-]

mind in terms of seeing her around?

BEHN: I remember seeing Bradlee and his wife. I don't recall it at the White House, but up at Georgetown there in N Street while Kennedy was president-elect they were in and out of the house. And her sister could have been in and out at that time, too, and I probably wouldn't have known her.

HARTIGAN: But the number of occasions--getting back to the White House, because N Street was certainly not under the same type of security that the White House was...

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: So, in terms of the White House, is it reasonable to say that it would be very unlikely that so many occasions could be legitimate as what we're hearing about in recent . . .

BEHN: I'd say that was true.

HARTIGAN: Jerry, you've just reminded me that one of the trips you were not on was the trip to Dallas [Dallas, Texas] the time the President was assassinated. But I'm sure you must have some observations with reference to it and some remarks you might like to make with reference to that awful situation. What, if any, conversation did you have with anybody who was there with reference, from a Secret Service point of view, now--I mean we've got a lot of newspaper reports, some of it garbage and some of it good, but from a hard-nose policeman's point of view, a Secret Service point of view, what observations do you have about that?

BEHN: I'm convinced that the Warren Commission [Earl Warren] report was accurate. As far as I'm concerned, that was it. Oswald [Lee Harvey Oswald] was the one guy that did it, and he had enough skill and enough luck to pull it off successfully.

HARTIGAN: He had to have luck. Well, if you'd call getting caught "being successful."

BEHN: Well, he was successful in the assassination.

HARTIGAN: But, I often recall talking oftentimes with Secret Service people on trips, and it has always been their contention that if anybody had no regard for their own life, that they could attain the success in accomplishing an assassination. Is that an acceptable fact?

[-7 -]

BEHN: True. I accept that. I accept that right today.

HARTIGAN: So there's really no way of total protection of any human being if the person...

BEHN: No, not in this country.

HARTIGAN: I see. How about you give me a little more conversation about that?

BEHN: Well, if you lived in a dictatorship or some place where you could move the President from point X to Y and keep everybody off the streets, then you might have almost 100 percent protection. But here in this country, well the President wants to go out; he wants to see the people; the people want to see him. You know Kenny said, "Protection and politics don't mix." And that's 100 percent true.

HARTIGAN: Did you feel that the President always had that--also that philosophy?

BEHN: Oh, yes. I'm convinced of that.

HARTIGAN: Do you feel that most presidents have that?

BEHN: I think they do.

HARTIGAN: I mean the ones you've had experience with have pretty much understood the risks of being a president in a free country.

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: What about some of these statements that....

BEHN: Gee, Bill. I was just thinking back. I started with Roosevelt. He had an attempt made against him. Truman had an attempt. Eisenhower was the only one that didn't up to Kennedy's time.

HARTIGAN: Do you have any thought as to why that situation....

BEHN: With Eisenhower?

HARTIGAN: Was one more active and more exposed?

BEHN: No.

HARTIGAN: They all pretty much exposed themselves to the public?

[-8-]

BEHN: Oh, yes.

HARTIGAN: With reference to the reports that have been resurrected in regard to the Kennedy--John F. Kennedy--assassination--and of course it is also coming up in Senator Robert Kennedy's [Robert F. Kennedy] assassination--these writers--I don't know if you've had the time or taken the time to read some of the stories, reports and what not that have been resurrected in terms of points of conflict that they bring up versus the Warren report. Do you have any observations on that?

BEHN: You're never going to satisfy everybody, Bill, on something like that. The experts disagree among themselves. Some will be satisfied with an answer; others won't.

HARTIGAN: But what about the situation. Do you think that they've actually dug for some insignificant points to elaborate on in this case that they haven't done in others?

BEHN: Probably, because the President was assassinated, sure.

HARTIGAN: If the same activity took place in other crimes that were committed, both historical and otherwise, would the same results happen? Could they stir up a....

BEHN: Probably. I would think so.

HARTIGAN: Jerry, after the assassination how long did you stay on the White House detail?

BEHN: A little over a year, Bill. I was transferred in January of '65.

HARTIGAN: Under the law or ground rules of Secret Service protection does it extend to anybody beyond the President and Vice-President of the United States and their families?

BEHN: Now it does. Visiting dignitaries. Foreign dignitaries.

HARTIGAN: The question has come up in the news media several times in terms of the security agents that travel with Kissinger [Henry A. Kissinger] who is the secretary of state. Is that done by the Secret Service?

BEHN: Right. It is now. And again, I'm not sure. For

[-9-]

a long time State Department had their own security setup, and they traveled with the secretaries. But Kissinger, I forget when it started with him. Of course I was out of there by then, but I know that agents are with him now, and I think it's a law that the Secret Service protect him.

HARTIGAN: Both domestically and internationally?

BEHN: Right.

HARTIGAN: Are there any other cabinet members that are now being...

BEHN: Not to my knowledge.

HARTIGAN: ...protected by the--Attorney General?

BEHN: No, not to my knowledge.

HARTIGAN: So that the President, Vice-President, and the Secretary of State are covered by Secret Service protection?

BEHN: Uh-huh.

HARTIGAN: Jerry, when you left the White House what was your assignment after that?

BEHN: Golly. Was special agent in charge of a division they called at that time "Special Services," and they still have that now, but it's a different name. And then I was special agent in charge--Golly, I even forget the name of that thing. It was, I think, "Special Investigations," as I recall, which--I'm trying to remember what we did--became involved in investigations and violations of the Gold Act at that time, claims against the Secret Service, like automobile accidents and whatnot over the country.

HARTIGAN: But this was all in the Washington area [Washington, D.C.]?

BEHN: Yeah.

HARTIGAN: Jerry, when did you finally retire from the Secret Service?

BEHN: In January of '67.

HARTIGAN: And I know personally where you went from there because...

[-10-]

BERN: Right.

HARTIGAN ...I hired you. You came over to the Post Office [Post Office Department] and did a very, very fine job over there, and you were still there when I resigned. Before we close, Jerry, do you happen to be in possession of any memorabilia that may be of interest to the library that you'd be willing to donate to them as it regards JFK now?

BERN: Gee, I don't think so, Bill. Of course I've got pictures, but I imagine they've got pictures running up their kazoo up there. What about one or two of the torpedo boats which they have, no doubt?

HARTIGAN: Anything written, in terms of interest, that the President may have scribbled on the back of an envelope or....

BERN: Nope, I don't have a thing like that.

HARTIGAN: Well, if you happen to come across any that you feel as though you'd like to donate to the library, if you'd just let us know, we'd be very happy...

BEHN: Okay.

HARTIGAN: ...to put it amongst the others that are on display for posterity. Jerry, thank you very much for the time you've given us. And this is Bill Hartigan closing an interview with Jerry Behn, former head of the White House detail for the Secret Service during the Kennedy administration. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-11-]

Gerald Behn Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Bradlee, Antoinette Pinchot, 6, 7
Bradlee, Benjamin C., 6, 7

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 4, 5, 6, 8
Exner, Judith Campbell, 6

F

Ford, Gerald R., 3

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 3, 5

K

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 3
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 3
Kennedy, John F., 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11
Kennedy, John F., Jr., 3
Kennedy, Robert F., 9
Kissinger, Henry A., 9

M

Meyer, Mary Pinchot, 6, 7

O

O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 4, 8
Oswald, Lee Harvey, 7

R

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 2, 5, 6, 8
Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr., 2

T

Truman, Harry S., 5, 6, 8

W

Warren, Earl, 7, 9

Y

Youngblood, Rufus W., 3