

**Isaac Coggs Oral History Interview—12/8/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Isaac Coggs  
**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey  
**Date of Interview:** December 8, 1965  
**Location:** Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
**Length:** 14 pages

**Biographical Note**

Coggs, a Democratic assemblyman from Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1952-1957), discusses the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in Wisconsin, particularly in Milwaukee's North Side, John F. Kennedy's positions on civil rights, and Humphrey H. Humphrey's Wisconsin campaigning efforts, among other issues.

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**Suggested Citation**

Isaac Coggs, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, December 8, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Isaac Coggs

December 8, 1965  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Why don't you tell me either when you first met Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] or when you first saw yourself becoming involved in that Kennedy-Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] race?

COGGS: Well, I first met Kennedy in 1957 when he came to Wisconsin to support Senator Proxmire [William Proxmire] in the campaign against Kohler [Walter J. Kohler, Jr.]. Shortly afterwards, Ivan Nestingen [Ivan A. Nestingen]—a couple of years later, I suppose—asked me about working for Kennedy for President. I agreed to do so. I didn't know at that time that Senator Humphrey, whom I had admired for many years, was going to run in the spring primary in Wisconsin in 1960.

MORRISSEY: Was this in 1959 that Nestingen asked you?

COGGS: Yes, during the 1959 legislature.

MORRISSEY: Were you in the legislature?

COGGS. Yes, I was in the legislature...

MORRISSEY: Oh, I didn't realize that.

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COGGS : I was in the legislature during the time that I met Kennedy, in '57.

MORRISSEY: Were you elected in '56 for the first time?

COGGS : I was elected in '52 for the first time so that twelve years it was.

MORRISSEY: Go ahead.

COGGS. I had agreed first of all to work for Kennedy; I didn't know that Humphrey was going to run. After Humphrey got interested in running and because of his strong stand on civil rights and because of his nearness to Wisconsin and because of his many liberal ideas, I decided to work for Humphrey in the primary, 1960.

MORRISSEY: Was it hard to make the switch?

COGGS: It was pretty difficult to make the switch because I had promised, and I, most of the time keep a promise. This was the reason it was hard for me to make the switch.

MORRISSEY: So you started working for Humphrey in what, early 1960?

COGGS : Early 1960, that's right.

MORRISSEY: What kind of work were you doing?

COGGS: Well, we had a North Side headquarters for Senator Humphrey for President. I ran the headquarters there. We planned meetings, schedules, dinners and rallies for Senator Humphrey to win the primary.

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MORRISSEY: Would you say the Humphrey campaign was well organized?

COGGS: It was rather loosely organized, I would say, [Laughter] to be honest with you.

MORRISSEY: The reason I asked—I'd heard people say that this was one of the reasons why he didn't do better in that campaign.

COGGS: Yes. Well, I think that Humphrey started late. I don't think he had the finance. It takes time to organize a good campaign. It was not as well organized as the Kennedy campaign.

MORRISSEY: Were the Kennedy people organized on the North Side?

COGGS: I think they tried to run the campaign from the whole citywide level rather than the sectional. After Humphrey became active in the campaign on the North Side, they gave some more attention to it. We did carry the North Side and the area where I live by three to one and four to one in some cases.

MORRISSEY: Who was the Kennedy man on the North Side?

COGGS: Well, we had Samuel Daniels as labor leader and Reverend Gordon [B.S. Gordon] who was a longtime politician. We had many ministers who were active in the campaign. We tried to organize a statewide sort of committee to.... You know, people who were interested in civil rights because of Humphrey's....

MORRISSEY: These are people who worked for Humphrey?

COGGS: Yes.

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MORRISSEY: Who worked for Kennedy? Did he have anybody on the North Side?

COGGS: Yes, he had a very prominent person. Vel Phillips [Vel R. Phillips] was for Kennedy on the North Side. He had some people who were for him on the North Side. He had some kind of organization. He did more. Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], his brother, attended some rallies which were non-partisan. I mean, they invited both Humphrey's people and Kennedy's people to attend.

MORRISSEY: Did they do that elsewhere in the city or just in the North Side?

COGGS: I don't know. I think I was just on the North Side....

MORRISSEY: Did they do it anywhere else in the state, do you know?

COGGS: Not that I know about.

MORRISSEY: Do you think there was a general feeling on both the Humphrey side and the Kennedy side that Humphrey's long and well known position on civil rights meant that there was really going to be no contest?

COGGS: I think that's the way Humphrey started thinking when he first started the campaign and that's the reason that they didn't spend much time in the area until he found out—and as I found out as I started to work with people—that people had forgotten about 1948. They had forgotten about Humphrey's strong

stand on civil rights, and we had to remind them of it again. We had Jackie Robinson in to help us with this. It was interesting to know how everybody had not forgotten about it, but there were many people, civil righters, who had forgotten about Humphrey's strong stand on civil rights all during the fight.

[-4-]

MORRISSEY: Were there some people who had their suspicions about John Kennedy's commitment to civil rights?

COGGS: There were some people who had suspicion about John Kennedy for civil rights, that's right.

MORRISSEY: For what reason?

COGGS: Well, they linked him with people from Alabama, Governor Patterson [John Malcolm Patterson] and the Dixiecrats and the Jury Amendment thing on the Civil Rights Act and this sort of thing.

MORRISSEY: Were these things well known?

COGGS: These things were well known.

MORRISSEY: And were they well publicized by the Humphrey people?

COGGS : They were well publicized, that's right.

MORRISSEY: This is interesting to us because, so many people point out that at the 1956 Convention, during that Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]-Kennedy race for the vice presidential nomination which Kennedy almost won, a lot of his support came from Southern states.

COGGS: This is true. I remember that.

MORRISSEY: And I've often been curious to know if there was, from Kennedy's viewpoint, a negative hangover from that with people in the North who were strongly for civil rights.

COGGS: Well, people who I know didn't accept Kennedy on the question of civil rights at first. This is true.

MORRISSEY: Did Kennedy ever appear on the North Side?

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COGGS: I don't think he did. His wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] did, and his brother did. I can't remember him appearing; he was pretty busy elsewhere. He had been in Wisconsin once, I believe. He was prone to make his campaign citywide rather than sectional.

MORRISSEY: If you can put yourself back before the votes were counted, how did you think your candidate was going to do?

COGGS: I thought that he would carry some other parts of Wisconsin better than he did. I thought that we might make up for it in the Fifth Congressional District as they had expected us to, but this wasn't the case. I was hoping we could get out enough votes to carry—the Fifth Congressional District was an important district in the primary. We had hoped to carry it overwhelmingly so that Humphrey could win. We expected him to win better in other parts of the state than he did.

MORRISSEY: It's easy to read back into what happened almost six years ago now, but at that time was there any indication of what later became known as "backlash?"

COGGS: You mean backlash against Kennedy?

MORRISSEY: I was wondering if perhaps the Kennedy people didn't soft-pedal civil rights as an issue out of fear that a lot of people would be antagonized by this and they might lose more votes than they'd gain.

COGGS: I think they did soft-pedal it in Wisconsin, but I think that they changed their tactics in West Virginia. This is my recollection of the whole campaign now.

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MORRISSEY: After it was over, did the Humphrey and the Kennedy people tend to get together or was there still some deep feeling between the two camps?

COGGS: Well, there's some people that got together, then there still was some deep feeling between the two camps. You realize it's hard to get these kinds of campaigns for everybody.

MORRISSEY: Did you go out to the Convention in Los Angeles?

COGGS: I went out to the Convention, that's right.

MORRISSEY: I recall that even though Hubert Humphrey had released his delegates in the Wisconsin delegation, some of them still voted for him on that first ballot.

COGGS: I think you're right.

MORRISSEY: Were you a delegate?

COGGS: I was an alternate; I was not a delegate.

MORRISSEY: And I've often been curious to know, since alphabetically Wisconsin comes at the bottom of the roll call, if there wasn't intense effort by the Kennedy people to persuade some of these Humphrey people to vote for the man that looked like the winner on the first ballot.

COGGS: There was this intense effort. I remember in the campaign there was very intense effort. In fact, some of the delegates tried very hard to convince Gaylord Nelson, I think, to more actively support Kennedy than he first did, I'm pretty sure.

MORRISSEY: Did you go to the Convention thinking maybe Hubert Humphrey would be the vice presidential candidate?

COGGS. I was hoping so, yes.

[-7-]

MORRISSEY: Could you rest your hopes on anything substantial?

COGGS: I couldn't rest my hopes on anything substantial.

MORRISSEY: How about Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman]? I remember his name was tossed around quite a bit as a possible vice presidential candidate.

COGGS: I think it was, but I was hoping that Soapy Williams [G. Mennen Williams] would be the vice presidential candidate that Humphrey it seems wouldn't be.

MORRISSEY: When it was announced that the choice was going to be Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], was that rather hard to swallow?

COGGS: It was. [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: Did it take some salesmanship in the Wisconsin delegation to convince people to accept it?

COGGS: Well, I think it did. I left the Convention before the vice president was chosen. I had to come back to Wisconsin. I think there was some

disturbance in the Wisconsin delegation and the Michigan delegation about Johnson's choice as vice president.

MORRISSEY: Do you think it hurt the Kennedy-Johnson ticket?

COGGS: No. I don't think it hurt anything. It helped it, I believe. I think it was a smart move, after you look back on it, to bring the Southerners and the Northern liberals into one camp with a shrewd politician like Johnson—and Kennedy turned out to be.

[-8-]

MORRISSEY: How well did Kennedy do on the North Side in the November election against Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]?

COGGS: Oh, he did very well. He did very well.

MORRISSEY: So there wasn't any reluctance to vote.

COGGS: There was no reluctance to vote for him, no. None whatsoever. In fact, I think it was one of the biggest turnouts we had on the North Side—the presidential election. Not quite as big as Johnson did the last time, but one of the largest turnouts we've had.

MORRISSEY: I don't understand why Nixon won over Kennedy in Wisconsin by more than sixty thousand votes.

COGGS: I can understand it because of the fact that Wisconsin is a Republican state. This is my analysis of it.

MORRISSEY: Just reverting to their normal political affiliation.

COGGS: That's right.

MORRISSEY: Humphrey had a lot of support from labor people—I'm thinking now of the primary campaign here in Wisconsin—yet some people have told me that this support wasn't really as effective as it appeared to be. Was this your impression?

COGGS: Well, a lot of times labor support is not as effective as people think it is, and I think Kennedy had his labor people, too. It is my impression that the labor support was not what the people thought it was, but they did support him. Well, some of them. I'm pretty sure that Kennedy people and people in whole areas where....

MORRISSEY: Yes.

[-9-]

COGGS: Yes.

MORRISSEY: From your vantage point did you think that Marjorie Lawson [Marjorie M. Lawson] was doing a very effective job for John Kennedy?

COGGS: I think she was doing a very effective job with the odds against her in the area. I won't say the odds against her. They had one delegate, one vote, to start with—Vel Phillips. At that time, I was in a campaign for county office, and she was in a campaign for city office. This was a disadvantage to both of us—more of an advantage to me, I would say, because my voters were civil rights voters. Hers were, too, and she managed to win her campaign and still support Kennedy. I think Marjorie had a very good, effective campaign for him here.

MORRISSEY: During the autumn campaign, the Kennedy-Nixon campaign, did the Kennedy and Nelson forces in this state coordinate their efforts?

COGGS: So far as I'm concerned, I think they did.

MORRISSEY: Did you ever meet John Kennedy personally?

COGGS: Yes, I did.

MORRISSEY: During the Proxmire campaign?

COGGS: During the Proxmire campaign.

MORRISSEY: Did you meet him after that?

COGGS: I met him after that, and he was a very personable guy. He said that he had my picture in his office...

[-10-]

MORRISSEY: Oh really?

COGGS: Yes. He told me this personally. I don't know if he had somebody tell him about things or not, but he did. He was a very personable guy, and he directed things to you personally that would make you feel good. I've often said that if he could meet everybody and talk to them personally, he would be much better than Humphrey would be because Humphrey can sway at arm's length; he's a good

orator. He's a much better orator, I think, than Kennedy was. But person to person John Kennedy was a real personable guy who could command a lot of attention.

MORRISSEY: Would you say that was his greatest asset as a campaigner?

COGGS: I think so.

MORRISSEY: Just his personality. Did you meet him when he was president at all?

COGGS: I didn't meet him when he was president at all. I went to the White House for a civil rights affair that he had. But he had gone, I guess, when we got there. I met Robert and Ted [Edward M Kennedy], I guess, but I didn't meet him after he became president.

MORRISSEY: Some people have criticized him as president because he, in turn, had criticized Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], remember, for not taking action on the housing order. He said, "By one stroke of the pen..." and so forth. Is this the way it looked to you here in Milwaukee—that he was perhaps procrastinating?

COGGS: Well, it did look like he was procrastinating, and I assumed that he wanted to get some of his other legislation on the board before he made outright statements or actions on civil rights.

[-11-]

MORRISSEY: Did you ever have any discussions with Senator Humphrey about his primary campaign? Did he ever comment to you about how it was going or anything like that?

COGGS: I talked to Senator Humphrey at the beginning of the campaign. He said he was in trouble and he needed help. The other times he was pretty busy. I talked to most of his lieutenants or people who assisted him.

MORRISSEY: Why did he think he was in trouble?

COGGS: Well, I think that they had recognized that they should have started earlier like Kennedy did, that if they wanted to make time, they had to be more active. They had thought that, in our area, people would know about him because of his strong stand on civil rights. As I said before, this was not true. We had to remind them of that.

MORRISSEY: Why was that?

COGGS: Well, this was in 1948 when he made his stand at the Convention. Of

course his record as mayor of Minneapolis.... Now I've found that unless you keep people informed on what you're doing, they soon forget about it.

MORRISSEY: Offhand, were there any other people like yourself who had been approached by the Kennedy people and had made a commitment and then decided, when Humphrey announced he was going to be a candidate, to support Humphrey?

COGGS: No, I don't recall any at all. [Pause] No, I can't.

[-12-]

MORRISSEY: Do you have any other recollections which you think ought to go on record, anything I haven't alluded to?

COGGS : Well, I just wanted to say, as I was talking to my wife [Marcia Coggs] before I came down, that the civil rights speech that Kennedy made in the summer of 1961....

MORRISSEY: The one on television?

COGGS: Yes, the one on television.

MORRISSEY: It was later than that I think.

COGGS: It was '62?

MORRISSEY: The one he made when there was trouble in Oxford, Mississippi, about Meredith [James Howard Meredith] gaining entrance to the University [University of Mississippi]?

COGGS: This wasn't....

MORRISSEY: The one in the summer of '63 before the march on Washington?

COGGS: The one in the summer of '63 before the march on Washington. I thought that was one of the greatest speeches I've heard anybody make on any question, especially the question of civil rights. He was really good.

And I think that as close as the Nixon-Kennedy race was, the turning tide of the winning thing was really the TV appearances. I think that Kennedy just overshadowed him like everything on TV.

MORRISSEY: Anything else?

COGGS: No, that's about all, I guess.

MORRISSEY: Another question comes to mind. Did John Kennedy's Catholicism hurt him at all as a candidate on the North Side?

[-13-]

COGGS: I don't think so. I think it was a question of his stand on civil rights and his association with Southerners during the primary, you know, at the time he was trying to get the nomination. And it certainly didn't hurt him in general other ways. There's no question about that.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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