Biographical Note
Kamlowsky was Chairman, Citizens for Kennedy, Ohio County, West Virginia (1960). This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] 1960 presidential campaign in West Virginia, anti-Catholic sentiment against him in West Virginia, and the opposition of local politicians to his presidential run, among other issues.

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John H. Kamlowsky

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Date
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Political potential of John F. Kennedy [JFK]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chairman of Citizens for Kennedy in Ohio County, West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>JFK attends reception at West Liberty State Teachers College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Political climate of Ohio County, West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Kennedy organization’s concerns about JFK’s Catholicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>People switching their political party registration to vote for JFK in the primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The campaign for Senator Hubert H. Humphrey in Ohio County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>JFK’s political assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Results of the primary in Ohio County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Anti-Catholic sentiment against JFK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The opposition of West Virginia politicians to JFK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Prosecuting attorney’s opposition to JFK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The reaction to JFK’s program in Ohio County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Successes of JFK’s presidency in West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kamlowsky’s interview with <em>The Charleston Gazette</em> about campaign spending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Coalition of West Virginia politicians that opposed JFK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Significance of the JFK campaign in West Virginia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Oral History Interview

with

JOHN H. KAMLOWSKY

February 9, 1965
Wheeling, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with Mr. John H. Kamlowsky, who at the present time is U.S. attorney for the northern district of West Virginia. In 1960, he was serving as assistant prosecuting attorney in Ohio County. Mr. Kamlowsky, will you tell me when you first became interested in the political potential of Senator Kennedy?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, I can recall reading about the Kennedy family when Joseph P. Kennedy, the president's father, was the ambassador to the Court of St. James. I, of course, attached no special interest or significance to the Kennedy name. Then World War II broke out, and I recall reading the exploits of the president as the commander of PT-109. And then, of course, after the war occasionally there would be an item in the newspapers concerning the Kennedys, and again, I say, no special significance. I think I first became interested in President Kennedy as a possible presidential candidate in 1956 during the Democratic primary in Chicago. I recall that [Adlai E] Stevenson was nominated for the presidency and the nomination for the vice presidency was left allegedly to the Convention. At least that's what was said for the record. Then, due to television, we would see the behind-the-scenes battle between Senator [Estes] Kefauver and then Senator Kennedy. It was very interesting. I think that at that time I probably felt as bad or almost as bad as Senator Kennedy did when he did not receive the nomination for vice president. It was at that time that I thought that this individual had tremendous potential.
Then in 1959, in West Virginia, I was invited to an affair at the Elks Club at Wellsburg. Senator Kennedy came in to speak at a luncheon and had his wife Jacqueline with him. I attended that affair with one or two of my friends from Ohio County. That was the first time that I met Senator Kennedy and that was at Ralph Pryor's home, Ralph being the prosecuting attorney of Brook County, West Virginia. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to a dinner at the McClure Hotel in Wheeling at which Ted Kennedy appeared. There were approximately eighteen to twenty people from Ohio County. The primary purpose for the dinner apparently was to meet Ted Kennedy. Nothing was said of Jack Kennedy running for the presidency.

Then, shortly thereafter, John Ruckman, who at that time, I believe, was the chairman of the Democratic executive committee of Ohio County, approached me and asked me if I would be interested in becoming chairman of the Citizens for Kennedy in Ohio County. John also advised me that he would aid and he, in effect, would be a co-chairman. So I agreed to do so with John. Shortly thereafter, John apparently had other things on his mind. He withdrew, and I found that I had most of the planning and so forth on my own shoulders. It was then that I contacted another democrat in Ohio County, a man by the name of Edward A. Culley, and asked Ed if he were interested in Senator Kennedy. He stated that he was, and Ed agreed to work with me.

Probably in March or April of 1960, the senator flew into the Wheeling-Ohio County Airport late one evening on his private plane, Caroline, and I was at the airport to meet him with a few of the local citizens. We immediately took the then Senator Kennedy to the McClure Hotel where he was staying. With him at the time were [Timothy J] Ted Reardon, [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien and [Robert P.] McDonough who, of course, was the chairman of the Citizens for Kennedy for the State of West Virginia in that important and crucial primary. I recall talking with Bob McDonough that evening, after we had arrived at the hotel, and they were very much concerned because a reception had been planned for the following evening at the McClure. We were not sure of the response that the senator would receive from the people of this area, but we thought everything would work out.

Early the next morning, I met the senator at the McClure Hotel. There was an itinerary prepared. We visited various plants in the area. We also visited West Liberty State Teachers College which is approximately ten miles from Wheeling, and also Bethany College which is approximately fifteen miles from Wheeling.
As I recall, Bethany had called a special convocation, and the senator was to speak to the students. I think that the people with Kennedy were very much concerned about his visit to Bethany since it is a Protestant college. They were very much interested in the response that he would receive. I recall that the senator made a speech, and it was evident from the reception that he received from the students that they had accepted him and were well impressed. Certainly, it was not an audience that was overly receptive, but at the conclusion of his speech it was obvious that the senator had made some points. I think that if an election had been held right then and there, that the senator would have had the majority of the student body with him. There was no question of that.

And then after Bethany College, we went to West Liberty State Teachers College. The president of West Liberty at this time was a Dr. Paul Elbin. Elbin had been approached about possibly having a convocation, but since West Liberty is a state school and receive their funds from the state of West Virigina, he did not believe that the school indulge in partisan politics. So the reception for the students of West Liberty was held in the open, and the entire student body turned out as did Dr. Elbin. He, of course, did shake the senator's hand. As I recall, the senator possibly stood either in an open convertible or platform and gave a short five-minute speech and then spent approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes shaking hands and answering questions with various students. After that, we returned to the hotel for the reception that evening.

One thing struck me as the time. When the senator was visiting the various plants in the Wheeling area and when walking up and down the street, he seemed to be slightly shy and bashful in walking up to people and shaking their hands although he was firm, and there was no question that he was going to do it. He was a man to do what he wanted. There was a certain reticence about his actions. But this was not obvious, in my opinion, to the people he met because the people practically ran over each other in the attempt to shake his hand. Another thing very noticeable was that the majority of the people were young, and the older people stood at a distance and obviously didn't think much of his chances of becoming president of the United States of America. Their attitude seemed to be that they would have to be sold. As far as the younger ones were concerned, no selling job was needed whatsoever. They were with the man and they were willing to do anything necessary. It was a feeling, I think, that became contagious among the other people. I know one girl who resides in my neighborhood--she
was then, I believe, a senior in high school. The senator had
shaken her hand, and she came home, and she advised her parents
that she would not wash that hand for the next month. In effect,
he seemed to be like a second Frank Sinatra of the late thirties
and early forties. At least that is the way that the younger set
reacted to him.

In making the arrangements for the reception that night at
the McClure, I had requested the then county chairman of Ohio
County to introduce Senator Kennedy, and the county chairman
advised me that he would be unable to do that.

YOUNG: John, I would like to interrupt for just a minute.
Do you remember the approximate date of this recep­
tion, a month at least, or was it before the primary?

KAMLOWSKY: Oh, this was before the primary, and it was the
first visit by President Kennedy to the Panhandle since
he had announced that he was a candidate for the
presidency.

YOUNG: So it was part of the primary build-up in the
spring of 1960?

KAMLOWSKY: Oh, definitely. There was no question about that.

YOUNG: Well, excuse me, go ahead with the county chairman.

KAMLOWSKY: Going back again to the county chairman, the county
chairman was the same John Ruckman who had asked
me to assist him in building an organization for
Senator Kennedy in the Panhandle. What Ruckman's reasons were
for backing out of this, I don't know, but he was very reluctant.
And, in fact, he said he could not do it since, apparently, the
senator had opposition in the West Virginia primary, and therefore,
as county chairman, he would be unable to participate in any way.
I then called Carl Galbraith an attorney practicing in the city
of Wheeling. Carl was a former county chairman of Ohio County, and
it so happens that Kennedy had visited this area two or three years
prior to this visit. At that time, Mr. Galbraith had introduced
the senator to a public gathering, and he said he would be most
happy to introduce Senator Kennedy again. Of course, Mr. Galbraith,
at this time held no office in the state of West Virginia nor did
he hold any office in the Democratic party. Carl did introduce
the senator, and the senator made his usual, customary, excellent
speech.
The affair was held in the ballroom of the McClure Hotel. The interesting thing concerning the hotel is that there is a balcony overlooking the lobby. This balcony is approximately a hundred feet in length and approximately six or seven feet wide. The second floor was so packed that the police had to rope off the balcony for they were afraid that the balcony would collapse into the lobby. People were jammed into the lobby and outside, and I honestly don't think that one more person could have been fitted inside the ballroom of the hotel. After the speech by the senator, he then, of course, mingled with the crowd, shaking hands, signing autographs, as did Mrs. Kennedy. The affair was quite a success, and everyone was most pleased.

At this time, we also had a few ladies in the audience with pencils and papers taking names of volunteers who would work for the senator. They came up with many names. The people were quite anxious to work. Again, it was mostly the younger people and very few older people. As I have said before, the older people stood back and looked at the senator with a jaundiced eye and thought that his star would shortly come crashing down.

YOUNG: Do you think this was because they felt he was just simply too young in comparing him with Adlai Stevenson and [Dwight D.] Eisenhower?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, I think it was for a variety of reasons: number one, his age; number two, his religion; number three, the fact that really none of the older, what you might call the professional politicians of the state of West Virginia, as far as I knew at the time, were in the Kennedy camp. And the older ones were standing on the side-lines waiting to see what would happen before they would make their choice. Consequently, none of them would do anything for the senator. I know that some were requested to step in and help, but very few would and none would lend their name in his behalf at all.

YOUNG: John, I wonder if you would do this: Describe Ohio County in the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia, first of all politically, and then, secondly, say a word about the Catholic vote in this area and its special significance as far as the Kennedy candidacy was concerned.

KAMLOWSKY: Wheeling is primarily an industrial area. The population of Wheeling is approximately fifty-five thousand. The population of Ohio County was in 1960 sixty-five thousand. Wheeling is the center of a shopping area, you might say, of approximately one quarter of a million people.
It's the hub of this particular area. Wheeling, at one time in the 1930s, as I understand, had more millionaires per capita—or possibly in the twenties—than any other city in the United States. In 1960, your voter registration in Ohio County was nearly evenly divided. The total Republican registration, I recall, was approximately twenty-one, twenty-two thousand and possibly higher; the Democratic registration was approximately one thousand less than the Republicans. The county has the habit of voting for the candidate rather than the party. So Consequently, in your local county offices, we have both Republicans and Democrats holding office at the same time. As far as national politics are concerned, this particular area, I would say, is Republican. That is especially evidenced by the fact that the one congressman who represents the First Congressional District of which Ohio County is a part, has held that post for approximately eight years, and Ohio County has been giving him majorities of fifteen thousand, which is a high majority in a county of this size. If anything, you might say that nationally Ohio County would be inclined to be Republican in 1960. They had voted for Eisenhower in 1956 and also in 1952. I am not sure whether Ohio County went for [Harry S.] Truman or [Thomas E.] Dewey in 1948, but I would assume they went for Dewey. Prior to that, the county did go for [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. But basically the county is Republican in thought and in philosophy, in my opinion. There are two newspapers in the city of Wheeling, and the publishers are Republican, although one of the papers allegedly is Democratic. But due to the fact that the publisher is Republican, you do have the Republican philosophy basically.

YOUNG: Let us go back to the 1960 primary. If you took the Democratic voters in the county, what percentage of the Democratic registration would you presume to be Catholic and what percent Protestant? Is there any way to break this down?

KAMLOWSKY: It is my understanding that Ohio County is approximately twenty-five percent Catholic. I would assume that over fifty percent of the Catholics—and this assumption might be erroneous, but I would think that they were in 1960 Republican in their philosophies. The Diocese of Wheeling which is the seat of Catholic diocese for the state of West Virginia plus a few counties in the state of Virginia. . . . The bishop of the diocese in 1960, to my understanding, was a Republican. He was a very conservative individual.

Incidentally, that brings up the question of a decision that had to be made. Some of the people in the Kennedy organization thought that it would be nice if the senator would visit Bishop Swint. Others felt that because of the bishop's politics, it would be a useless gesture. To make a long story short, the senator did not visit the bishop.
I might add that the Kennedy organization—and by the Kennedy organization, I mean the men who were on his Washington staff and who seemed to carry the most weight—were very sensitive concerning the fact that the senator was Catholic. I think that if a priest walked up with a Roman collar, the first thing they did was glance around to see if any photographers were in evidence, though at no time did anyone deny that he was Catholic or anything of that nature. The question simply wasn't raised. If anything, he would prefer to meet a Masonic group or a Methodist group, a Baptist group, any group whatsoever, although the senator was not particularly interested in what type of a group it was as long as there was a group. He would expose his personality to them and endeavor to have these people work for him in the campaign.

YOUNG: Well, John, this is the most Catholic part of West Virginia. During the campaign and afterwards, we heard that many Republican voters in this area switched their registration to Democratic so that they could vote for the senator in the primary. Would you evaluate this statement?

KAMLOWSKY: The Kennedy people, I think, made politics a science in the 1960 primary in West Virginia and followed through in the general election in November of 1960. I know that in the Panhandle they had a telephone campaign in which they would recruit various women who were interested in the senator's candidacy to make phone calls to their neighbors, not identify themselves in any way, but simply state that they were a member of the Citizens for Kennedy for President and requesting these people to vote in the primary, and if they saw fit, vote for the senator.

Now, in West Virginia, you cannot cross over in the primary. If you are a registered Democrat, you may vote only the Democratic ballot, and if you are a Republican, you vote only the Republican ballot. I know for a fact that there were many republican women that did work for the senator in the primary on the telephone and through other means, and wholeheartedly, with no question of time. Their thought was that they would not change their registration because possibly their husbands might be Republican, but if the senator did receive the nomination, they certainly were going to vote for him in November. And they would do everything they possibly could to assist him in obtaining the Democratic nomination even though they could not vote for him in the primary.
YOUNG: Well, without going into the records at the courthouse where I suppose that this is available, would you tend to discount then the number of people that anticipated the primary and deliberately switched their registration ahead of time?

KAMLOWSKY: I don't believe there was much switching in this particular area by people to vote for Kennedy. Although some say that, in their opinion, a considerable number of Catholics did switch, I don't believe that because I think if you would check the figures of people who switched in 1960, the figures would be less then in 1964, so it would only be a normal switch and nothing extraordinary.

YOUNG: In other words, great numbers didn't anticipate far enough ahead of time . . .

KAMLOWSKY: Definitely not.

YOUNG: We could check this very easily. But I presume that you can't switch a certain number of days or weeks before the election itself, but you would have to change your registration at least thirty days or sixty days before the primary?

KAMLOWSKY: I am not sure, but I think that is correct.

YOUNG: Well, you mentioned the volunteer women, the volunteer men involved. Did they tend to represent any particular religious group or was it a group that was interested in the senator per se?

KAMLOWSKY: No, I think this was one of those situations which you might say was a grass-roots thing. People were interested in the senator as a man. And I think that if the reverse were true, if he were a Republican, the same thing would have occurred. It was not a question whether he was a Democrat or a Republican. It was a question of what type of individual he was, the appeal he had, and the program that he was presenting in the primary to the people of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, that brings up another point. We know that there are a great many different West Virginias, and you have already described this one as being based on heavy industry, steel in particular, coal, glass, pottery. What particular pitch did the senator make to this area that might be distinguished from political programs he presented in other parts of the state? Did he tailor anything to the immediate area in the primary?
KAMLOWSKY: No, nothing was tailored particularly to the northern Panhandle. His campaign, as far as I know, was the same throughout the state of West Virginia. Of course, when you went into the southern part of the state in 1960, you had numerous coal miners out of work because coal mining was and is the principal industry there. Due to the mechanization and automation in the mines, probably over fifty percent of the employable men in certain counties in the southern part of the state were unemployed and were receiving welfare from the state of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, John, in this particular area let's move into. . . . I would like to talk about the Kennedy platform in the primary, but for purposes of contrast, talk about the campaign for Senator [Hubert H. Humphrey in this area. How well organized were the Humphrey forces in Ohio County? How much real opposition did they give Senator Kennedy?

KAMLOWSKY: Humphrey really had no organization in the primary that I know of. I do know that one individual came into Wheeling, opened a campaign headquarters at the Windsor Hotel, and apparently attempted to secure people to work voluntarily for Senator Humphrey. It was my understanding that approximately three days later the Humphrey headquarters was closed. So actually, there was no organized drive that I know of for Senator Humphrey in this area.

However, there is one thing interesting concerning that. In talking with various individuals who were interested in national politics in 1960, and by that I mean Democratic politicians. . . . These men did not think that Kennedy could win in 1960. However, these men also were all not for Hubert Humphrey. Some were for [Lyndon B.], Johnson; some were for Stevenson; some were for [Stuart] Symington. And what you had were these individuals working against Kennedy and for Humphrey. The reason for that, of course, was that if Kennedy lost the state of West Virginia, then Kennedy was no longer a candidate. He, in fact, would be dead. Then the men that they were interested in would have a chance at the Democratic convention.

YOUNG: Well, let's go back then to Kennedy's special appeal. Would you run over any items in the Kennedy program in the primary that seemed to appeal to voters in the area? In other words, what were Kennedy's most attractive political assets and what were the issues, if any, that seemed to be important?
KAMLOWSKY: Well, of course, I think that the most attractive asset that Senator Kennedy had was Senator Kennedy himself. The man made a marvelous appearance; he made a wonderful speech. I think the average woman, to be blunt, when she looked at Kennedy, she was not particularly interested in the platform. [Pause] Another thing that I think helped tremendously in the state of West Virginia was his war record. As I understand it, West Virginia had more men per capita serving in the armed forces in World War II than any other state in the Union. I firmly believe that many of these veterans were definitely interested in the senator. I know that in the city of Wheeling there was a magazine, or I should say approximately an eight-page newspaper, that had been printed outside the state. This particular paper was distributed to nearly every home in the city of Wheeling. It contained articles concerning, among other things, his exploits in World War II, his labor record in the Senate of the United States and in the Congress, what he felt labor should have, his policies on practically everything you would think of, including medicare. So that if one were interested in the policies of Senator Kennedy, all one had to do was pick up this paper, and they were set out very explicitly.

YOUNG: Well, did you and the Kennedy forces in Ohio County have any special contacts with organized groups? I am thinking, for instance, of Negro voters, of organized labor, of pressure groups that might bring votes.

KAMLOWSKY: All these groups were contacted. I should say—rather than use the words groups—the leaders of these various groups or the majority of these groups were contacted. Any specific questions they had pertinent to themselves would be answered so that they all knew what the senator's stand would be, if elected, on every issue that would be vital to them.

YOUNG: Civil rights, however, in this part of West Virginia wouldn't necessarily be an issue. Is that correct?

KAMLOWSKY: Civil rights would not be a problem here because the schools have been integrated. There is really no racial problem here whatsoever.

One of the very interesting things and amusing things that happened during the primary—the Kennedy headquarters was on the second floor of the McClure Hotel, Ted Reardon, who was on the Senator's staff in Washington, was in Wheeling and spent approximately four or five weeks in Wheeling. He, of course, was interested in the Panhandle. This particular day Ted and I were the
only two in the headquarters, and an individual walked in who was not very well-dressed. He said that he needed some money to get home, and he lived down state. By down state, I mean the southern part of the state, approximately two hundred miles from Wheeling. So, Reardon and I gave him two or three dollars, whatever the price of a bus ticket was home, and asked him who he intended to vote for in the primary. He advised us that he was a veteran, and he was going to vote for Jack Kennedy. We asked him why he was going to vote for Kennedy. He said that he had examined both candidates very closely, their qualifications and their backgrounds. He was for Kennedy since Kennedy apparently had come up the hard way, had not had very much in his early life, and this other individual, whom he could not even name; had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had everything that he wanted when he was young, and lacked nothing whatsoever. He didn't believe that such a man could appreciate the difficulties that the less fortunate have in life and therefore would not make a good president as far as he was concerned. Therefore, he was going to vote for Senator Kennedy and would not vote for that other man, whoever he was.

YOUNG: In other words, he completely reversed the candidates.

KAMLOWSKY: Completely reversed.

YOUNG: Did you set him straight?

KAMLOWSKY: No, Reardon and I simply looked at each other and smiled and wished him "bon voyage."

YOUNG: Well, John, in coming to some kind of a conclusion on the primary itself, do you have any other memories of contacts or meetings with Senator Kennedy that might be interesting?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, one thing that impressed me with the senator's grasp of the primary in West Virginia was this: On this one night, there were four of us in the car. As I recall, it was Ted Reardon, the senator, myself, and who the fourth was I can't remember. The ride to the airport takes approximately twenty-five minutes to a half hour from Wheeling. During the ride, the senator was asking various questions concerning the whole state of West Virginia and different people in the state, mentioning these various people by names, whether they had been contacted, various problems that had been raised or questions by them, had they been answered. In effect, he knew apparently everything that was going on. I do recall—and I was a little bit surprised at the time—they weren't able to answer one question. Apparently, no one had done anything on this particular matter, and the senator was displeased. In fact, he retorted something to the effect, "God damn it. What's going on!" He seemed to have a little bit of
a temper if things were not being handled properly. I think that is one little insight into the senator: A very well-organized man and he expected the people that were associated with him also to be well-organized, to know what they were doing, why they were doing it, and to do it properly.

YOUNG: Well, John, how well did Senator Kennedy do in the Ohio County primary?

KAMLOWSKY: The turnout in Ohio County, as I recall.... I think the senator carried Ohio County between five to one to six to one in the Democratic primary.

YOUNG: Were you surprised at these results or were they about what you had anticipated?

KAMLOWSKY: I was rather surprised. I expected the senator to carry the county maybe two to one or three to one. And the fact that he carried if five to six to one was very definitely a pleasant surprise to all concerned.

YOUNG: What were your misgivings, or what led you to believe that the majority wouldn't be this great?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, Ohio County, as I stated before, is rather an odd county. The people vote both Republican and Democrat. They don't give an indication, and there is really no way to have a good indication how they intend to vote. Now, the reception that the senator received in this area was tremendous. And due to the fact that Wheeling is across the river from the state of Ohio, we had no idea of how many people who attended that meeting were from the state of Ohio, interested in the senator, and therefore unable to vote for him in the West Virginia primary.

YOUNG: Or even conceivably, I suppose, a few neighbors from Pennsylvania.

KAMLOWSKY: I have no doubt that people from Pennsylvania were also here since Pennsylvania is only seven miles from the city of Wheeling. So we didn't anticipate any problems here, but we certainly didn't expect five or six to one. At least I didn't, to be honest about it.

YOUNG: Were you surprised at the state-wide results in the primaries?
KAMLOWSKY: Very definitely. I think when you travel into the southern part of the state of West Virginia, you're into an area that is not too particularly interested in Catholics. Any knowledge that they have concerning Catholics certainly is detrimental to Catholics, in my opinion. I recall that I was returning from Clarksburg--this was in 1959--and there were five or six of us in the automobile. We stopped at New Martinsville which is approximately twenty-five miles below Wheeling on the Ohio River. We went into this restaurant--it was late at night--to get a cup of coffee before continuing our trip. The waitress who served us was asked what she thought of Senator Kennedy. Now this, of course, was prior to the primary and there was really no great interest. But her reaction was that she was afraid that if Senator Kennedy was elected president of the United States of America, the Pope would be in control of the United States. And she was perfectly sincere in her thoughts. I think of the group of six of us, at least four if not five were Protestant. They attempted to dispel her doubts concerning the senator. The more they attempted to show her the error of her thoughts, the more statements she made concerning Catholics, what they did, who controlled them, and certainly it was an indication that many people in the state of West Virginia have a fear of Catholics.

YOUNG: Well, John, let's come back to just Ohio County. Did any of the Protestant clergy in Ohio County use the pulpit against the senator in the primary? Were there sermons against him, or any active campaign against him on the basis of his religion in Ohio County?

KAMLOWSKY: I cannot honestly recall. I understood that some of the ministers were definitely opposed to the senator. As far as using the pulpit as a means to attack his candidacy, I can't recall that.

YOUNG: Well, as a Catholic yourself, you might have not have been in on the Protestant underground, but were there stories privately circulated, that sort of usual thing that we hear about every presidential candidate?

KAMLOWSKY: No, I did not hear many stories of that nature. Most of the people that I worked with on the Kennedy campaign, in fact the majority of my friends, are non-Catholic. I didn't feel that there was any anti-Catholic feeling necessarily.
YOUNG: In other words, the area wasn't particularly vicious?

KAMLOWSKY: Definitely not. In fact, a few of my friends who are good Masons were for Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, John, is there anything more about the primary that you would like to say before we move on, anything that I haven't asked or covered?

KAMLOWSKY: One other interesting aspect of the primary, as I mentioned before, was the fact that the headquarters for the Kennedy organization in Ohio County was on the second floor of the McClure Hotel.

It so happens that adjoining the headquarters is the ballroom which is also used for meetings by various local civic organizations, especially those who have noon luncheons. I can recall many instances where various businessmen would be going into the noon luncheon. Of course, they would have to pass the headquarters. They would glance in or maybe come in and pick up some of the literature and have a tendency to smile and glance at the people in the organization headquarters.

The only conclusion that you could think of was that in their minds you were a nut and why were you wasting your time. But nothing was said. It was simply the way they looked at you, and they had that half smile. And then of course, I know they were thinking that because after the primary and especially after the general election, many of these same individuals, who I know, came up to me afterwards and said, "Did you honestly think, back in the primary, that Kennedy would be president?" And I said, "Naturally."

YOUNG: Well, let's go then on to the general election. Can you describe the nature of your activities then after the primary victory? What was your relationship with the Kennedy candidacy between the night of the primary victory and then the November election?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, there were frankly difficulties in the state of West Virginia. The professional politicians in the state of West Virginia were very unhappy with the Kennedy organization. They felt that this was an organization that possibly threatened their existence and they wanted no part of it. They did not want this organization to function during the general election. Especially in Ohio County I know this was true, and I understood this was true all over the state. They wanted everything, of course,
to go through the county chairmen, which is logical and which should be done. But the people who worked for Kennedy were people who normally would not be involved in politics. They were interested in an individual and not a party. Consequently, though these people would work in an organized effort for the senator, they would not work for other candidates on the Democratic ticket they did not support. But again, this was something that had to be done for party harmony. Bob McDonough stated that you had to go through the county chairmen, cooperate with the county chairman, do everything you could, smooth their feathers if they felt they were ruffled.

And so in Ohio County, rather than have two headquarters in the general election, there was one headquarters. . . . All the candidates had their own literature, and, of course, there was Kennedy literature in there. The only literature that the people were taking was the Kennedy literature. It was that the local candidates, possibly two to three weeks prior to the general election, started to jump on the Kennedy coattails. Prior to that, they felt that he was an albatross around their neck. In fact, they requested anybody, including the former Kennedy organization, to obtain any Kennedy supplies that they could. I know one individual who purchased approximately three or four dozen Kennedy hats. Well, these were sold out, as I recall, one morning, and rush orders were placed for new hats. Anything with the name of Kennedy on it was taken immediately by the general public.

I was an assistant prosecuting attorney at the time, the prosecuting attorney was up for re-election, and he happened to be Catholic but anti-Kennedy. The reason that he was anti-Kennedy was that he felt that Kennedy would repeat the 1928 election. He thought that Kennedy would take the Democratic ticket down with him. I was advised on more than one occasion that either I was to give up my interest in Senator Kennedy's candidacy or resign from the prosecuting attorney's office. Some of my more influential friends heard of this and advised the prosecuting attorney that if he felt that he had to relieve me of my position as an assistant prosecutor, they felt that they had to work against him as prosecuting attorney and he would not win re-election. Then an amazing thing happened. Approximately two days before the election, the prosecutor advised me that he thought Kennedy had a chance. He thought that Kennedy was definitely an asset, and he was most happy that Kennedy was on the ticket. I think he was typical of the, if you might call him, professional politician in the state of West Virginia.
YOUNG: Do you think then Ohio County pretty accurately mirrored this albatross feeling and then there was a last-minute reversal?

KAMLOWSKY: I have no doubt about that since the boys in Ohio County obviously talked to the people in Charleston who, in turn, talked to the people in the rest of the state. I think it was a common opinion.

YOUNG: Well, did anti-Catholic feeling spring up then before the general election? The same question that I asked about the primary we might, just now, apply to the November election.

KAMLOWSKY: That's a rather touchy situation in Wheeling since twenty-five per cent approximately is Catholic. We have really no dividing lines in this city, and most friendships are regardless of religion. So no one really was in a position to state anything that would be anti-Catholic because obviously, he would lose many of his friends. I think many of the Catholics were bending over backwards, and there were many Catholics that did not wish Senator Kennedy to be elected because they felt that with a Catholic president in the White House they, in turn, would suffer by any mistakes that he would make, and the mistakes would be blamed on Catholics in general. You had a reaction also which was counter to the other reaction.

YOUNG: Would you go on then and give some kind of an evaluation of the reaction to the Kennedy program in Ohio County and among the Kennedy supporters?

KAMLOWSKY: I think the reaction was very favorable. Kennedy certainly had mentioned these things during the campaign, prior to November, and that basically was the program that he presented to Congress. The people had approved it in November, and they certainly were still for it after he had been sworn in as president. I think West Virginians, in general, were very pleased with President Kennedy since there was no question that he had a warm spot in his heart for West Virginia. West Virginia was primarily instrumental for his election to the presidency it did prove a Catholic could win in a Protestant state. West Virginia expected much from President Kennedy, and President Kennedy certainly did everything possible for West Virginia. I don't think that anybody in West Virginia disapproved of any of his policies in general.
YOUNG: Can you think of any of the policies that were met with a particularly favorable response, particularly any that might apply to an industrial area such as this?

KAMLOWSKY: I know that Congress passed much legislation concerning government loans. In this area and West Virginia in general, people attempted to take advantage of these various acts of Congress and attempted to obtain all the money possible. That was evident here in the Wheeling area since government funds were used to build one plant even though the plant is still idle at least two years later. And then, of course, we had the road funds in Ohio County. Interstate 70 should be finished within the next two to three years through this area. We have two new tunnels going through Wheeling Hill to expedite traffic. So we have certainly taken advantage in this area of the road building funds. The city council in the city of Wheeling has various committees which are studying the various acts of Congress and are attempting to take advantage of these acts and obtain money. And of course, the welfare program has helped, the government funds there Mental health has been one item in this state that had been neglected in the past. I know Wheeling now has a guidance center and that is entirely due through the aid of federal funds.

I do know this: that many of my friends are Republicans and are prominent in the Republican party. Immediately after the assassination of President Kennedy, one individual in particular—he was a rabid Republican, and his wife was for Kennedy in the 1960 election—advised me that he certainly had intended to vote for Kennedy in 1964. And I think that was true of numerous people. Once they had seen the man in action and realized his abilities and his potential and what he could do for the country, they had no fear of his age and they had no fear of his religion. They were judging the man on his merits and not on matters that really didn't matter. I think that if that event hadn't occurred on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy would have won the election in 1964 by anywhere from five to ten million votes because the people really appreciated the man and were no longer in fear of his religion.

I think that they realized after his death the fact that he did have a firm grasp of foreign affairs. This, of course, is vital in this day and age. This is a man who had stood up to the Russians and realized what he was doing. I think that he had the respect and admiration of the people, which, of course, is the most important asset of all. I have
no doubt that in the second four-year term he would have realized his full potential.

BEGIN SIDE I TAPE II

YOUNG: This is reel two of an interview with Mr. John H. Kamlowsky, U. S. Attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia. In the 1960 Kennedy primary, Mr. Kamlowsky served as the County Chairman for Kennedy in Ohio County, West Virginia. At that time, he was an assistant prosecuting attorney. John, do you have any other comments as we finish this interview?

KAMLOWSKY: One other thing occurs, and that is that it was either after the West Virginia primary or after the general election, a reporter from the Charleston Gazette called and requested an interview. Upon meeting with him, he had one question, and that question was how much money was spent in the northern panhandle by the Kennedy forces in the West Virginia primary. When he was advised that there was practically no money whatsoever spent up here, that all the work was by amateurs who were not paid and they were strictly interested in the candidate himself, he was very much amazed and I am sure that he did not believe me. But it was the truth. I understand that this particular paper conducted interviews in various parts of the state of West Virginia, and they seemed to imply that considerable sums were spent, and that possibly the election was actually purchased. There is no question that this is not true. And I am firmly of the opinion, especially from what I saw, that Kennedy won on his own merits.

There was no question that it was a well-run campaign, and it was operated in a way that would be expected of a general's staff in time of war. As I saw the Kennedy organization, the people at the top of the organization, though not professional politicians, each had their assigned duties and they were each very efficient. They were very much dedicated to the senator. This, of course, is not normally what you find in politics. Normally it is a question of, well, what is in it for me. These people had one objective in mind, and that was the election of Senator Kennedy. Many of these people, apparently had been with him for years. This was something that the Gazette did not understand, especially the reaction of the people of West Virginia and the people who worked for him. But he was simply an attractive candidate whom people liked. I think that possibly these questions were originally raised by the people who opposed Kennedy in the primary.
When I say the people who opposed Kennedy I do not mean the Humphrey organization. I mean those politicians in the state that were interested in other candidates, such as those who favored Stevenson, Symington, and Humphrey. These people thought that if they could block Kennedy in West Virginia, then the convention in July would be wide open, and at that time they could make whatever book was necessary for their candidates and possibly push their candidate over at that time. However, for some apparent reason, none of these individuals saw fit to come in and oppose Kennedy in the West Virginia primary. I am firmly of the opinion that Humphrey was chosen to stem the tide.

YOUNG: By a coalition, you mean?

KAMLOWSKY: Right. And this, of course, did not happen, as was obvious from what occurred after that. I can't recall at the time of the West Virginia primary any major Democratic politicians who had come out in favor of Senator Kennedy. Most had their own axes to grind and they did not take Kennedy seriously. Even if they had taken him seriously and come to West Virginia, I am sure that the results would have been the same regardless of who the opponents had been in the primary.

YOUNG: Well, John, do you think the Kennedy people had cased West Virginia, and do you think they know what to expect in West Virginia politically when the senator was considering entering the primary?

KAMLOWSKY: There's no question in my mind that the Kennedy people had looked at West Virginia very closely and had decided all the pros and cons before making a decision. And though I was not present, I know that meetings were held in 1959 concerning the possibility of Senator Kennedy entering the West Virginia primary. This state was examined county by county, I assume. The one reason that I have for saying this was that I did attend one meeting early in 1960, in Washington, at Robert Kennedy's home. I recall at that meeting, Larry O'Brien, Robert McDonough from West Virginia, Robert Kennedy, and I believe Kenny O'Donnell and one or two others of the Kennedy staff were present. There were approximately seven or eight people from the state of West Virginia. These seven or eight represented the various parts of the state, and at that time, the state was reviewed section by section. I know some questions were raised concerning certain parts of the state. There was a slight disagreement as to what would be necessary to carry the vote in those particular sections in the state of West Virginia. But the
Kennedy people indicated that they knew what the situation was throughout the state, and they could cope with the situation.

I think that, as I have said before, this was the best organized effort that has ever been made in this country. And in the future, the Kennedy blueprint will be followed closely because if you follow that blueprint and do the necessary work, and if you have an attractive candidate, well, there is no question that you have at least an even chance to win any election.

YOUNG: John, do you have any final reflections or observations on the Kennedy years in West Virginia, their importance, significance, or your own participation in the Kennedy program?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, I think there is no doubt that the remaining forty-nine states of the Union now know that West Virginia exists. In the past if you traveled in the West and stated that you were from West Virginia, they would ask you how close you live to Richmond. They now realize that West Virginia is a separate state from the Old Dominion. I think that is one thing that had occurred. And I think the people of West Virginia realize more closely the problems of the state as a whole, which is something they didn't realize before. I think they appreciate the problems, and there is a concerted effort by all the citizens now to not only solve the problems of their particular section, but again, the state as a whole. I would think that the state is more unified than it has ever been.

YOUNG: Well, I have picked up in various discussions and interviews the possibility that the West Virginia primary added something to the president's education. Would you have any comment on this?

KAMLOWSKY: Well, I would think that the senator certainly appreciated the problems of the unemployed, the problems of those that were unskilled to go into other industries if the particular industry in which they were skilled was closed down. And I have no doubts that it benefited the country as a whole because certainly West Virginia, especially in 1960, was one of the poorer states in the Union. The economic conditions here were terrible.
I think that the people of West Virginia came to the conclusion that the remainder of the country came to at a later time, and that was if you intended to mold a presidential candidate and if you had your choice of the ingredients to place in one man, Kennedy answered perfectly. The man was young, had an attractive appearance, and had a very attractive personality. I believe you can consider him somewhat of an intellectual. He was a practical politician. He was polished. He had a sense of humor. He had an attractive wife, an attractive family, And I can't think of anything that was missing from this man's make-up that you could ask for in a presidential candidate. As I say, the people of West Virginia saw this first. I think he appreciated that fact, and he, in turn, intended to do everything he could for West Virginia. The people of West Virginia realized this from the very beginning.

YOUNG: This is the end of reel two, the last reel of an interview with Mr. John H. Kamlowsky of Wheeling, West Virginia. The interview was conducted on February 9, 1965 in Mr. Kamlowsky's office, that of the United States District Attorney for Northern West Virginia. The interview was by William L. Young.