

William J. Riggins Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 12/06/1965
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Creator: William J. Riggins

Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey

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Biographical Note

William J. Riggins (1925-2011) was a campaign worker for John F. Kennedy [JFK] during the 1960 Democratic primary in Wisconsin. This interview focuses on the 1960 Democratic presidential primary and JFK's trips to Wisconsin during the campaign, among other topics.

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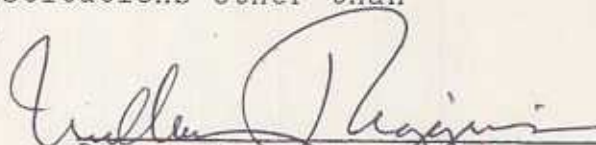
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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM J. RIGGINS

December 6, 1965
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let me begin by asking how you became involved in the Wisconsin primary.

RIGGINS: The first time that I got an invitation was to a spring meeting in '59 when Ivan Nestingen, the mayor of Madison, sent out letters to people who, I presume, had indicated an interest in Senator Kennedy's candidacy. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the Madison meeting--that was a breakfast meeting, as I recall--but I was interested in Senator Kennedy as a candidate for the presidency. That's really the way I felt--that here was a man that, obviously, if he was going to enter the Wisconsin primary, could be elected president.

The first time I actually met him was, ironically, on the thirteenth of November--Friday the thirteenth--1959. I believe that date's accurate. The state Democrats were holding a state convention. Senator Kennedy was to be the keynoter, Friday evening. Senator [Hubert H.] Humphrey was to be the speaker at the dinner Saturday night.

I received a call from Walter Hale who asked me if I was available to meet the senator in an auditorium at Marquette University. I said yes, we were. I forget the time, but the senator was late, and the auditorium was filled. There was a lot of excitement and anticipation. Remember, this was prior to the time when Senator Kennedy had indicated any real decision that he was going to enter the Wisconsin primary. I think we only had one police escort, sheriff's escort. We were all waiting on the east end of the building. The audience was facing east and the senator pulled a very. . . . Well, whether it was intentional or not, he came in from the west and surprised everyone. He got a real reception. We thought we were important by being there and waiting for him, but he didn't see us first. I think it really captured that audience. Immediately, you just knew this was a man on the move. Striking appearance. . . .

Then, that day, he had to get to Kenosha because he had a labor meeting which he was talking to. I believe at that time I was driving. [David F.] Dave Powers, I think, was with us, and Dave was in my car. Ira Kapenstein, I believe, from the Milwaukee Journal and [Marquis] Childs, I think, also were there in the car. As we went from Milwaukee late in the afternoon, it began to snow. It was very slippery; it was a pretty treacherous drive. Nestingen, I believe, was driving ahead with the senator. We changed escorts at the Racine County line. The Racine sheriff's department picked us up, and then they took us into the city of Kenosha. We got this escort all the way. In Kenosha the streets were so slippery. Kennedy's car couldn't make a hill, and the next thing that I saw was that the senator was out pushing the car--he was pushing Nestingen's Chevrolet, I think it was--up the hill, or trying to. I can't remember if they had stopped or after he pushed, but he and I went into this little gas station, with, I believe it was, a correspondent from Newsweek and a couple of others. One of them asked him then if he had made the decision about the primary. I recall the senator saying that with weather like this, they could still feel that he hadn't made a definite decision. He'd have to really see in the primaries in the early spring.

That evening, when we got to Kenosha, there was a place called Oege Thomsen's, I believe, was the restaurant. Actually, that was the first time I remember him coming in. I happened to be standing in a narrow entrance hallway. It was kind of a rough campaign at that point, so far as treating the candidate, because there he was with a coat and no one to take it and not knowing what to do with it. I offered to take it. He was very kind and just said, "I hope I see it when I leave." I forget just who his particular aides were. He got through that meeting pretty fast. We sat down to eat, and the senator was ready to leave, so we left without eating.

Then he went over to the union meeting and addressed that meeting. Remember this too, that at that time really labor leaders were supporting Humphrey. He still had to get back to Milwaukee to keynote. They made the decision then that he'd have to take--what was that called?--the North Shore train back to Milwaukee because it was impossible to drive back and get there in time. He took the train, and Mayor Nestingen went with him. Then the others drove cars back. We just arrived back at the Pfister Hotel, where he had keynoted. I really think he had electrified that audience that night with that address there because when we got back, they were all pleased. And they had waited very patiently for him.

My one opinion was then that I was convinced that this man. . . . I liked the way he talked. He said, "I run for the presidency." Now wait, I don't recall if he had announced he was going to run for the presidency. Later on this was the theme--after he had announced. At this point--that's correct--he had not said this. I knew when he left that this was the man that I was committed to support in Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: What was the source of your interest in him before you had met him?

RIGGINS: I guess everybody remembers the prior [Democratic] National Convention. I read--just like most people who are interested in politics or national affairs. I had thought that this was a young man who had. . . . He had defeated [Henry Cabot] Lodge, hadn't he, at that point? He just seemed to capture the spirit. I was, what, about thirty-five then. He spoke to the people's hearts, to what really was confronting the United States at that time. After having served under sort of a caretaker government with [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, we needed new leadership.

Of course, the fascinating thing was, too, I am not a Catholic; he was a Catholic. There was a feeling of, really, anti-Catholicism among many people. To me, this man rose above any feelings of prejudice so far as religion.

But basically, I think that it was a new man on the national scene. He commanded respect from afar--just from reading about him. I wasn't convinced until. . . . I think I was convinced in the spring that this was the man. When I met him, then I knew it. I liked the way he operated; I liked the way he was a man on the move, and he did make people feel that they wanted to help him do whatever he was going to do.

That's true that in November he really hadn't decided. Well no, he had. Yes, that's correct. I forget when the New Hampshire primary was. Was it. . . .

MORRISSEY: March of 1960.

RIGGINS: March of '60, so he had not run in a primary. Then, of course, I think it was in January he came back to Wisconsin. They had a press conference at the Pfister Hotel where he announced it; Mrs. [Jacqueline B.] Kennedy was with him. I'm a Congregationalist; Hubert Humphrey is a Congregationalist. I'm Irish, but not all Irish. Reverend Stanford went with me. Reverend Stanford had known the Humphreys from Minneapolis so he had that connection. I just persuaded him to come along. I introduced Mr. Stanford to Senator Kennedy then. I recall his remark in substance. The man, obviously, didn't have much time for anyone because he was busy, but I introduced him as Reverend Stanford. He just said to him, I think very kindly, that he certainly appreciated the fact that he would take the time to come to the Pfister and hear whatever he was going to say. The minister was impressed, but he wasn't convinced at this point.

• Then after he did announce it, I think [Gerald J.] Jerry Bruno arrived on the scene. I may have volunteered at the headquarters. Well, of course, they had various headquarters. They started out I think on 12th and Wisconsin, where I met [Robert F.] Bob Kennedy, shirt sleeves rolled up. And very crowded quarters--you had boxes of literature. [James B.] Jim Brennan, of course, was there and a number of others. But everything was still, in all those crowded conditions, organized.

It was compartmentalized. Certain people were in charge of certain things. You knew that Bob Kennedy knew that business and that they were going to win.

They did get a ground floor location on Wisconsin Avenue later. Then Jerry Bruno was sort of the phone man; he was constantly on the phone. As I said to you, Mr. Morrissey, the geographic location was really an advantage for me. The senator was often coming by plane, and I lived close to Mitchell Field. Jerry would call and ask me if I could make it because they always had this entourage of press. So I'd stop over anytime. I was practically on call. Always glad to meet the senator. Usually, he'd at least have time to say hello. Ivan Nestingen, of course, was with him, I think, most of the time during that campaign.

Jerry Bruno had called me so many times to do so many things and, of course, sometimes their schedules changed. I was practicing law, and at the time I was alone. It was also monetary considerations. I really was enjoying doing it, and Jerry could enthrall anyone about getting something done. I think his favorite expression was, "That's great. That's great. Wonderful." I think around March I had reached the end of the rope over there as far as doing things. He called right at dinner time--about six--and said that [Edward M.] Ted Kennedy was over at Southgate. The idea was, I guess, I was supposed to go over and look for Ted at Southgate. Well, that's a large shopping center and a lot of people, and I had had some other things to do that night. So I said to Jerry, "If Ted Kennedy wants me to do something for him, why don't you have the senator call me. He's out there, and if you have contact with him, have him call me at home." The idea was that Ted had been up since, I think, five o'clock that morning somewhere else in the state, and he had to go into Racine that evening. So they felt that they would make valuable use of the time between Southgate and Racine by going through the south suburbs, which were then and are now Cudahy, and South Milwaukee, and Oak Creek. That was the end of the conversation. Jerry said, "Well fine. That's great. I'll see what I can do." I just wasn't going to go over there and try to find Ted without him being there. Shortly, the phone rang, and it turned out to be [Joseph F.] Joe Gargan. Joe asked if this was Mr. Riggins. I said, yes. He said, "Ted Kennedy would like to talk with you." So Ted did. I had never met him. He just said that he understands that I would like to help again, and that he would appreciate it. Where should we meet? So I told him the Dutch's Sukiyaki House. This was on a Monday night, as I recall. It's right north of the airport, about halfway between where he was and where I was. I got over there. My wife had become very enthused with the Kennedys. Ted beat me to the Sukiyaki House, and the Sukiyaki House was closed so he was over at a little dairy store making the phone call. Rhoda, that's my wife, was astounded really. She said she answered the phone, and he said, "Ted Kennedy here. Where's Bill?" She told him, and he said, "Well, the place is closed." Right about then I walked in, and Ted was there.

Here's what I appreciated about the Kennedys. He was with Joe Gargan; they had a car. I had my own car. The usual fellow would have gone back

with Joe and said, "Well, now you lead us around." But Ted said, "I'll drive with Bill." I think that's genuine; it wasn't a technique. He wanted to have information; he wanted to know what was going to happen.

Even when Jerry had called me, knowing the way they operate, I still checked. I thought, well, they probably will. This'll turn out, so I'd better check. I had called the local Voice-Journal editor there in South Milwaukee and told him that Ted Kennedy might stop in at the Common Council meeting so they should be ready for any pictures. I also called the president of the Cudahy council and told him that Ted Kennedy might be there and made those preparations.

I called a couple of other people, and they suggested that we attend the PTA [Parent-Teachers Association] meeting. This was kind of funny. It was a public school. Joe and I and Ted went in. I was handing out matches, I believe it was, for Kennedy, and so was Joe. Then I was introducing them to Ted. Most of the people mistook him for Senator Kennedy. He enjoyed it. We started at the bottom of the stairs. I warned him that we probably shouldn't be doing this--politicking in a school. He said, "Well, let's find out what the local rule is." So we gradually got courage because nobody was objecting, and all these women were delighted. Ted ended up on the stage [Laughter] having his picture taken. I think it worked out very well. There was one woman who then voiced an objection that this was no place for politics. She was out-talked by the group there, but Ted said that he appreciated that viewpoint and that we'd leave.

He hadn't eaten, so we went to the Dutchland Dairy place, had chicken. I had eaten. I think Joe paid for it. Yes, Joe paid for Ted's chicken. I liked Ted at that point because he did say he wanted something to eat, and the Dutchland Dairy is just a regular, run-of-the-mill, plain-food restaurant, but he certainly liked the chicken.

Then, of course, we did go that evening to the Common Council in Cudahy. There was a police officer there who had served on the, let me see, I think it's the destroyer named after Joseph Kennedy, Jr. He happened to be there, and he had a picture of, I believe, the crew and it was all autographed. This was something which this police officer treasured, but he gave it to Ted. He was well received--and knew how to do it--and spoke to the Council there and the people in the audience.

Then we went to the South Milwaukee Common Council. He spoke to them there. By that time, it was a little late so all we did in Oak Creek--we got just to the Council. They had adjourned, but we did catch the mayor and four aldermen and about five other people. Ted went on his way, and I'm sure it was 11 o'clock at night. That seemed to be the way they were campaigning through the whole thing.

MORRISSEY: While you were doing this, did you see any indications that Humphrey people were doing the same thing?

RIGGINS: No. Here's the thing so far as the Humphrey people were concerned. The Humphrey people were really. . . . Senator Kennedy, as I recall, did not want to debate Senator Humphrey because he felt that they agreed. He also, I'm sure, believed that he was going to win. There was no sense for a presidential nominee to be debating Senator Humphrey who will not win. I thoroughly agreed with that. He avoided it. With due deference to Senator Humphrey. . . . He had been our senator while we had Republican senators. It was certainly amazing, really, that Jack Kennedy won that primary with, I think, twenty and a half delegate votes.

But, Humphrey could not get a crowd. He just couldn't. They would try to find out where the meetings are; they would try to confront Kennedy. They didn't do this at the larger meetings, but if there was a smaller meeting they would do this. I don't know if Senator Humphrey himself was doing it, but certainly his aides were. We had one instance when this did happen after a rally we had in South Milwaukee which Senator Kennedy attended. Some machinists from the local in Cudahy--there's a large plant there which has a large machinists local--wanted to have Senator Kennedy in on the Sunday just before the primary. They wanted him to speak to their meeting that Sunday morning. After our rally in South Milwaukee, Jerry (Bruno) and I went over and talked with these men. This was the arrangement agreed upon--that if Senator Kennedy is there, are you sure Senator Humphrey will not be, because we don't want to be debating Senator Humphrey. It won't do the party any good. This was the assurance we had. That Sunday, I got to the machinists hall, and I found out that Senator Humphrey was going to be there. So I called [P. Kenneth] Ken O'Donnell (I think he was staying at the Pfister) and [Clement J.] Clem Zablocki substituted. He had to come in.

They were not really organizing. I think, number one, they failed not for lack of money. They failed for lack of, really people who were willing to do the work, who were on the Kennedy side. Kennedy people crossed party lines; they crossed religious lines: they were enthusiasts for Kennedy; and they went out of their way to help.

MORRISSEY: And yet Hubert Humphrey had built up this backlog of help to Wisconsin Democrats during their dry years?

RIGGINS: Right. Our minister got me to one Humphrey thing, but this was the extent of it. An example is a small church in the town of Caledonia, Raymond Church. The pastor there had known Senator Humphrey. This was in very bad weather. I think it was least two feet of snow. I agreed with Mr. Stanford, Ed, "All right, I'll go to hear Senator Humphrey." So we went out there in that blizzard, and I don't think there were more than ten or fifteen people. We waited, but Senator Humphrey did get there. He was with Philleo Nash; Philleo Nash was with him. He took an awfully long time to say what he wanted to say. He used a podium, and I thought that it was bad judgment really because here people had waited, and they were concerned about getting home because of the weather. Humphrey does have, and he did have, a very folksy, warm manner about him. Maybe he did this out of deference to the pastor who

had set up a podium because he thought there was going to be a larger crowd. But I think it would have been much better if Senator Humphrey had sat down with us, talked briefly, and had some coffee, and left. He made his appearance. I think that's the difference. John Kennedy would have been there, but he wouldn't have done what Humphrey did at that point. He may have had the chiefs, but he didn't have the Indians--that is, Humphrey --at that time.

As far as I'm concerned, we had a rally in the city of South Milwaukee. It was called a south suburban rally. They were having a large rally for the south side at the American Serbian Hall on Oklahoma Avenue. I believe it was Sunday before the primary. March 31 was very close to that. I think it was a Thursday night. We wanted the senator there. It was hard to convince Jerry and some others because they said, "Now, look, this is going to be competing for a crowd." And I said, "If you haven't learned already, you don't have to worry about crowds." In that particular little hall, called Rawson Ballroom, I don't know how many people you can get in there. Three hundred, maybe. I had no problem organizing that. I wanted a brass band and South Milwaukee has a good high school band, a good municipal band. I wanted about five people. I ended up with about sixteen in this fairly small hall. We had them, I think, play "Anchors Aweigh" when the senator arrived. It was a lot of fun. He was late, but the audience stayed. We had, I think, phone bulletins through the course of an hour-and-a-half wait, I think. The senator was here; he was coming closer; and he would be there shortly. The surprise was that Mrs. Kennedy was with him. I didn't know that she was going to be with him. I can remember they had a little stage there. It was a very short program. But, then, as an example, that I recall, the way he talked. I liked the way he said that "I run for the presidency," because here was a man who by his mannerism was sincere. He didn't belabor points. He made the point clear--I think this was obviously calculated--that he had another primary coming up in West Virginia. He didn't want to expend all of his program in Wisconsin. He certainly didn't want to get involved with debate with Senator Humphrey. We had apple cider at that meeting. Mrs. Kennedy was delighted about it. I think she said that they had either gone to places where they had coffee or beer and when this apple cider. . . . I don't know if it reminded her of New England or not, but she enjoyed it. Ken O'Donnell was there, and he said that that particular rally reminded him a lot of Boston rallies because there was a lot of music and signs. I remember there was a lot of applause because obviously these people waited. He held the crowd. I was sort of the M.C. on the thing. I can remember him saying while he was sort of smiling through his teeth, "Bill, let's get this show on the road." Just cut it off, you know. We did it.

I remember, too, another trip when we were to meet. Ken O'Donnell had arranged for us to meet at the Pfister. The senator was in Superior, but at the last minute he was called, I believe, to Pittsburgh by David McDonald to talk to the steelworkers. He flew from there to Pittsburgh. He was supposed to make an appearance in Waukesha, We were supposed to meet him in a caravan and go to Waukesha. He cancelled that. Well, we

didn't know that, of course, until we got down to the Pfister, and Ken O'Donnell told us that this was the situation: The senator was in Pittsburgh, not in Milwaukee, but that we'd meet him in Janesville.

I was impressed when we got to Janesville--the way that he handled himself. The dignitaries--I don't know, the mayor, or whoever it was--were brought into the plane. Oh, prior to that maybe Ken O'Donnell, went in. I suppose he briefed their local man on what the situation was. Then some local officials went into the plane and came out with him. That's just the way a president acts; that's protocol, I suppose. We went to the Chevrolet plant there. They had Humphrey signs in many places along the assembly line. It was a great experience to see Senator Kennedy in his black coat and stepping over the various machinery there. Well, then, I guess he didn't have his black coat on. He'd removed his black coat, and he was just in his suit coat. Just the big smile and hand-shake. I think they probably removed every Humphrey sign in the place after he left.

He also had a stop there at a YMCA, [Young Men's Christian Association] which was absolutely jammed. So far as the religious aspect, I think this was unusual. He was at the YMCA, and there was one Catholic priest there, an elderly man, a pastor. He received a tremendous reception, really.

And we drove through, I think it was, Elkhorn and stopped. He had insisted, I think, that any escort when they were picked up. . . . He asked that they would not blow any sirens but this invariably happened. He apparently didn't like it.

At this point, I did ride with Senator Kennedy, and I did ask him to autograph a business card for my son. I'm very proud I have that today. He asked what his name was. I think he wrote, "To Steve" and "Jack Kennedy."

Burlington, we stopped there at a particular hotel, and it was also jammed. Congressman [Gerald T.] Flynn, who was pretty rotund--I wasn't quite sure where Congressman Flynn stood; I think he was not really with Senator Kennedy--had a hard time getting through. He wanted to get in, but I don't think he ever made it. Maybe because of his size or what, but he never did get in to be with the senator.

On the way, Sargent Shriver was with him then too in the caravan, and Shriver had a flat tire. The senator stopped and checked to see if everything was all right. I guess they were left to repair the flat and go on.

That evening, he was to talk to the Young Democrats at, I believe, the municipal building in Racine. His luggage was in my car. I got a ticket for having parked the thing in front of the hotel. Another fellow and I went up to his room with the luggage and just knocked. He asked who was there and asked us to come in. He was just putting on his shirt. He asked us if we would like something to eat. Well, we

said no because he was eating. I think that was his usual practice, to eat alone or something, but he was alone, at any rate, before the banquet.

I did make one criticism that night to Ivan Nestingen. I think this is remarkable that a man with an accent like that, with associates like Ken O'Donnell and these other fellows walking around in farms with these black coats without hats, absolutely a foreign picture in this state without trying to change their mannerisms at all, would have done so well. I remember that night I thought this building in Racine. . . . I was impressed with it. I hadn't really been there before. The senator made some brief reference to the Young Democrats convention, but he just launched right into what he wanted to say. I told Mayor Nestingen that I thought he was making a mistake during the campaign because he should express some interest in the building and compliment the city. This to me would add a lot to his presentation. Ivan said, "Well, that's just his style, and he won't change. It would be a mistake to try to have him do it." I think that that was correct. But you had a sharp contrast between Hubert Humphrey, who was folksy, backslapping, hand-shaking, whereas Jack Kennedy was not a backslapper at all. He didn't have to do it. He could stand on Wisconsin Avenue and attract a crowd. He didn't have to go to people to shake hands with. Although I think there were many embarrassing moments, too. I can't imagine anyone not wanting to shake hands with any candidate for office at any gate, but I think he had had that experience, too, in the primary where some people refused to do so.

I think that the whole campaign was exciting. Jim Brennan, for example. We organized it this way, too. Jim had a speakers' . . . We had two speakers. He had the list, Tom Maroney, an attorney, and I took a list of every Democratic unit. The Democratic party in this county was not for Kennedy. The organization, such as it was, the county chairman was not for Kennedy; he was for Hubert Humphrey. We covered every meeting, nevertheless, and Jim would have us send in the reports. Tom and I both faithfully sent in the reports to make sure that they were covered each time. I used to say that here was a truly dedicated man. I think it came through; I think his personality and what he said showed it, that there was a dedication to his party and his country.

So far as any more personal experiences, offhand, Mr. Morrissey, I. . . . Well, we had many meetings at Mitchell Field. It was interesting. Oh, yes, at Racine at another time, Theodore White was there. Frankly, I thought the newspaper coverage for Senator Kennedy was not good in Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: By local reporters or reporters for national magazines and national newspapers?

RIGGINS: I'd say that I'm talking about local papers. Kenneth Frye was one of them. Ira Kapenstein was. . . . I think he

gave a fair account of the goings-on. Most of them really would send one fellow up apparently to monitor the program, but the rest of them really weren't around. Then you'd end up with some story. The Journal, especially, was really playing the religious angle. They were continually pointing out that Senator Kennedy was a Catholic. He really got bad press from the Journal on the whole, and I think Ken Frye was doing most of the coverage.

But White I was impressed with. I remember standing next to him and talking with him. Theodore White, who wrote The Making of the President, listened very attentively throughout that whole meeting.

I can't remember a meeting which I attended with Senator Kennedy when he was there--and I think I attended most of them in the southeast part of the state--that there wasn't a full or overflowing crowd. Many of these things were a spur-of-the-moment situation.

Well, I guess the press referred to him as "the candidate." It used to be interesting because very often I got some of these fellows, Childs and there was a man from Newsweek (I forget his name) and there was a reporter I thought was good for the New York Herald Tribune (I can't remember his name either, a blond fellow). They would write news critiques; we'd very often end up with some of those for us. As I recall, at least when their statements were fair, off-the-record. . . . I forget about the national coverage. Locally in Wisconsin I don't think he got good press.

I think even the results were misinterpreted. He had more than a hundred thousand vote lead over Humphrey. And they forgot all about the fact that Humphrey lived right next door and he had been in this state for years, and that the northwest part of Wisconsin is really more attuned to Minnesota than it is to Wisconsin. Senator Kennedy had been here for. . . . Well, he had been in the state a couple of times prior to November 13, 1960 or '59. He had been a J-J [Jefferson-Jackson] dinner speaker. I believe he was. But he was not well-known in Wisconsin, and he just wasn't the type of person that Wisconsin people expect. Remember Lake Michigan isolates us. I think all in all we're fairly provincial. I went to the University of Michigan. Michigan people look east; they look to New York. Here we may think of Chicago, but otherwise it's Milwaukee, Minneapolis. For a young man to come from Massachusetts in here was amazing--amazing to roll up that plurality.

He may have been disappointed himself. I can recall Ted Kennedy telling me at the Dutchland Dairy that they were going to win the Wisconsin primary, and then they were going to. . . . And I posed the Catholicism question to Ted. He said that he had some figures on the [Alfred E.] Al Smith election, of course. He said that they were going to win this one, and then they were going to go on and, "We'll be able to prove in West Virginia that my brother can win." I'm Danish-Irish

ancestry, and I'm usually taken for an Irish Catholic. And I just think it was really a very fine thing, for one thing--which is really a minor thing, but in Wisconsin it played really a major role; there was an emphasis put on it by the local press--that a Roman Catholic was nominated and elected president of the United States and that he did in fact handle the whole issue so well, never really shyed away from it. He handled himself in Wisconsin as a real gentleman so far as Senator Humphrey was concerned, too.

MORRISSEY: Did you see any evidence that Catholic Republicans were crossing over for John Kennedy?

RIGGINS: No. I know of Protestant Republicans who crossed over for John Kennedy. They were people who were more liberal-minded than the Republican party was and is.

MORRISSEY: Would you say in retrospect that the Kennedy campaign in Wisconsin was definitely a young man's campaign? Did you find a lot of fellows like yourself, thirties and forties, many back from World War II, the Kennedy had come back, who felt the way this guy felt.

RIGGINS: Yes. That's right, but that wasn't his sole appeal because we had a meeting up at Jefferson Hall and I believe one of the men who were on his PT boat was there that time. There were a lot more old people there, really. People in their sixties. Maybe it appealed to the fact that this was their son personified. Maybe their son had been killed or a son who was working and raising a family. If this man would have been sixty, he still would have been able to do it with the same type of direction.

MORRISSEY: Were some of the Wisconsin liberals suspicious of this senator from Massachusetts whose family was reportedly close to your Senator Joseph McCarthy?

RIGGINS: Yes. I remember that charge being made at one of the units I spoke at. Somebody brought out an old magazine-- I think it might have been the New Republic--which had a quote which really wasn't significant but it related to something about McCarthy. And there was some feeling about that. Yes, there were a lot of liberals who felt that Senator Kennedy was not liberal enough. But I think that Senator Kennedy was pacing himself very well. This was no time to get involved in that. At that point, they had a long way to go. He probably used it more in West Virginia--I mean so far as a liberal. Here he confined himself pretty much, I think, so far as the issues were concerned. It was time to get moving again, time, in the sixties, to go forward. He was, I think, critical in retrospect of the Republican administration. Truly, yes that's correct. The real progressive liberal, and this is to say a Madison liberal, was not for John Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Was he for Hubert Humphrey?

RIGGINS: Oh, yes.

MORRISSEY: On the basis that maybe Adlai Stevenson would become the ultimate candidate?

RIGGINS: Yes, I would think that they were either. . . . Yes, I would say so, right. This was probably true--that if Humphrey didn't make it, this man may have been a stand-in for Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson at the time certainly enjoyed the respect of most Democrats in Wisconsin including the people who were for Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Since Kennedy did so well in the primary, why did Nixon carry the state by sixty thousand votes?

RIGGINS: I think it was because, frankly, Senator Gaylord Nelson did not carry his load. Senator Kennedy, if there was anything on. . . . Senator Nelson has never been a party Democrat. He became a party Democrat when the Democrats became stronger, I think under [Patrick J.] Lucey who was neutral, of course, when he was state chairman and everybody would kid about that. But in the areas where Gaylord Nelson should have been helping Kennedy, he didn't do it. Those I'm talking about are the northwest part of the state and some of these Scandinavian areas where if he would have campaigned. . . . But he was campaigning strictly, Gaylord Nelson, for re-election as governor. The only thing we could do in Milwaukee was to get a . . . We finally devised some Kennedy-Nelson car-tops and those came out, but that was within the last month. We had joint headquarters, but the Nelson headquarters were just absolutely separated, and not through any wish, I believe, of the Kennedy people.

That's one factor. There's another factor, too. In Milwaukee, although the party I don't think had really much to do with it because in my opinion the Milwaukee County Democratic party was very weak--Howard Meister was its chairman--Howard Meister and the group dragged its feet. I never went to the convention, but Wisconsin could have made it for Senator Kennedy on that ballot but there were still people who voted for either Humphrey or Stevenson even though Humphrey had released his delegation. This feeling has carried on through. . . .

Then later I was elected county chairman when the senator was president in '62. I was county chairman on the day of his assassination. Ironically, we had scheduled a big fund raising event, a big show with Vaughn Meader coming in to do his characterization of the first family.

I think there has been no one on the political scene in Wisconsin with the same drive with the exception of a couple of times of the president, President [Lyndon B.] Johnson, now. I think Johnson and Kennedy have at least two things in common. They demand loyalty, and there's a driving

force. Whereas President Johnson is folksy. . . . When he came in here, you know, he stopped and went into the store and bought some baloney or something. Obviously this is a different type. But Johnson is also a--seemed that he was. . . . Of course, he came in here as vice president of the United States and president, and that's quite different I guess than just a senator. John Kennedy was a lightning bolt when he was here, and the whole organization was.

The explanation for why he didn't carry the state in '60 is, outside of that, I think pretty hard. I don't recall how much Nelson was reelected by but I think if. . . .

There was another reason, too. I think it was a mistake made by the Democratic party, or whoever did it, to have a meeting in Oshkosh after the primary. They virtually dumped the voluntary organization and turned it over to either the party--I know Congressman Zablocki was to be in charge of it in the Fourth District, and Congressman Zablocki helped very much, but they had not been in touch. . . . The people who had done the work and had worked so hard really were not. . . . And many of them were not Democrats, I suppose; but I think that most of them were who did the work. They had no connection. You see, you had the party organization which in some areas was not friendly to Kennedy, and they just lost the control of things. In fact, the only way I could get involved in it was through the Citizens' Committee for Kennedy. We organized that and helped that way.

MORRISSEY: Was there tension between the Citizens and the regular organization during the autumn campaign?

RIGGINS: No, because. . . . I forget who was in charge of the headquarters here. I think Bruno may still have been. LeMoynes Billings came in. In short, Bruno was still here but the operation was really on the south side and supposed to be worked through Zablocki's office. Congressman Zablocki did what he could but I'm afraid that the home secretary and everyone else just took it for granted that we're going to have enough. Now the Fourth District could have carried it, really. We should have been able to pick those votes up in the Fourth and the Fifth. And the Fourth District is--and that I think was a wrong interpretation by the Journal--primarily Polish, and it's primarily Catholic. Yet I think the records would prove there wasn't the turnout there should have been. We had the situation where the county chairman here was absolutely--I think, yes, Lucey was still the state chairman--and he just wouldn't permit some of these things to be done. So there was a lot of dragging of the feet. And it's incredible, but even after the nomination, even after the man received the presidential nomination--I can see them fighting for any other candidate, Stevenson or anyone else, but not when a man is your nominee. The only time I ever saw the Milwaukee County Democratic chairman was when the presidential nominee came in October of '60. Then he showed up at the arena and carried a donkey which Senator Kennedy had given. . . . It

was presented, you know, to Caroline. I suppose he must have a herd of them. But his was one and I think Senator Kennedy gave it to Howard Meister who was then the chairman. He gave him the jackass. [Laughter]

So I really think that's about it. I didn't have any official capacity except I had more fun, I think, than anybody and had more chance meetings.

MORRISSEY: Have a lot of these younger people that Kennedy attracted, people who hadn't participated in politics before, stayed with the Democratic party?

RIGGINS: Yes, right.

MORRISSEY: Would you say that this is one key to why the party has done so well in this state in recent years?

RIGGINS: I'm sure it is. There is still, I think, the--if you want to call it that--cause celebre. There is still that idealism and spark there, you know. They're not fanatic about it, but there's a definite group, I think, who are leaders in the party and definitely are Kennedy Democrats. Now they worked strongly for Johnson. There's no question about it. And they've worked for Senator Nelson, too.