

Kirk LeMoyne Billings Oral History Interview – JFK#11, 01/09/66
Administrative Information

Creator: Kirk LeMoyne Billings
Interviewer: Walter D. Sohier
Date of Interview: January 9, 1966
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 39 pages

Biographical Note

Billings was a Kennedy family friend and associate. In this interview, he discusses John F. Kennedy's trips to Cape Cod and Newport, RI, his relationship with employees, and his presidential visits to Europe, among other issues.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed **April 25, 1967**, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Kirk LeMoyne Billings, recorded interview by Walter D. Sohier, January 9, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

"GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT"

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, KIRK LEMOYNE BILLINGS, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of personal statements approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

This material shall not until my death or expiration of fifty (50) years from date of delivery of this material (whichever shall last occur) be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine them.

This restriction shall apply to and include employees and officers of the General Services Administration of the National Archives and Records Service and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

A revision of the above stipulations governing access to the subject material may be entered into by the donor and the Archivist of the United States if it appears desirable to the donor to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights shall pass to the United States of America.

Dated:

Kirk LeMoyne Billings
Kirk LeMoyne Billings

Dated:

April 25, 1967

ACCEPTED:

Robert H. Dalman
Archivist of the United States

Kirk LeMoyne Billings – JFK #11

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
777, 785	John F. Kennedy's [JFK] appreciation for boats and sailing
781	JFK's feelings on spending, both personally and professionally
782	Time spent in Newport, RI
788	Secret Service and other employees of JFK and the White House
793	JFK's trips to Europe as President, including meetings with country leaders

Oral History Interview

with

K. LEMOYNE BILLINGS

January 9, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Walter D. Sohier

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SOHIER: Lem, as I recall when we left off last time we were talking about the Cape and the *Honey Fitz* and we were going to talk about Newport. I wonder what more we can say about the Cape and the boats and the *Honey Fitz* and things of this kind.

BILLINGS: There's so much to say about the Cape. Do you remember exactly how we ended?

SOHIER: We talked a little about the *Honey Fitz* and I guess there were stories about the *Honey Fitz* not involved with the Cape.

BILLINGS: I can remember one which took place at Newport. The President had a meeting there with some of his top people; Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor and Ros Gilpatric who was Deputy Secretary of Defense at that time. I don't remember who else was present, but they were all top brass. The meeting was planned aboard the *Honey Fitz*. The President, whenever possible, whether he was at the Cape or at Newport, spent a lot of time on the *Honey Fitz*. He liked having meetings on board. It did not matter if the weather was good or bad. When the

President took office the Navy officer commanding the *Honey Fitz* was a Commander. The President later had him promoted to rank of Captain. He was a full Navy Captain at this particular time. As you know, I had been in the Navy and at the end of the war I reached the lowly rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade. I ended my Naval career in that rank. Although I was in the Reserve for a while, I never really answered any of the Navy's correspondence. Later I was retired from the Naval Reserve. The President always introduced his guests to the Captain as they went on board the yacht. For instance, he would say: "This is the Secretary of State, Mr. Rusk; this is the Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara; this is the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Mr. Gilpatric, and this is General Taylor who is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," etc. Finally at the very end of the line, "This is Lieutenant Junior Grade Billings." He did this with a complete straight face. As a matter of fact, I remember General Talyor looked around to take another look at me, and the ship's Captain was never very excited about me again. The President always enjoyed introducing me with some strange title — always hopeful that it would embarrass me. However, to his credit and my pleasure, he never failed to introduce me to everyone including the Chiefs of State. How-

[-778-]

ever he never said, "This is my friend Lem Billings." Instead he would give me some title. I remember he introduced me to Chancellor Adenauer as Mr. Billings, one of our top cultural people and to the first astronaut, Captain Shephard, as Congressman Billings! He had done this quite often before but in this case fortunately Captain Shepherd was too busy to stop and talk. On other occasions I was not so lucky. I would be left to try and explain the whereabouts of my congressional district and talk about the Congress in general. Sometimes he would introduce me as General Billings. I would have preferred Admiral because I knew nothing at all about the Army.

SOHIER: How did he feel about the Eisenhower administration's use of boats? I think General Eisenhower didn't use the boats that are available to the Presidents the way others had done, as President Roosevelt had done.

BILLINGS: You will remember there was a Presidential yacht called the *Williamsburg*, which was really big and luxurious and very seagoing. Hoover had had it put in mothballs. He had felt its continued use was in bad taste due to the Depression. I don't think Roosevelt ever took the yacht out of mothballs, but Truman did

[-779-]

and he used this yacht a great deal. Eisenhower had no interest in boats, the Navy in fact, the water or anything to do with it. It was for this reason that he put the *Williamsburg* back into mothballs as soon as he became President. He claimed he did this to save the taxpayer's money. This irritated President Kennedy, he knew whenever Eisenhower wanted to spend money on things for his own pleasure he never held back — as witnessed by all the expenditures at Camp David. President Kennedy felt that the Chief Executive was entitled to whatever relaxation he needed. However, since he was always very conscious of the narrow margin of his election, he

felt he could not relaunch the *Williamsburg* until 1964 — when he was convinced he would win by a large minority.

SOHIER: We discussed earlier that President Kennedy was rather close with the penny or parsimonious like his mother — turning the lights out.

BILLINGS: No, I didn't say he turned the lights out. No, he never turned a light out in his life.

SOHIER: I guess his mother liked to turn the lights out and I just wondered to what extent did he worry about...

BILLINGS: That's President Johnson. God only knows. I was

[-780-]

noticing tonight as I went by the White House, that the entire building was pitch black. When President Kennedy was in residence, the White House always seemed full of life at night. The lights were always blazing. Now it seems dark and foreboding.

SOHIER: What was his feeling about economy in the White House — yachts, cars, a helicopter — did he worry about this much, was it mostly a political concern, if it was a concern at all?

BILLINGS: As I said before, he felt that the Chief Executive was entitled to every kind of comfort available, but he didn't like to do things which he considered ostentatious. Perhaps in this he was considering the political aspects. The President was only tight in small matters. As so many people born to wealth often are. I don't mean such things as paying the luncheon check, or expense on parties given at the White House. It was in much smaller — extremely unimportant things.

SOHIER: Did he give you Christmas presents?

BILLINGS: That's a good example — he hated spending money on presents — I think he really disliked buying a lot of personal presents.

[-781-]

SOHIER: What about Jackie? Did he give her any good presents?

BILLINGS: Yes, pretty good ones but not with...

SOHIER: He didn't enjoy that?

BILLINGS: I don't think he enjoyed spending a great deal of money on personal gifts. In fact, none of the Kennedys do. The Kennedy family just don't give — they've never given each other important presents. They always give each other Victrola records on Christmas, or something like that.

SOHIER: They like to get them, though?

BILLINGS: They just aren't big on gift-giving, and I don't think the mother and father ever were. Certainly the mother never was. However, the father always did give presents, at least to his daughters.

SOHIER: Now let's discuss Newport, where he would go part of the summer because Jackie's family lived there. Did he enjoy that? Did he like the big house at Hammersmith Farm?

BILLINGS: Well I think he did like it. Mr. and Mrs. Auchincloss always moved out of their house while he was there. They would stay in sort of a guest house near the big house. The

[-782-]

big house was an extremely comfortable one. It is a Victorian house which had belonged to Mr. Auchincloss' family. Mrs. Auchincloss has done it over in the most attractive manner.

SOHIER: Did you spend weekends there with them?

BILLINGS: Yes, I did.

SOHIER: Can you remember any particular weekend?

BILLINGS: Well, I remember one, for instance, when Nehru was a guest with his daughter Madame Gandhi and the Indian Ambassador, Mr. Gandhi or Mr. Nehru. I can never remember his name. It was one or the other, but he was no relation to Nehru or his daughter or even Mahatma for that matter. The President and Mr. Nehru and the Indian Ambassador had lunch together behind closed doors in the dining room while Madame Gandhi, Jackie and myself lunched in the living room. We had a very good time with Madame Gandhi; we thought she was really quite amusing. She told us all about her experiences as a politician in India. In the beginning she had difficulty not only in public speaking, but in accomplishing things not expected of women at that time. Jackie and I enjoyed her immensely. She was not very serious that day and made many jokes about herself.

[-783-]

Later, we heard she was really more difficult than she seemed to us. We also heard that she leaned further to the left than her father and that she was a great admirer of Grishna Menan when

he was in power. We didn't actually talk to her too much about her political beliefs. It was mainly about the growin-up years — and her relationship to her father, parents, though she never mentioned her marriage including her son.

SOHIER: They spend the weekend did they? Was it a pleasant sort of thing?

BILLINGS: No, they didn't spend the night. They came just for the day. They flew in, we went out on the boat, had lunch at the house, and then they left with their entourage.

SOHIER: The President must have been a little amused that he left you with Madame Gandhi. Did he capitalize on that?

BILLINGS: No, he didn't because Jackie was there and I guess he thought Jackie would handle it pretty well. But later I . . .

SOHIER: Well, are you telling me a story?

BILLINGS: No, I don't think I want to get into that.

SOHIER: Tell a little about it.

BILLINGS: Really, I can't remember it too well. Anyway

[-784-]

Jackie thought I got along very well with Madame Gandhi and she told the President I did. We had an extremely good time with her. The following weekend Mrs. Gandhi was in Washington. She stayed at the Blair House. I spent that weekend at Steve and Jean Smith's. On Sunday afternoon, I received many messages from the Blair House, presumably from Madame Gandhi. These continued through the evening and they all expressed Madama Gandhi's desire to see me, to have dinner with me or some other sort of thing.

SOHIER: Did you fall for it?

BILLINGS: I certainly did fall for it. Of course, every time I'd call the Blair House back Mrs. Gandhi was out. It was some time before I realized the whole thing was a hoax arranged by the President through the White House switchboard.

SOHIER: Can you remember anything else about the Cape or Newport that would be worth talking about, or the *Honey Fitz*, or some of those weekends.

BILLINGS: The President always loved to take Caroline with him when he cruised on the *Honey Fitz*. He enjoyed keeping

[-785-]

her amused. She was very young then and he used to tell her fantastic stories about a white whale. This white whale was always following the yacht. There were many stories about the life of the white whale.... all of them very different. Caroline loved these stories — we were all kept very busy looking for it at the stern. Caroline particularly liked the fact that the white whale liked to eat men's socks — in fact men's socks were its favorite food. Some of us didn't enjoy this part of the story as much as Caroline did. Franklin Roosevelt was aboard one trip and the President asked Franklin to throw his socks overboard to satisfy the white whale's very particular appetite much to satisfy Caroline's amusement. From then on whenever he'd start telling that story about the white whale, I'd move to another part of the yacht.

SOHIER: Maybe we could — Do you want to talk a little bit more about Newport?

BILLINGS: While we were at Newport, we would usually go over to Mrs. Young's house every day for a swim. Mrs. Young is the widow of the man who headed up the New York Central Railroad. He had committed suicide and left her very wealthy. Mrs. Young had one of those enormous Newport houses complete with a heated pool.

[-786-]

I don't know how long outdoor heated pools have been in fashion but this is the first one I had ever seen. This is where the President did his swimming at Newport. Mrs. Young is rather an eccentric stern old lady — but she was most excited and pleased to have the President come there every day. He had her quite mellowed. We went every day rain or shine.

SOHIER: Did you ever go to Bailey's Beach?

BILLINGS: Never.

SOHIER: Didn't he like that?

BILLINGS: No, I was never at Bailey's Beach with him except the weekend of his marriage. We took quite a few drives all around Newport — looking at its historic parts as well as its enormous summer houses.

SOHIER: Did he swim in the ocean there?

BILLINGS: No, we never swam in the ocean — we never even went to anyone's house for a visit. I'm sure Jackie must have known almost everyone in the Newport colony — but we never visited them.

SOHIER: What about Claiborne Pell. He'd come over, you mean?

BILLINGS: Quite often the Pells would go out with us on the

[-787-]

Honey Fitz — I think we may have stopped at their house once to pick them up after a swim at Mrs. Young's or after church.

SOHIER: Did he drive around himself or did he relax?

BILLINGS: He always drove himself. Nobody ever drove the President. There would always be one secret serviceman in the car and several in the car following. He never wanted them to drive him — in fact, the only time they ever drove him when he was President was when he was using his limousine. He always preferred not to use it on weekends.

SOHIER: Let's talk a little bit about the Secret Service. What was his relationship? I don't mean in the sense of what happened at the end but was this a difficulty for him, was there friction, was he amused by the situation?

BILLINGS: No, I think the Secret Servicemen, well, it is hard to talk about it now because of the way it ended but the Secret Service was always very circumspect in the way they guarded the President. For instance, in the White House you were never conscious of them at all. The White House was well-guarded by White House policemen. You never saw the Secret Service on the grounds. You only saw uniformed policemen everywhere at all the different doors and around the grounds but you really never were conscious of

[-788-]

of the Secret Service at all.

SOHIER: I guess they were Secret Service, those policemen?

BILLINGS: No, the policemen in uniform were not Secret Service. Actually the Secret Service were everywhere if you really looked for them. For instance, when he was in his office you would always see a man in business clothes sitting outside his office. They were there but you just weren't conscious of them. Of course a policeman in uniform is more obvious than a man in business clothes. At Glen Ora, Hyannisport or Camp Davd, the Secret Service had strategically located guard houses everywhere — but they would be unobtrusively hidden behind trees, etc. You never were conscious of the Secret Service standing there staring at you.

SOHIER: Well, did he have fun with them?

BILLINGS: He was terribly good fun with them. They all really liked him. However none of them were happy while in Virginia. They complained a good deal to me about how unhappy they were to be stationed there. They liked Cape Cod and Newport and Florida but they felt the same way about Virginia as the President did. There was absolutely nothing to do there. The President always

[-789-]

got along well with the people who worked for him.

SOHIER: You mean, the staff in the house and everything? He wasn't tough on them or intolerable?

BILLINGS: I don't think he ever got to know the regular White House staff too well. There are so many of them and they are constantly changing shifts. Of course the Kennedys brought their own servants to the White House — two, anyway. One was George Thomas, his valet whom the President had for years. This was his second George. The first was George Taylor — he had him when he was a student at Harvard — both were sort of valets. George Taylor even worked in the first Congressional campaign and brought a lot of his black friends around. I don't know what happened to George Taylor. The President had him for a long time. He was a real character and a most inefficient valet. The other George — George Thomas was just as bad. He had him from the time he first came to Washington until he died. He was always complaining about George. He thought George was completely lazy and his work inefficient. He was never pleased with his work. However, all his life, the President hated to fire anybody. So, he never fired either of the Georges. Both of them were very fond of him, of course.

[-790-]

SOHIER: Who else did they have?

BILLINGS: All during their married life, they had a Costa Rican maid named Provie, or Providencia Parades. She was really the backbone of their entire staff during their married life. Provie couldn't do anything wrong for either the President or Jackie. They relied heavily on her. It was rather interesting to watch Provie develop from a little Costa Rican girl who could barely speak English into a rather sophisticated and chic figure wearing Jackie's cast off Parisian gowns. She went on all the Presidential trips and she could get away with almost everything due to her sense of humor, her obvious loyalty and her efficiency. Whenever the President wanted anything he'd yell for Provie even though her job really was Jackie's personal maid.

SOHIER: We were talking about his driving himself and you remember one would see pictures of him in the papers driving the golf cart full of children. Was this just on the golf course, or was this generally on the Cape?

BILLINGS: I can't remember whether we have discussed this or not in past tapings. We may have discussed the fact that the President was always a skillful driver, but he liked to drive very fast. In his lifetime, he had his share of accidents although....

[-791-]

they were all minor ones. As I said, in all the time I knew him I really can't think of any time when he was a passenger except in his capacity as President of the United States when he had to be driven in a limousine. He always, no matter whether he had a chauffeur or not, drove his own car. He always wanted to be in control of any kind of situation whenever he could. I don't even remember him in a speedboat, for instance, with someone else at the wheel. Of course with big boats, it was, by necessity, a different story. He particularly always wanted to be the skipper in sailboats. And when golf carts came into being, he was always the driver. He used golf carts quite a bit driving around the compound at the Cape, particularly down to the Kennedys' private pier to board the *Marlin* or the *Honey Fitz*.

Returning from the pier, the golf cart was always loaded with grandchildren. The President would drive it as fast as it would go — over hills and bumps. This was always exciting for the kids.

SOHIER: Rather dangerous, wasn't it?

BILLINGS: Well, nothing ever happened.

SOHIER: Well, now — we're moving along.

BILLINGS: He also used golf carts at Camp David. Camp David is laid out over a large area. We always used the golf cart

[-792-]

to visit all the different facilities. The heated swimming pool, the bowling alley, the rifle range, Caroline's ponies at the stable, the chapel, the soldiers in their barracks, and the different guest cottages. As I said before, he thoroughly enjoyed Camp David. Unlike Middleburg — there was always a lot to do.

SOHIER: We have talked in various contexts and, as you said earlier, we've been back and forth in these interviews — so we may repeat here a little but he made two European trips while he was President, didn't he?

BILLINGS: He made two European trips during...

SOHIER: And you were on both. I think we have talked in various ways about each. Let's talk about the first trip. We talked about presents, etc. We talked about that aspect of his first trip, but what else could we discuss on that?

BILLINGS: First of all, the President didn't want to take his friends or any member of his family other than Jackie on his first trip. Despite the fact he did end up by taking his mother, Eunice and myself. Needless to say, he was very fed up with his mother going, but there wasn't much he could do about it without making a real scene. She didn't go over on the plane — but instead met the Presidential party in Paris, and then proceeded to Vienna

[-793-]

finding her own transportation. He was, however, always happy to have his sisters with him — although he limited his trip to only one. Eunice was the natural choice — not only because she was the oldest, but actually, she was always his favorite. As for me, he wouldn't have considered letting me go unless he had what he considered a legitimate reason. We may have covered this before. The reason I went over on his first trip was because he didn't have a present for Khrushchev. A day or two before he went he realized that possibly Khrushchev would have a present for him. It wasn't an official visit so there was no real reason why they should exchange gifts, but there was always that possibility. We talked about what might be suitable. He had a very beautiful model of the Constitution which I had found for his father to give him for that Christmas. The President valued this model tremendously but there was not time to find another gift so suitable. He decided to take it to Europe with him for Khrushchev. The model was being repaired and it was not ready to leave when the Presidential plane departed. I was to remain and bring it over on a later plane. Rusk was not able to leave with the President because of the problems in the Dominican Republic following the assassination of Trujillo. I went over with him several days after the President.

[-794-]

Unfortunately, we arrived too late to attend the most important and impressive function of the French visit, the official dinner in the Palace of Versailles. This was the most sumptuous and brilliant dinner given at Versailles since the days of Louis XVI. Of course, it was terribly disappointing to miss this, but it was the last official function I missed for the entire trip, except, of course, the small private dinner given at Buckingham Palace by the Queen. I will never forget our arrival at the airport in Vienna where he was to meet Khrushchev. Of course, I have arrived with the President on Air Force One at the airports of many American cities — but this was the first time I had been with him on the arrival in a foreign city. His ovations as President had always been tremendous but in Vienna there were more people than I had ever seen before — all of them roaring with enthusiasm.

SOHIER: What was his attitude to an ovation like that?

BILLINGS: His attitude towards great crowds was always the same — the bigger the crowd, the greater was his pleasure. Always upon the arrival of his plane, he would look out of the window and judge the size of the crowd. This had been true all through his campaign. Everyone would discuss and compare the crowds' size to other arrivals. He was more than extremely pleased when he looked out the window

[-795-]

at Vienna.

SOHIER: Did he ever get overcome by something like that? Was he a political animal and this sort of rang the bell?

BILLINGS: If the extent of his pleasure in regard to enthusiastic crowds typifies a political animal, then that is what he was. As the crowds got bigger and bigger, particularly on his European trips, he just couldn't believe it. I mean, it was just beyond him. He felt that he could never be happy at home again after some of the tremendous crowds he had abroad. This, of course, was particularly true on his second trip to Europe, when he went to Germany. Of course, I guess it is natural that he would have tremendous ovations in Austria. After all, the Russians had occupied Vienna and they were certainly unpopular there. Obviously, the Austrians wanted to show their preference for the President of the United States over the Premier of Russia. Going into Vienna was fantastic, huge crowds all the way, lining both sides of the road. It must be at least six miles into the city from the airport.

SOHIER: Tell me in terms of the Khrushchev confrontation — what did he say to you about that? Did you get involved at all?

BILLINGS: He talked about it on the plane on the way to England.

[-796-]

Obviously, I didn't see very much of him while we were in Vienna. He stayed at our embassy. The remainder of the Presidential party stayed at the hotel. This included Eunice and Mrs. Kennedy. As I said before he really didn't want his mother to be with him on these trips.

SOHIER: How come she went?

BILLINGS: Because she wanted to go.

SOHIER: Well, was it that simple?

BILLINGS: It's a little difficult not to allow her to come. I think she was in France anyway. Maybe by design, I don't know. But she was there and she was in on the Versailles things and she wanted to see Khrushchev. Mrs. Kennedy has all the feelings of wanting to be in on everything and you can't really blame somebody whose son is President.

SOHIER: Was this his idea?

BILLINGS: No, it certainly wasn't. He was very much against it.

To get back to our visit, we really didn't see the President except at certain functions to which we had been invited such as luncheons and of course the main official dinner which was at the Schonbrunn Palace. The Austrian government gave an enormous dinner there for the two

[-797-]

heads of state. It was very strange because we all were dressed in formal clothes while the Russians came dressed in very badly fitting street clothes. Their wives were badly fitted in unfashionable afternoon dresses. They made quite a contrast with the American women in their chic evening dresses and jewels. We all sat together. I mean I sat at the table with two or three Russians and two or three Americans. So we were all one happy family. I didn't sit at the main table where the top officials were, with the heads of state. After dinner some of us were asked to accompany the two heads of state into another room where we had the opportunity to watch the President and the Premier sitting together with their wives talking through interpreters. Eunice as usual was very amusing and very bold. She went over and made a big fuss over the Premier and told a lot of jokes, which both the President and the Premier enjoyed. This helped in breaking the ice.

SOHIER: The President really enjoyed Eunice didn't he?

BILLINGS: Oh, she was much his favorite sister above and beyond Kick who died so many years ago; Eunice was much his favorite sister.

SOHIER: Eunice was the only one who was really his contemporary

[-798-]

being only four years older than she was. They adored each other. They had so much in common. They even looked alike. Strangely enough they had many of the same medical problems. Both were constantly in pain with nervous stomachs, and strangest of all, they both had Addison's disease, although it is not known to be common among members of a family. They shared the same kind of sense of humor. He always loved having her around and got a big kick out of her humor. For this reason, Eunice was able to make the atmosphere at this meeting more pleasant. I remember Khrushchev roared with laughter over something Eunice said — I can't remember what it was but I'm sure it was something at her brother's expense.

SOHIER: Do you remember when she was at the airport when Nehru arrived and she had some remark about, "Oh you naughty boy, you," or something. There was some well quoted remark.

BILLINGS: I don't remember that. She was often the President's hostess when Jackie was away which was quite often. To go back to the Vienna meeting, Mrs. Khrushchev was sitting on the other side of the group and I talked with her. I had already talked to her daughter-in-law who spoke a little English, and I was rather surprised when she told me that she worked an eight hour day, six days a week, as an engineer, despite the fact that she had a couple of children, the Premier's grandchildren.

[-799-]

I thought it was rather interesting that as a mother she could be away all the time. I mentioned to Mrs. Khrushchev how surprising it was that her daughter-in-law could spend so much time at a job and still raise two children. Madame Khrushchev shot back that of course she had a cook and a maid and a nurse. This is not exactly the way we had pictured life in Russia even among the ruling class.

SOHIER: Did the President ever talk about the confrontation with Khrushchev because...

BILLINGS: Yes, he did on the flight from Vienna to London. The President had his final meeting with Khrushchev just before the departure of our flight. I think I may have discussed this before because I remember saying on this tape that this was the first and last time that I had ever seen President Kennedy as President, upset. He was terribly upset on his trip from Vienna to London.

SOHIER: We may have, but, in what way was he upset?

BILLINGS: Because he had had a very bad experience with Khrushchev. They had talked mainly about two things, two major problems. One was Laos — I think Laos or Vietnam — it was primarily our crucial problem with China. The other was, of

[-800-]

course, Berlin. Khrushchev was very, very congenial and unconcerned about the problem in the Far East. They didn't have any problem about that at all. However, Berlin was an entirely different story. It was during this discussion that the President saw the Russian face for the first time. It was a completely immobile one and would not move at all — would not give one inch. This was a most important meeting for the President. It was blasted home to him how difficult and how absolutely immovable the Russian leader could be.

SOHIER: Did he say anything about it?

BILLINGS: Oh, yes. It absolutely shook him.

SOHIER: On the plane?

BILLINGS: Oh, yes. It absolutely shook him.

SOHIER: How did he describe it?

BILLINGS: He just said that these people have one philosophy and we have another. That we are entirely opposed and there is no way for us to get together. There is no question the President had never come face to face with such evil before. It was terribly important that he meet face to face with Khrushchev so early in his term of office. Remember, this was only the spring of his inauguration.

SOHIER: Did he ever relate this to Cuba later on?

[-801-]

BILLINGS: Yes, there is absolutely no question that he did — there was no better way for him to understand the Russians then from this confrontation. Although the meeting was a terrible shock to him, the President had the kind of mind that didn't have to be told twice. This experience was enough for him to understand Khrushchev — and he was prepared for his future problems with him.

SOHIER: Do you remember anything he said about it? Describing Khrushchev or...

BILLINGS: He said it was impossible to make Khrushchev see any reason. Although our position on Berlin was the right position by treaty and by law, Khrushchev's determination was such that he was only interested in his own point of view and that in his position he was like a stone wall.

SOHIER: What did he say about de Gualle? Did he ever talk about him much? I guess he was rather charmed by him and well entertained.

BILLINGS: I think he was charmed by him on his first trip. He felt he had made a good impression and he felt he was going to be able to work with him. It was later that he was...

SOHIER: Later on did he discuss it? Do you remember anything about that?

[-802-]

BILLINGS: Later, he disgusted with de Gualle, completely, when de Gaulle ruined the President's idea of a Common Market by refusing to allow England to be a part of it. The President had had his heart set on this.

SOHIER: Did he talk about de Gaulle personally in any way? Did he mention his reactions, because he had some conversations obviously when he was in France?

BILLINGS: Well, yes. At first he had a great admiration for de Gualle. He had the same kind of admiration for de Gaulle that we've been told de Gaulle had for him. That de Gaulle absolutely operates on his own, without having his advisors around when he meets a head of state. He has the ability to speak for himself on any subject. This is the same way that President Kennedy operated. On the other hand, when de Gaulle met with Eisenhower, we are told, he was disgusted with the fact that it was necessary for Eisenhower to have his advisors present at all meetings.

SOHIER: How do you know it disgusted him?

BILLINGS: Because we heard that. I don't know where the President heard it, but it was the President who told me. Apparently there were times when de Gaulle would have liked to talk without another man present, but Eisenhower never wanted to be alone.

[-803- and -804-]

President Kennedy could talk on equal terms with de Gaulle and with Khrushchev without anyone except interpreters present.

SOHIER: Did he prepare a lot for these discussions? Were there sort of cram sessions before the meetings?

BILLINGS: He certainly did, he certainly did. He prepared the whole way going over in the planes working for hours before each meeting. He had all his people with him and they prepared very, very carefully. Of course, the President had a very retentive memory and had a sound background on all subjects — but he made sure by careful preparation before each meeting.

SOHIER: Now what else is there about the first trip that we might mention before we move on?

BILLINGS: We might mention that he was surprised and disappointed to find that on the trip from the airport in London, there was a lot of anti-American feeling. England is the last country you would expect to find this — but there was much booing and even groups tried to throw themselves in front of his car. Admittedly, all the anti-Americans were rather a motley looking group. You will remember at that time there was some feeling among certain groups in England against us establishing submarine bases in Scotland.

[-805-]

SOHIER: Now where did you stay? Did he stay in the Embassy?

BILLINGS: Yes, he stayed at the Embassy. The rest of us stayed at Claridge's. Of course the highlight was the dinner at Buckingham Palace. I was quite fed up because I was not invited — only the President's family went. This included Lee and Stash Radziwill. This caused a little commotion because the Queen does not receive divorced couples — at first the Radziwells were not invited and it was only due to the President's insistence that they were.

SOHIER: Did he say anything about the Queen and Prince Philip?

BILLINGS: I don't remember him saying anything about them. I heard a description of the whole evening from Eunice. As I recall, she said the Prince was most outgoing and the Queen was polite but withdrawn.

SOHIER: What else did he do in England — in London? Did he ever go to an art gallery or something like that?

BILLINGS: As I recall, this was not an official visit but he did have meetings with the Prime Minister of whom he was very fond — this friendship was entirely mutual. I will never forget how touching

[-806-]

MacMillan's speech was at the Runnymede ceremonies after the President's death. Lee's daughter was baptized during this visit. The President was the godfather. The ceremony was held in some English church and the crowd there was unbelievable — solid masses of people around the church for two or three blocks.

SOHIER: Must have been Westminster Cathedral.

BILLINGS: No, it was some small church. The Radziwills gave a christening party afterwards at their house. The Prime Minister was among the guests as well as most of the Kennedy friends from the days when Mr. Kennedy was Ambassador. It was a very pleasant reunion and the President enjoyed himself immensely.

SOHIER: Then what happened? That was the end of the trip to London, was it?

BILLINGS: Yes, we flew back to the States.

SOHIER: Then there was the second trip which perhaps we might...

BILLINGS: It was much later. It was the summer before he died.

SOHIER: And you went along on that trip?

BILLINGS: By that time he was not so concerned about taking a friend along. There was never any question as to whether I would go

[-807-]

on that one or not. Although it was Pat Lawford's turn to go — Eunice went instead. Pat couldn't go as she was having a baby.

SOHIER: You mean there wasn't any particular reason for you to go?

BILLINGS: No, not for any reason. He just took me because I wanted to go. We flew directly to Bonn, where he stayed at the Ambassador's house. There was some slight difficulty because although he wanted to stay at the Ambassador's, he didn't want the Ambassador's family to be there when he was.

SOHIER: I don't understand. You mean he wanted them to move out?

BILLINGS: Yes, he not only wanted them to move — they were asked to move.

SOHIER: That must have been unpopular.

BILLINGS: Perhaps it was, but actually, that is the President's house in a foreign country.

SOHIER: Well, didn't he feel a little bit badly about it?

BILLINGS: After all, if you've ever seen what the President does on one of those trips you would realize that it is one of the most gruelling, long days that any man could endure. Remember, at all times, at every second, he is the center. There isn't a moment during

[-808-]

the entire day for him to relax. At the end of the official day he was exhausted. I didn't accompany him to South America, but apparently on that trip he stayed at one of the embassies as a guest of the Ambassador and his wife. He had a rather harrowing experience. Tired as he was, he was treated as a guest and had to make conversation with the Ambassador's family. He couldn't relax. He decided he would never do that again. Therefore, when he went on all his other trips, it was arranged ahead of time that the embassies would be emptied for his use. I completely agreed with him. I think that that is the least that any ambassador who is sent there as the President's representative can do. He should make his house available for the President.

SOHIER: You went with him to Bonn? You flew right to Bonn?

BILLINGS: Yes, as usual there was a tight schedule there.

SOHIER: What was your involvement with him on these trips? Sort of catching him here and there?

BILLINGS: Of course I would always see him whenever he was alone. When he was relaxing.

SOHIER: At the end of the day/

BILLINGS: Yes, whenever he was finished with his official duties —

[-809-]

but I was also included on all the official dinners and appearances. It was rather interesting at the dinners. Of course they were always completely ruled by protocol. I was the only man in the President's party without any official rank — and therefore, I was always placed on the very bottom of the table.

SOHIER: He rather enjoyed that, didn't he?

BILLINGS: Well, I guess he did. He would have enjoyed it much more ten years before that.

SOHIER: What do you remember about the second trip particularly? Involving him, you know, in conversations, particular instances. That was the Berlin trip.

BILLINGS: We went to Frankfurt before we went to Berlin. In Frankfurt, he received the greatest ovation he had ever received in his life up to that point. He spoke before the Town Hall. The whole square in front of the City Hall was one single solid mass of people, packed as together as possible. All the windows and roofs lining the square were black with people. In fact, people packed the streets for eight or ten blocks from the square. It was incredible. Of course, this had never happened in the United States. Everyone was yelling for the President — his popularity was very much in evidence. We didn't think such an ovation could ever be equalled, but of course we had not as yet been to Berlin.

[-810-]

SOHIER: Let's move unto the Berlin visit now. The crowds were enormous. How did he feel about that?

BILLINGS: I asked you to stop for a second there because I really want to do justice to that part of the trip. I'm sure this was one of the high points of the President's life as far as a personal feeling of accomplishment of what he represented, as an individual. I don't know really in history whether there has been anything like

that before. The real excitement about a man and the fantastic adoration of a man. Of course, he was realistic enough to know it wasn't himself as much as it was that he represented the United States. He was the leader of the powerful country who was in favor of keeping Berlin free. I am sure that he understood exactly why he was this adored figure of the moment. But whatever the reasons were, it was a hell of an experience to witness the acclaim of a multitude of that size. They tell me that there were 2 ½ million people living in Berlin and I don't think there is any question that most of those people were present at sometime during our trip through the city, particularly in front of the town hall where he gave his famous speech. It's hard to describe the multitude of people there. You couldn't possibly have squeezed another person into that square. Since the square is contained by buildings, there is just so much space and the people were really jammed together. They not only filled the square, but they flowed out through all the streets leading into the square. I'm told that they crowded those streets for ten blocks, in every direction, their only contact being through loudspeakers. Every window and all the roofs of the buildings around the square were filled and crowded with people. The sound of human voices all roaring "KEN-NE-DY" at the same time was almost deafening. This is what the President

[-811-]

heard and saw when he gave his famous speech. He was certainly overcome.

SOHIER: How did you know he was overcome?

BILLINGS: Of course, I saw him later. Not immediately, however. I actually was even on the same platform with him. We were at the town hall and I was not on the platform from which he spoke, but I was on a balcony above him looking down so I really couldn't see him. I could see the crowds and their reaction but I couldn't see him. I guess the next time I really saw him to talk to was on the plane.

SOHIER: He wasn't somebody who would say. "Oh, my God, wasn't that something." Didn't he just move on to other things?

BILLINGS: No, I think we talked a good deal about that experience. I'm convinced that it was the greatest personal experience of his life. I don't think he ever had anything else like that happen to him. I'm not sure that any human being in history has ever had such an experience.

SOHIER: Do you think he looked at it that way?

BILLINGS: I just know that he was terribly moved. How could any of us understand how a man would feel in a situation like that.

SOHIER: I'm just wondering what he said about it.

BILLINGS: I know, but how can I remember. I can't remember exactly what he said. All I can remember is his reaction; I can't recall what he said.

SOHIER: Well, then, after Berlin you went to Ireland.

[-812-]

BILLINGS: No, after Berlin we flew to some small city where we all stayed together at a hotel.

SOHIER: In Germany or where?

BILLINGS: In Germany, yes. And then we went to Ireland the next day. I don't know why, but I guess there was some reason for us stopping over in that city.

SOHIER: How was Ireland?

BILLINGS: Let me say something about that evening. It was at that hotel in Germany when we really talked about his experiences in Germany. This was an evening off schedule for him, one for relaxation. We all had dinner together in his suite and his enthusiasm was infectious. There was always a crowd outside the hotel roaring "KEN-NE-DY." He was completely exhilarated about this really fantastic day.

SOHIER: What would the group at dinner be?

BILLINGS: There were perhaps ten of us. This would include Eunice, myself, Pam Turnure, Pierre Salinger, Kenny O'Donnell, Mac Bundy, etc.

SOHIER: And all of those were involved in the dinner?

BILLINGS: Yes, we all had dinner up in his room.

SOHIER: Was he close to Mac Bundy, as a friend? What was his relationship with Mac?

BILLINGS: I think he relied on Mac a lot.

[-813-]

SOHIER: Did he like him?

BILLINGS: I think he liked his judgement tremendously, and that he liked his personality. Whether he liked him as a friend is so difficult to say because the President....

SOHIER: He didn't say that he didn't?

BILLINGS: Oh no. He didn't say that he didn't like him.

SOHIER: He didn't tell you he liked or didn't like him?

BILLINGS: I'm sure he liked him because I don't think he could have worked so well with him if he hadn't. I know he respected him. He listened to him and relied on him a lot, but to say whether he liked him socially or not is very difficult because he hardly ever mixed business with friends.

SOHIER: Actually, there weren't many people that he did business with that were invited around.

BILLINGS: None.

SOHIER: The Bundys went to the White House but not....

BILLINGS: Yes, but never, socially.

SOHIER: Oh, yes, they did.

BILLINGS: Well, they went to the White House but they were not invited to his private dinner parties or to the Cape or to Florida or Glen Ora or Camp David. When you say socially do you mean did they go to those rather large parties he had at the White House for associates and friends.

SOHIER: Yes.

[-814-]

BILLINGS: He invited many people to those parties. I think that everyone who was close to him in the administration went to those, but not to the small dinners upstairs. He really didn't want to mix his business with his really close friends.

SOHIER: On that note we end our interview and we will take up from here.

[-815-]