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Oral History Interview

with

MARY McNEELY

By Mary Tierney
May 5, 1964
Charlestown, Mass.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TIERNEY: Tell me, Miss McNeely, about the first time that you met Jack Kennedy in Charlestown.

McNEELY: Well, the first time I met Jack Kennedy was in April of 1946. The exact date I don’t recall, but it was in April on an evening. He came to my house with Billy Sutton, who also came from Charlestown. When he came to us and Billy Sutton introduced him as John Kennedy, really the name John Kennedy didn’t strike anything with us, because up to this time we were aware that a former Charlestown fellow, John Cotter, who has since gone to his reward, was running for Congress in Charlestown.

He sat and talked with my father, who has since passed away, and he talked at quite great length and he told him he was thinking of running for Congress. My father, who had come from Ireland, had lived in the Sullivan Square section all his life. He was very skeptical, because he really didn’t recognize this name of Kennedy as being from our district. So one word led to another and in the conversation he mentioned that he was the son of [Joseph P., Sr.] Joe Kennedy, the former
ambassador. Well, to my father that had a great deal of
meaning because my father, back before the time of prohi-
bition, had been in charge of the Warren House in Charlestown
for Eddie Fitzgerald, who was John F. Kennedy's grandfather's
brother. And Joe Kennedy visited him quite often. The times
he did visit him, he was very kind to my father. So that
put a different light on the picture altogether.

After they talked for a long while, then, of course, my
father was all for him running for Congress and assured him
that he would be behind him and his family would be. Now we
live in the Sullivan Square section of Charlestown and Precinct
7 was the largest precinct in Charlestown and was controlled
by some very prominent men in political life. But my father
always was known to carry that precinct. So he told him
that he would look out for Precinct 7 and assured him that
we would be with him. So, he left that night. Of course,
he told us all—he wouldn't have impressed you at the time,
because he was very thin and he'd had, apparently had, malaria.
He was very yellow and you could never imagine—he was so
young looking that he didn't look as if he was old enough
to go to Congress. But as I said, he was assured that we
would be behind him. So he said that we would hear from
him.

At a later time we did hear from him. And they had
opened the headquarters on Main Street in Charlestown of which Mrs. Colbert was in charge of the ladies' division. Every night we went to the headquarters. We had been--well, we were interested in that program before, working with Mrs. Colbert in other campaigns. So we thoroughly enjoyed it. And he came every night at some part of the evening to, well, to thank us for doing the work for him.

Well, then the June following that, the June before the election, he came to Charlestown, and he was in the 17th of June parade. I always recall that he came to the corner of our street and we had one of my nieces present him with a bouquet of flowers so people would recognize him. And when she gave him the flowers he was so disturbed. He just didn't know what to do with the flowers, that he walked about five feet and the first little old lady he came to, he gave the flowers to. So you weren't going to recognize him by the flowers. He always had that manner of being very shy. 'It came to the election time . . .

TIERNEY: Could you tell us about the first house party at your house?

McNEELY: Oh, yes. We had the first house party for him. That was in about August, around the first of August or maybe the end of July. We had the house party at home and had close to a hundred people there and he came and his sister, Eunice Shriver, who is now Mrs. Shriver, came with
him. And he stood and he gave his speech that he had prepared. And I would like to add a little story here about that particular time, because while he was speaking, his sister, Bunice, was saying every word along with him and it was very noticeable. When he had finished his speech, he called her out to our kitchen and he said, "Bunice, you made me very very nervous. Don't ever do that to me again." She said, "Jack, I thought you were going to forget your speech."

At that time, that night—I happen to be a great sports fan and, in particular, a great hockey fan of many years. I had several hockey sticks autographed in the room. And he was attracted to them. So he took the hockey stick in his hand just as if he was going to play with it. He said, "I haven't had one of those in my hand since I was in prep school." But why I mentioned the hockey sticks, is the fact that he never, up to the time of his assassination, he never forgot that I was a hockey fan or a sports fan. It always seemed to linger with him and he always recalled that incident. And, of course, the election came, which is now history, of course. He won the seat for Congress and he beat the Charlestown candidate. And I'm very proud to say that in Precinct 7, he won in that precinct, too. Then, of course, as we know, he was in Congress and we always followed him and everything he did—if we'd feel that he was interested in or
or he more or less—he always sent a letter to the district
telling what bills he was going to propose or bills he had
proposed and what bills had passed and so forth and so on.

But when it came... After he had been in there for
three terms, in 1952, he decided to run for the Senate. Well,
on May—it's almost a coincidence that we should be having this
interview today, because on May 25, 1952, at that time I was
President of the Daughters of Isabella No. 1, who are affili-
ated with Bunker Hill Council No. 62, Knights of Columbus.
I was the President and it happened to be the 50th Anniversary
of the organization. I had invited him and the then Arch-
Bishop Richard Cushing of Boston to be guests on that evening.
Well, he came and he was on crutches. He had just come out of
the hospital, and he was on crutches. He looked very bad that
evening. But then I realized when we got to the Hotel Bradford
that it was in the works then for him to run for Senate, because
every newspaper in Massachusetts about was there interviewing
him, and they took all kinds of pictures. A picture which I
have to this day, I have Cardinal Cushing on my right and
the President on my left. And there's a peculiar coincidence.
I never gave that much thought until I first saw that picture
and in more or a less in a joking way, I used to say to
people, yes, someday he will be a Cardinal and someday he'll
be the President of the United States," which turned out to be.
It all happened on that particular evening. But the tremendous interest that was paid him on that evening at that banquet was the first inkling I had that he was going up for, running for, Senate and that he must have been national timber or there wouldn't be so many newspapermen interested in him. When it came to the---of course, it was only possibly a month after that when it was officially announced that he would run for Senate against Senator Lodge.

At that time, I was working on the committee and I worked on Battery March Street. And we gave many, many hours there. In fact, we went every night for about three or four months, and there was a tremendous amount of work to be done. I spent most of my time working with a man who was Mr. Joseph Kennedy's, his father's, head man from New York, a man by the name of Mr. Lenny Johnson, who, I hear now, still works for him in New York. But we worked many, many, many hours there and, of course, he was successful in that particular fight. But there are so many stories about the late President to recall, I never could recall all of them. I never could recall the many, many places that I met him. But I always would want it to be known that even though I was just a small, small person in the number of people that he met in his life, or the classes of people that he met in his life, he never forgot. Because no matter where he saw me or any member of my family, he went
out of his way to make sure that he would speak to them, or if there was anybody to be spoken to, or anybody to be introduced to, that was of any importance, he always made sure that that happened.

TIERNEY: Did you ever have any other parties for him or did your father ever have any other house parties for him after the first one?

MCNENLY: No. We never had another party for him. We had been to... Of course, as it progressed, then the things got bigger. Of course, everybody is very familiar with all the teas and coffee hours. And all of that which we did take part in, in both the congressional and the senatorial fights. But in all those things, there are so many anecdotes that you could recall. Some of them are very personal, but there's no word you could use to describe him or describe just his manner. You would have to know him in the sense that I know him to explain it.

And, of course, I'll never get over the tragedy of his death. But it's peculiar. It's almost unbelievable that I should be sitting here talking about him being dead. I just can't realize that at all.

I might add here that, of course, when he ran for the Presidency, we met him in Boston here. We were going to Miami to the Legion Convention and we told him, and we said, "Well, we'll certainly work for you down there." So, they
gave us a lot of buttons and paraphernalia to give out to our friends at the convention, but he also gave us the name of people down there to see to get these buttons and everything. So we did. And from that convention... We flew down but we came back over the road. And all the places that we stopped all the way up we gave out all these buttons and so forth. But it was almost, you could almost tell that he was going to be elected. I had no fear of him not being elected, because in the South people would come up to you and just almost whisper to you that—"Would you please give me a button. I can't wear it, but would you please give me a button."—because they wanted to vote so badly for him.

And there were many, many things, of course, like during the... The last night when he came to Boston and he spoke to the nation from Faneuil Hall, we happened to be fortunate enough to be in Faneuil Hall. And when he came down the aisle—of course, there was nobody to move or anything and we were sitting in our seats at the edge of the aisle. The minute he saw us he came right over and all the newspapermen... It was upsetting the television and everything. When he did get up on the stage to speak before he started his nationwide speech, he said, "My friends that were with me in 1946 are here tonight..." But he never failed to recognize the fact fact that the small people were with him, which makes him a
very big man. I also had a letter from him thanking me for all the work I had done for him. He went to great length to thank me and that he would never forget the work that I had done in 1946 and 1952 for him, which in some ways it was inconsequential. Because for somebody that went so high and so far, when you think of the few hours that you may have given to it, it's very small.

TIERNEY: Did you go to the Inaugural also?

McNEELY: Yes. I went to the Inaugural and probably the people that were sitting close by me--I recall very vividly when he was giving his Inaugural Address and I'm standing there. And I'm crying there like terrible and nobody seemed to realize what I'm crying about. They didn't know and I suppose they were wondering, "What is she crying about?" But all I could think about was, "Well, here's the man that came to my house in 1946." I never thought that I would know the President of the United States, and to know him so well made us feel--I don't know--emotionally upset, if nothing else. But, of course, in Washington, as Mrs. Colbert probably has told you--there was a very, very bad storm--we got held up in the storm, but it was a tremendous experience.

TIERNEY: Did you have a chance to talk to him at all during the Inaugural?
McNEELY: No. Not during the Inaugural at all.

TIERNEY: Or during any of the festivities?

McNEELY: No, no. We saw him but... We felt that he had possibly seen us. But he had a great eye for noticing people that you wouldn't think that he would see at all. I recall one time I was at the Ocean House in Swampscott and it was the national convention of the Emblem Club, which is connected with the Elks. Mary English from Everett, was the national President. And he was the principal speaker, and that night his wife, Jacqueline, was with him. They were a little bit late in starting. So she had met him in my house. The 17th of June he used to come if he was in the parade. He'd always come to the house to visit after. And when he--she came to me and she said, "Senator Kennedy and his wife are here and we don't know exactly what to do about it. We're going to be a little late. Would you come out? I'm sure he'd be glad to see you." Well, I went out. He was so happy to see us, my sister too. When he got up to speak--he spoke, but he just couldn't realize how I was mixed up in the Emblem Club, with all these people from all over the country. Well, it happened that Mrs. English didn't have too much of a family and she invited us as a part of her family. Well, when he came from the platform, he came over to the table where we were sitting and he asked, "How come that you're in this?" Well, of course, I suppose while
he was sitting up there he was saying, "Well, she's far away from Charlestown." So it was unusual. But all those things, small things, seemed to go through his mind as well as large things.

TIERNEY: Didn't you feel all the time that you knew him that he was very attractive as far as women were concerned, both old and young women?

McNEELY: Oh, yes. Very, very much so. And I would have to say we went to Washington in April of 1962 to see him. And when he came out to us, well, he looked—there isn't a movie star that could compare to him in looks. And he still hadn't lost that same manner, even though he had now been President a couple of years. He still hadn't lost the same manner that he had when we first met him. But there was something about him. He was so kind and humble. There's so many qualities in him that you don't find in the ordinary man in political life. He was a very unusual man, and I'm sure there never will be another one to take his place.

TIERNEY: Did you feel that all these qualities more or less made up the appeal that women felt for him?

McNEELY: Oh, positively, positively. You couldn't help but love him. I mean there was something about him that stood out. It seemed that he was like your brother or somebody very, very close to you. And I think most people felt that even though
they didn't know him at all. Because I've had people talk to me, people almost go into an ecstasy, because they knew me, because they felt that I knew him intimately. But he never failed to talk about his wife and his children and the small things that his children did or well, sports or anything that would come in the very common touch of people that he was interested in.

TIERNEY: Well, didn't he always ask you about hockey every time he saw you?

McNEELY: Oh, yes. He always asked me about hockey and about other sports, too. And he had a great sense of humor, of course. That was his biggest asset. I must add this too—regarding sports—because I was at the opening of the Boston Red Sox; I should say the opening day. Of course, it was for the Kennedy Library and all the Kennedy's were there. But the Harvard band was out in the field, and before the game they said, "The Harvard band will now play the favorite hymn and the favorite song, Irish song, of Senator Kennedy." And, of course, I had to go into tears again, because it upset me very, very much. The Irish song that they played was "Too-ra-Loo-ra-Loo-ra."

I will say that the first November after—yes, I think it was after election that he was elected to Congress, he spoke at the Bunker Hill Post, American Legion. He was the
speaker of the day on November 11. And he was going along fine and giving a very fine speech until he came to a part in his reading that said, "No greater love has a man than he who gives up his life for his brother," and he broke down and he never did finish the speech. And of course everybody there felt terribly sad. They carried right on. They didn't make anything of it. They went right along. And a little while after there was a woman that was very well known in Charlestown here. She happened to be a very, very short person. Her name was Mrs. Lillian Kenney. She used to sing a lot of songs. She was an elderly woman. So they asked Mrs. Kenney if she would sing a song for Jack Kennedy at the time and she sang "Too-ra-Loo-ra-Loo-ra." Well, no matter when I ever met him after that he always asked me to play "Too-ra-Loo-ra-Loo-ra," because I happened to play piano and organ. But it just seemed unbelievable that I went to that ball game and that was the song that they played. Of all the tunes that they could have played. Of all the tunes that they could have played, that was the one. But he always—and he loved to sing, you know. Sometimes you read about that, that he liked to sing Irish songs and everything. That was the positive truth. I can recall him standing at my piano with ten or fifteen members of the Kennedy Post of the VFW Veterans of Foreign Wars after the 17th of June parade many years back. And
they'd stand up and sing, and they'd sing all day and all night as long as you played Irish music for them. But he liked it and he didn't make any bones about it or didn't try to hide the fact that he liked it. But oh, there are so many stories that you could tell about.

TIERNEY: It's awfully hard to remember all of them, isn't it?

McNEELY: Yes, it is. Very, very hard. And every day something comes up that you think about it all the more.

TIERNEY: Where were you on November 22 when you heard the news?

McNEELY: Well, I had been out to lunch, and I went back to my office and, of course, the people in my office were very well aware of the fact that I knew Jack Kennedy very well. And when I walked into the office everybody looked terribly sad and they kept looking at me and I thought that it must be something happened at home, to myself. And finally one of the men who worked with me said, "Did you hear that the President had an accident in Texas?" So I said, "An automobile accident?" And he said, "Well, some kind of an accident." And I said, "Is he very badly hurt?" And they said, "Well, we don't know yet."

So almost at the same minute, a telephone call came. And it was the man for whom I've worked for many, many years, Tom Hogan. And the man--I have never known him to show any emotion of any kind, but he called and the man was crying and he said, "Mary,
he's dead." And I said, "Who?" And he said, "The President."

Well, when I didn't die myself, I never will, because it was such a tremendous shock. But that's how I received the news. But I was in a state of shock I think for three days. I never did get over it. But it's something that you can't explain to anybody else, because even though people that didn't even know him, never spoke to him, or came close to him, they were shocked by it so you can imagine how somebody that, under the circumstances, how you would feel.

TIERNEY: When was the last time you actually saw him?

McNEELY: The last time that I actually saw him was October, just about a month before, the day he came to his little baby's, Patrick Bouvier's, funeral. He came to Boston for the day that the little boy was buried.

TIERNEY: Wasn't that in August?

McNEELY: Well, maybe it was August. Maybe I'm wrong in October. It was August.

TIERNEY: That was the last time you saw him then, you talked to him?

McNEELY: Yes, just for a few seconds out in Brighton.

TIERNEY: Oh, I see, not at the cemetery?

McNEELY: No, not at the cemetery. It was over where the Memorial Library is going to be.

TIERNEY: Oh, really. You talked to him over there?

McNEELY: Yes.
TIERNEY: Do you remember what he said to you that day at all?

McNEELY: Well, it was a very... As you know, it was something that was tucked in with all that was going on with the funeral and everything. It was the same conversation that he had, you know, nothing--there was nothing unusual about the conversation.

TIERNEY: This has been an interview with Miss Mary McNeely of Charles-town, on May 5, 1964, and the interviewer has been Mary Tierney of the Boston Traveler.