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Oral History Interview

with

FRANK O'CONNOR

May 18, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Frank, tell us how you got connected with the Kennedy organization?

O'CONNOR: Well, many years ago, (David F.) Dave Powers was working for the housing authority and he was then the social director and recreational director at the old harbor project in South Boston where I lived. Dave used to like to come down to the L Street bathhouse to watch myself and many others play handball. We got to be quite good friends and we used to take the youngsters of the old harbor village over to Bray's field -- the old knothole gang. Dave was always interested in kids and we used to have a great time.

So, he told me about his activities in Charlestown and how he was working for a congressman by the name of (John F.) Jack Kennedy. And I said there was a great opportunity maybe to come up to the Boys Club where they were having one of these beauty contests and doll carriage parade and so on and he probably could get the congressman to come up and pick it out. I had never met him before this and the funny part about it is that he picked my little boy in the 3 to 5 class as the healthiest looking youngster and my girl who was then I think about 8 as one of the prettiest little girls. And now that I think back, naturally you'd think this was really in the bag that Jack had bagged this thing for the O'Connor kids. So the next day as you know in these projects, as all the women are sitting around the court, why this is the reaction all the women sitting on the benches gave to my wife and up to that time my wife hadn't even met him, never knew him, what he looked like or never had ever seen him or a picture of him.

MARTIN: Had you met him before then, Frank?

O'CONNOR: No, I had never met him. I had never met him, but Dave had talked to me about him at L Street, his political activities,
as Dave started with him. And he said that in the next election—of course, this was after he had become a congressman—knowing that I was at least politically minded, that maybe I ought to come over and get into the next campaign. And that's how I started with Jack Kennedy in the next campaign, or the year before the second campaign. This was when I started with him.

MARTIN: This was somewhere around 1948-1949? You're not sure?

O'CONNOR: No, I'm not. It was somewhere around '48 or '49.

MARTIN: So when you say the next campaign you're referring...

O'CONNOR: The second congressional campaign, of which there wasn't if I remember right, on the Democratic side, there wasn't too much opposition.

MARTIN: You don't recall who the Republican...

O'CONNOR: No, I don't. The first real fight, of course, that I was involved in, deeply involved in, and where we had the most competition, of course, was '52 when we came into the senatorial race.

MARTIN: What did you do in that campaign, Frank?

O'CONNOR: Well, I worked in Boston with Dave Powers and (Joseph P.) Joe Timilty, whom I happened to see the other day after many many years. I worked with Dave and Harry Fleming and Joe Timilty. We were about the nucleus of the Boston organization.

MARTIN: What type of work was it?

O'CONNOR: Oh, this was everything, Ed: registration, brochures. One of the things that I cherish is a brochure. All men running for public office have brochures and one of the brochures which I do cherish, which I think is Jack Kennedy's first brochure, in '52, when he told about his war exploits and the PT boat. And in that they depicted, had stories of why certain people in certain walks of life would back Jack Kennedy and I happened to be chosen as the veteran. There was a businessman and a clergyman and so on. When it came to the veteran in the brochure, I had my picture and a statement of why the veterans organization would back a fellow like Jack Kennedy. So I kind of cherish that.

But as far as the work, it's the regular start from the beginning: registration and delivering the brochures and lining up your ward committees and the regular routine.
MARTIN: Did you work in any specific area, perhaps South Boston?

O'CONNOR: Every area. South Boston, mainly because I was from South Boston; Ward 6 and 7, I was chairman of the drive in that area. We worked from there. Ward 6 and 7, of course, wasn't hard to do. If you started talking about a Democrat in South Boston, an Irishman by the name of Kennedy, there wasn't. He had been well received. He had been over a few times to South Boston and I marched with him a few times in the regular St. Patrick's Day parade that they have over there, with Dave Powers, and he was always well received. So in that area, naturally, you know, maybe you wouldn't put as much emphasis on work in that area as in others.

MARTIN: Tell us about the parades. Did he always walk?

O'CONNOR: Oh, he always walked; he never rode. And he always made it a point—he was always so congenial to the people—to definitely stop at any church, any school that was there where nuns would be; also fire houses. If he saw a man standing on the street with a cane or if he was an oldtimer, he'd run right over and shake their hand. Plus, as he walked in more and more parades and they got more familiar with him, why we had a pretty hard time in the parade because he seemed to want to walk half on the sidewalk with all the people on the side. And you'd never know when he'd dart into a building where a bunch of older people would be and it wouldn't be because he wanted a drink of water or because he was hot or cold or to get warm or anything, it was just the fact that he'd go out of line and go right in. Typical, I think, of what he's done all his life. He'd just get right into the houses, you know, and they all loved him.

MARTIN: How about some of the people that walked with him in that parade, do you remember who they were?

O'CONNOR: Well, I remember John E. Powers that walked and Dave Powers, and there was another John E. Powers that walked from, I think it was from Charlestown. And my brother John (O'Connor) walked with him one year. He stuck with more or less four or five people that he liked to walk with.

MARTIN: Traditionally, over in South Boston and perhaps more so lately, Frank, there's been a, you get a pretty rough crowd in a lot of sections in that parade that are not above hooting and hollering at politicians. Did you ever experience any of that as you went along with him?

O'CONNOR: Not with him, not with him. The first couple of times we walked,
of course, you got that usual kidding, you know, "Who's that skinny guy walking there in the middle of the street?" And you'd always get a couple of wags as you're walking along that would, you know, yell. I remember a couple of times maybe somebody would yell after they probably had a few beers or something and they'd say, "Stand sideways and cast a shadow," or something like that. And he'd sort of turn around and give a half grin or something like that. But it's the usual. As far as booing is concerned or calling someone a bum or something like that, there was nothing like that. It seemed that this guy was, well, destined to be a hero to the people of South Boston from the beginning and as they got better acquainted, the more they like him.

MARTIN: In those parades, it didn't make any difference whether you were a Democrat or a Republican?

O'CONNOR: No, because (Leverett Saltonstall) Salty used to walk and, you know, Salty used to tell Jack he'd get a bigger hand in South Boston than he would ever get. And, of course, Senator Saltonstall does, he gets a pretty good reception in South Boston.

MARTIN: Frank, what do you remember of the type of campaign that (Henry Cabot) Lodge ran? Did he attempt to create some impact over in South Boston?

O'CONNOR: Oh, yes. Well, of course, Lodge was quite popular. He made a good candidate, he was a good-looking fellow. You know, we used to kid around a lot. I remember Dave telling the president many a time when we'd be over at Dave's house after a night or something like that, and he'd be kidding him about a beauty contest between him and Cabot Lodge.

Cabot Lodge always did well in South Boston because he was that type of a candidate. He was tall, good-looking, appeared well-dressed and it was quite a clash between the two personalities. And actually many people in South Boston and everywhere told us many a time that it was just too bad they were not running on the same ticket for different positions because they'd both be elected. So, it was too bad that one had to be defeated.

But I remember one night, the only comment that I heard personally in the campaign, one night when we were driving in the West End and Henry Cabot Lodge had a speaking engagement in there the same night or something, we came alongside of his car and Cabot Lodge opened the window and said to Jack, "What a hell of a way to make a living." And I can't help but think back now. When you think of it now, you get more of a kick out of it than you did then, because he is now, you know, one of the great figures in the world. You get a kick out of thinking of these things.
MARTIN: Did you ever work in a political campaign for some other candidate prior to running into Congressman Kennedy?

O'CONNOR: No, except, well, local politics. I was interested in John E. Powers and a couple of local representatives. But John E. Powers was the first one that I got interested in. He was always, there was always a lot of action in Johnny's campaigns. He was always controversial.

MARTIN: Well, what would you say impressed you most in the Kennedy organization? You hear so much now about the Kennedy machine and how well and efficiently it functioned. Did you see that in the beginning?

O'CONNOR: Oh, sure. I think the greatest thing that the organization had was, well, two things: First, unity—and it's due to the personality of the candidate. I know, I think, that everybody that I came across in the last twenty years or more who talked about the Kennedy organization, all pretty much loved the candidate. And I think it was loyalty to and love of the candidate that kept a lot of us together, because, well, you know how it is sometimes at home when you've been away and you travel and you're working in a campaign, I used to get from my wife, well, "Who are you married to, me or the Kennedys?" And so we'd laugh about it. But even my wife then when she met Jack Kennedy, after she had known him a few years and had been in his company a few years, why, she could also feel the sense of responsibility, the sense of duty that you had towards the guy who was terrific.

MARTIN: Well, you were a volunteer in that '52 campaign.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Well, I think we were all volunteers, Ed. You know, we used to... In many campaigns, you know, somebody is always saying, "Well, how much for gas money and how much for supper money?" and all this. And, you know, I never saw that; I never heard it. And to this day, I never got a dime as far as... And I never thought of it. I never thought of going to a gas station and charging a tank of gas to the Kennedy campaign or something like that. Actually, it was never brought up; no one ever thought it. As I say, I think that this love of candidate and the organization, they were really interested in the candidate and thought they had really something great and there was no thought of anything else.

MARTIN: Well, you obviously spent a lot of time in that campaign and in subsequent campaigns. You never ran across anyone for whom you
would sacrifice so much time and effort before, why would you single out this particular candidate?

O’CONNOR: I don’t know, Ed. I don’t really know the reason. I don’t know whether, I mean, I don’t think you can point to one reason that you do things like this. Why do you continually go to a place like L Street or the Cape or someplace that you like, that you enjoy yourself? Why do you do these things? Well, I think either because you get a great deal of satisfaction. . . . I wasn’t looking for a candidate who was waving a flag or was talking about moral corruption or any other corruption in the government or anything. This was just one of these fellows that comes along and, well, we used to be in crowds and when he’d walk in it would be just like magic; everybody would know he was there and it just seemed as though everything hushed up and everybody moved towards him and this was just one of those magical things. I don’t think, I think it’s something that you almost felt as though. . . .

To be honest with you, here was a fellow that to me was someone that you would look up to as far as money. Coming from South Boston, the majority are poor people, and here was a fellow who had no money worries. Here was a fellow who didn’t have to be in politics. Sometimes you say to yourself, "What the heck, if I had all his dough I wouldn’t," you know, "I would never get mixed up in it. I’d sit down. Why should I have people throwing brickbats at me," or something like that.

But I think you get into it, you feel as though, all of a sudden, you’re part of a family, so to speak. I mean I always felt that way. I always felt that here was a fellow, and many times he’d sit down and have a hot dog at a stand on the beach with us or take us to the finest restaurant in town and, you know, just accept us. And it got so, honestly, you felt as though you were with your brother, that he had to be some relation. It became almost as if blood ties, because there wasn’t anything that. . . .

And I don’t think I’m alone, I think there are many, many guys like myself who all he had to do was ask and it was done and no questions asked. So I think it’s hard to say, to give a real definite reason as to why you would pick him among other candidates or why all of a sudden did I start with him. It’s really hard.

MARTIN: Frank, you stayed right with the then senator after his election and when he came up for reelection in 1958, did you also work in that campaign too?

O’CONNOR: Yes, I stayed again, staying in Boston, being more familiar with Boston then anywhere. I again worked in Boston, the entire city. The usual routine almost, because we had no opposition. (Vincent J.) Vinny Celeste from East Boston was running against the senator and actually he was an unknown and we didn’t have as much work to do on this
campaign as we did in '52, naturally, against Cabot Lodge. So that...
But it was the usual well-organized Kennedy, well-planned, well-thought-out. And actually we did the same things we did in '52 and I think it was to just a lesser degree.

Naturally, there wasn't any pressure, but we had the usual registration drive and the brochure, door-to-door distribution of the brochures, and opened the headquarters in every ward in the city as usual. Had volunteers in these wards distributing brochures and then holding meetings at which the candidate would speak to the volunteer workers and any crowds that gathered. And then we opened the main headquarters on Tremont Street in Boston. And the staff, (Timothy J., Jr.) Ted Reardon and (Kenneth P.) Kenny O'Donnell, (Lawrence P.) Larry O'Brien and (Robert F.) Bob Morey, everybody was in on it, the same staff that practically he took to the White House with him and had been with him in '52.

MARTIN: How about the volunteers, were they, did many from his '52 campaign return to help him out?

O'CONNOR: Well, this was the amazing part of it all, Ed. If you were to call for the Kennedy volunteers now, today, you'd be able to find them. I think everybody stuck right in close. Through the years, it's amazing to see the change in people as you meet them from one campaign to another, because they were widespread, but all of a sudden when it says Kennedy campaign it seems as though they come out of the woodwork. They're all there, and all the same people. And once in a while you miss somebody and ask for them and either they've moved out of the state or died or something like that. But outside of that, it's the same faces that you see.

MARTIN: Did you also take any active role in the Kennedy coffee hours?

O'CONNOR: Only as far as driving the girls on any of these. There were tremendous crowds and, of course, we always like to have a couple of guys around who at least could keep them back and give them a little breathing space. I used to drive the Kennedy girls. We used to have an open convertible. I don't know, a couple of them owe me a couple of bucks they bummed off me to go into the movies. Eunice (Kennedy Shriver)--you know, she's at present Mrs. Shriver--used to love the mystery movies at the RKO Theater. You'd be driving Eunice and Jean (Kennedy Smith) up Washington Street and before you knew it... You know the old story, the Kennedys never have any money in their pocket. Eunice was no different and she'd bum a buck. I'd probably have three in my pocket and she'd take one of them or something and in the RKO she'd go.

And as far as the coffee hours were concerned, I drove them quite a bit in the North End and the West End and they would go right into the homes of the Italian people and were welcomed. They'd go anywhere. You'd be
driving them all over the city, and they were always welcome. They were a great asset, you know.

MARTIN: Back in '52 and again in '58, did they have that campaign strategy of moving the candidate to supermarkets and factory gates?

O'CONNOR: Same thing. He went day and night, he went everywhere. We used to go into the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) stations at that time, bus stops. I remember the famous G and G restaurant out there in Ward 14 and many other meeting places that are frequented by the politicians. He was at all the rallies.

MARTIN: Did he indicate to you at all that he enjoyed this?

O'CONNOR: Oh, he loved it. I think he loved it. Because, well, for instance, in '52 he used to go to... Many times we would hold his crutches while he went into, I can remember going into a place over in South Boston, the Lithuanian Club and places like that, and when he'd be on crutches and in apparent pain. Well, apparent pain, when I say apparent, you'd never know it, I mean he'd never complain, never say anything about it but after all, here's a man who walks in some places on crutches, obviously there's got to be something the matter with him. And we used to take him into these places and he'd be campaigning on crutches. And you have to love it to do these things. There's a real excuse for a guy who doesn't want to participate in a campaign or not go to a rally or put it off and say, "Well, I won't go here," or "I won't go there and people may be disappointed, but after all I got an excuse, I'm on crutches." But not him, he never hesitated, never complained and he never postponed anything that he could possibly get to. Might have been running a little late but he never postponed it on account of health or anything. And yet he was on crutches many and many a night.

MARTIN: Frank, your interest in Senator Kennedy extended beyond that to the 1960 campaign for president. What kind of a role did you play in that?

O'CONNOR: Well, I was predominantly in New England. I travelled about five or maybe six days and that's all, out of New England. I spent a couple of days in Green Bay, Wisconsin and three days down in West Virginia. But the bulk of the work, my work, was done in the New England area--I was more familiar with it. At this point I was a salesman and had travelled the New England area. I was very familiar with all the roads and how to get there and get there the fastest. I also knew most of the politicians in the area or at least had a speaking acquaintance with them. And then Ted Reardon, the senator's administrative assistant, was
I put in charge of New England and we worked out of the Metropolitan Building over here on Tremont Street. John Ford's office was next door. And (Richard J.) Dobby was in there with John Ford. And that's where we worked, and we travelled all New England, in every New England state right out of there. And this was the bulk of my work in the presidential campaign.

MARTIN: You were saying you moved with him in the primary in West Virginia?

O'CONNOR: Yes, I moved with him in the last two days that he was in Wisconsin and the last three days that he was in, West Virginia. We moved around with him and that was the extent of my role outside New England in the '60 campaign.

MARTIN: Frank, were you ever what they describe as an advance man?

O'CONNOR: No, we didn't need an advance man, so to speak, in New England. I mean we could do this over the phone, New England being his home area more or less, this was something that wasn't necessary to do. I mean we weren't strangers going into a state like he would in Wisconsin or Kansas or something else where you'd have to set up things that would take maybe three or four weeks to do and there were a great many advance guys that they had throughout the country. But in New England area we didn't need that. We could make a phone call and there was a ready-made rally for us almost, you know, at our beck and call because he, well, they had great admiration for him in New England, naturally, being his home territory.

MARTIN: Well, after his election did you get down to the White House at all?

O'CONNOR: Yes, we were in the White House about a week after his inauguration, my wife and I, to meet the new president, and for a while he was still Senator Kennedy to us. I think for about a year, more or less, he was always Senator Kennedy to us and then somehow as the affairs of state got bigger and bigger, you felt you were imposing upon him to even take a peek in the door and wave your hand at him as you went by his office. And it seems to me as though, I don't know, he grew six feet taller and five feet wider, he just seemed to be a president all of a sudden. This was an amazing transition to me because it hit me one day while I was in the White House. All of a sudden, you know, here was a man that was president and you'd known him for so long but I guess it took about a year for it to sink in to many of us, that all of a sudden, here was a great man. Because as you're growing up and you don't know these presidents like
(Franklin D.) Roosevelt or (Harry S.) Truman or any of the past presidents and you don't have a speaking acquaintance with them, and as you're in school you look in awe and you look up to a president as really somebody who is set apart from everybody. For a long time you never had that and then all of a sudden the affairs of the world got so great and here's a fellow that was solving them and I think this is probably what happened. All of a sudden he looked so wide and so tall in the chair and then you realized that no longer was he the Senator Kennedy you knew but all of a sudden he was the president.

MARTIN: Frank, what would you say your best memory of the president will be?

O'CONNOR: Well, I think it will probably be one of my last. One day in 1962 he came home to Boston to vote in the Massachusetts election and Dave Powers occupied the other room at the Statler. And I had been with Dave the night before and he said why don't you come up and have breakfast with me the following day, which was election day. And I walked up and knocked on the door and Dave was there and he said, "Well, I'm waiting for breakfast to come up from room service." And, as I stood there with Dave, the door opened and I turned around very quickly and there was the president standing in the doorway in blue dot pajamas. And he said to me, "Would you hand me that good Democratic newspaper on the bed?" And naturally, he was giving me a little ribbing; it was the Boston Herald. And I threw it to him so he started, he asked Dave if he had sent for breakfast and Dave said "Yes, Mr. President, the fellow will be right up." And just then a man came in the door and he had a big tray and everything and the president said--well, he was just kidding us--he said, "Well, I might eat with you two clowns as anybody else." And Dave and I and the president sat down and he in his blue dotted pajamas and had coffee and English muffins--I don't know what it was. I couldn't help but think that here was a guy from Chelsea and a guy from Charlestown sitting with the president of the United States--probably the most important and the strongest office in the world. And here we were just a couple of clowns, as he called it, sitting down having breakfast with the president.

The last time I saw him after that was November 9, just a few weeks before his assassination. I was in the White House with Dave Powers. We had gone down to a party at Senator (Edward M.) Ted Kennedy's house and we went over to the White House the next day. And fortunately I had stayed with Dave Powers that night and I went into the White House about 9-o'clock. And it was one of the few times that I had seen the president with his glasses on and he came out of his office with a pair of glasses on and I was standing in the entrance of the Fish Room and he took his glasses off and waved to me and said "Hello, Frank, how are you?" And I said, "Fine, Mr.
President."

And he went back into his office again and that's the last time that I saw him. I think those two instances will probably be best in my memory of the president.