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Biographical Note
Campaign worker, Kennedy for President Campaign, Wisconsin (1960). In this interview, Tracy discusses working on John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign during the primary in Wisconsin, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

AMBROSE TRACY

January 14, 1966
Lyndon Station, Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let me start by asking how you got involved with John Kennedy's campaign in Wisconsin.

TRACY: Well I noticed a piece in the paper one day where Ivan Nestigen was asking for people to help Kennedy. I wrote back to him and in a few days I had a lot of literature, and I was very much in accord with what he said. And we, my wife Dorothy and I, went to work...
for him and we had quite a lot of correspondence. Dorothy, I, and John Flaherty put on a dinner for him at the Methodist Church in Mauston, the first time I met him personally, and we had tickets out in the different areas. The night before the dinner we had only fifteen tickets sold, and we had to guarantee the Church seven-hundred dollars so it made us feel a little dubious, but we were really happy the next morning, we were turning people away before the dinner.

When the President arrived he got out of the car. He didn't say hello to nobody but made for a grocery store and got in there and shook hands with the proprietor, and then took off for the kitchen of the church and talked with all the cooks before he
recognized the people in general. After the dinner him and I started for the radio station. He was going to make a tape recording for campaign purposes in the country. On the way over a fellow that runs a tavern came out to shake hands with him, he also had a couple of other fellows that were pretty well inebriated, and the President looked up and said, "These boys look like a couple of your customers." But before we got to the radio station, he was half a block ahead of me. He was a terrific walker. So Jackie and I walked along together and let him go. He made a tape recording and while he was making it, he was reading the newspaper at the same time, which all the people in the room complimented him on being able to do it. So from
there he went to Tomah where he had a speaking engagement. From then on his sisters were in our locality. The Democratic ladies put on a tea for Bunice at which we had a very nice crowd. We had this tea in the Assembly room in the courthouse at Mauston. One of the ladies thought it would be appropriate to have a flag. She went up to the Register of Deeds, he had custody of the county flag, and being a good Republican he wouldn't give it to her. So another lady went up the street to a store that had a big flag. When she come out of the store she unfolded the flag and come down the street. You would think it was George Washington crossing the Delaware.

Last summer Mrs. Anna Mary Koscal took up a collection for the library
fund. At the anniversary of his death she had a nice write up in the paper.

Lem Billings came to Wisconsin on a real stormy night in March. He came up to our place and had supper. There was a Democrat meeting that night. John Reynolds and Norm Clapp were there. They each gave a little talk on the Kennedy for President organization. Lem added to it, he went over it real good and the people weren't used to his Boston drawl and they got quite a kick out of it. He stayed in Baraboo that night as he wanted to make contact with a Mr. Welch. He often commented on the fact that he never had a better time than he did that night. He used to come to our place in the summer of that year, he would stay half a day at a time.
MORRISSEY: What attracted you to Kennedy before you had known him?

TRACY: Well, I do quite a bit of reading and research and thought he was a great man. His personality, his method of getting things done. And I thought he was really the man for President the way the United States was going. I couldn't see Humphrey because he was just a front for these other fellows.

MORRISSEY: Have you been active in Democratic affairs?

TRACY: Yes, I have been active for many years. But I work for the Federal Government now and can't be as active as I used to be.

MORRISSEY: You work for the government?

TRACY: Yes, when Lem left here the night before the elections Pat Lucey asked him if he had any patronage he wanted to give
out in Wisconsin. Lem told him that, "Be sure Tracy gets a job."

I was not looking for any job when I worked campaigning as I had enough to do at home, but done it to help the President as much as I could. Then I thought maybe I would try and get the U.S. Marshal job, but evidently that job is the governor's plum. That's practically the only appointment that he can make. I did not get the job. Pat Lucey was quite disturbed. He said, "God, I've got to get you a job." So we maneuvered around the most of that winter due to the fact the Department was short of travel funds.

MORRISSEY: Were most of your colleagues who had been active in party affairs active in working for Humphrey?

TRACY: Not too much. We had a pretty good
organization in the country for Kennedy. We have a lot of Norwegians who, of course, worked for Humphrey and of course you could not blame them for that. We had clubs of different people. Kennedy club, Humphrey club, and Democratic club on the county level. We had the President in the county first. Then Humphrey. Mauston was the first place that Humphrey started to browbeat Kennedy. It was the first place that Humphrey used language trying to ridicule the President as much as he could.

There were quite a lot of Kennedy people there that day. We were sore at Humphrey ever since. One old fellow had a bunch of Kennedy buttons on his coat; Humphrey come over to shake hands with him. Humphrey noticed the buttons,
shook his head, and walked off. Wouldn't shake hands with him. That was the kind of sport he was. But all in all we were very pleased with the way things turned out in the campaign.

My brother and his boys worked at the Kennedy Club head quarters in Milwaukee. Matter of fact, my brother has one of Bobby's stetsons which he left in my brother's car. The boys worked hard for Jack. He told one of the boys if he got elected to come to Washington and he would get him a job. He was going to school at the time and by the time he finished the President was assassinated. So he went to Seattle to work for Walker Lumber Company.

MORRISSEY: Did you travel much with John Kennedy when he came through your part of the state?
TRACY: Well, he only made one trip through our area. But Bobby and the girls were more active in our part of the country than the rest of the family. The Kennedy club ladies put on a tea for Pat Lawford at Wonewoc and Eunice Shriver at Mauston, and there was a nice crowd at both places.

MORRISSEY: How do you spell that first town?

TRACY: W-O-N-E-W-O-C. That's a Republican stronghold if there ever was one. The Republicans put on a coffee lunch on the day Pat was there to keep the people from coming to see Pat. But we still had a nice crowd.

MORRISSEY: Did you get much of a vote out of that town for Kennedy?

TRACY: No. Not too well from there.

MORRISSEY: Do you think those receptions that his sisters held were effective?
TRACY: Very much so. Eunice gave a nice talk at Mauston. There were around one hundred fifty people there. Pat, at Wonewoc, did not have that many. She was in the wrong town, the control was bad, the Republicans would not let the photographers take pictures for the local papers.

Lem Billings went to Lacrosse from our area and the following summer he was in our area most of the time.

MORRISSEY: Was Kennedy's religion an issue?

TRACY: It was in certain localities. I really think it was.

MORRISSEY: Did you see much evidence of it?

TRACY: Yes we did, especially among the Norwegians.

MORRISSEY: What kind of evidence?

TRACY: They came right out and said they would not vote for him on account of his religion. Especially the older people. The younger
generation were much smoother, but they still would not vote for him. In fact, a lot of those fellows who were members of the Democratic party never came back after that.

MORRISSEY: Did you expect your district to go for Kennedy in that primary campaign?

TRACY: Well, it's hard to say. We were a little skeptical all the way through due to the fact that our area is pretty much Norwegian. They were working hard, and then they had the Farmers Union group that is pretty dominant in this area. They were all Humphrey people. But we did the best we could and spent a lot of time.

During the campaign after he got the nomination we had a lot of committees set up, which does a lot of campaigning for the President.
I ran for sheriff, we tried to build up the campaign locally as much as we could. Although I ran two years before, I lost only by six hundred votes.

MORRISSEY: How did you do the second time?

TRACY: Not too good the second time because it has been sort of customary to elect a sheriff the second term. I was not so particular for myself as I was trying to help Jack out as much as I could. I thought that was probably as good a way as we could help as we had a lot of local people who would not of voted for Jack otherwise.

MORRISSEY: Were there many Republicans that voted for Kennedy in that primary in your area?

TRACY: I think there were. There were a lot of Catholic Republicans that did. The
big issue was between Catholic and Protestant in our county.

MORRISSEY: What did you think all over the United States? Was it about the same way that one offset the other pretty much?

TRACY: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Did you have the entire district?

TRACY: No, we just had the local county. Lem was head of the whole district; we didn't have any district chairman. Lem set up headquarters in LaCrosse, he picked Steve De Prazza, not knowing him, and I think that hurt a bit in that area.

MORRISSEY: I don't think I ever heard the name before.

TRACY: He was County Chairman at one time. He was a restaurant owner. John Flaherty was with me on this. He's an old campaigner, helped get the dinner at the Methodist Church. One lady who's
kind of head of the Methodist Church
was a good Democrat. The Methodist
minister was a real Kennedy man and
you know afterwards they kicked him out.

MORRISSEY: For what reason?

TRACY: Yes, and it was the Republicans that
did it.

MORRISSEY: Did you get much help from volunteers
during that campaign?

TRACY: Oh yes, a lot of people helped out.

MORRISSEY: Where did the volunteers come from?

TRACY: School kids, especially, Catholic
school kids; they really worked. The
young Democrats. If they could keep
these young people interested the old
people fall in line with kids.

MORRISSEY: Did any of these volunteers stay active
in the party after the primary?

TRACY: Yes, there were a lot of people that
stayed in that we never had before.
After the assassination practically everyone felt bad.

MORRISSEY: How about the newspaper up in your area; did they support one candidate more than another?

TRACY: Yes, I think so. He had Democrat leanings, he was for Stevenson, then Humphrey. Mrs. Orville Freeman was in our county, she put on a tea for her.

MORRISSEY: I think that just about covers it unless you have some little isolated incident you recall, any anecdotes as any other things that happened.

TRACY: Well, it's five or six years now.

MORRISSEY: Almost six now.

Go ahead and tell me that story you just told me.

TRACY: The morning the President came into
Mauston for the dinner, there was an old gentlemen named Fred Havey, he was a great Kennedy backer, he walked out to the car Kennedy was in, he looked at him and said, "Gosh, I guess he's just like the rest of us." He had eight tickets for the dinner, although he had left them up to his daughter's house. He went up after them; there was nobody home, he couldn't find them, we were all out of tickets now. Come to find out afterwards, that his daughter had put them under the pillow so that the kids wouldn't get hold of them.

After buying eight he didn't have any for himself.

MORRISSEY: Thank you.
United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

August 24, 1959

Mr. Ambrose Tracy  
Lyndon Station  
Wisconsin

Dear Mr. Tracy:

It is most encouraging and a great source of satisfaction to learn of your public statement in my behalf. I want to extend to you my sincere thanks for your confidence and your willingness to subscribe your able assistance to the Wisconsin Kennedy for President Club.

As you know, I plan to be in your state from September 24 to September 26 and again in November. I am looking forward with much pleasure to visiting with you on one of these trips.

With every good wish, I am

Sincerely,

[Signature]

John F. Kennedy
March 12, 1960

Mrs. Ambrose Tracy
Mauston
Wisconsin

Dear Mrs. Tracy:

I want to express my appreciation to you for your generosity in hostessing a "coffee" for my sister Eunice. The cordial hospitality which you and your friends accorded her was gratifying to us both. It was indeed good of you to help my effort in this manner.

On behalf of both Eunice and myself, many thanks for your kindness and assistance.

With every good wish, I am

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

JFK: Jms
March 24, 1960

Mrs. Ambrose Tracy
R. R.
Lyndon Station, Wisconsin

Dear Mrs. Tracy:

It is very generous of you to hold a coffee hour in my behalf. I want you to know how much I appreciate your willingness to invite your neighbors and friends to join me via television at 10:30 a.m. on April 2nd.

If you or your friends have any questions you wish to ask me, you may telephone collect the numbers which will appear on your television screen, and I will answer these queries as they are received.

You will also receive under separate cover a kit of material which you may distribute to your friends during the coffee hour.

Again, my sincere thanks for your assistance in this matter.

With every good wish, I am

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

JFK:jms
April 18, 1960

Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose Tracy
Lyndon Station, Wisconsin

Dear Dorothy and Ambrose:

I was very sorry that I was not able to see you again as I had planned after Jack's sweeping victory in Wisconsin, but I had to fly to West Virginia on Wednesday and left my car in LaCrosse instead of Madison as I had planned.

I know you are as disappointed as I am that we were not able to take the Third District; however, I guess it was asking too much that we take the three border districts in that after all, they are Humphrey's back yard. Humphrey is politically dead whether he admits it or not. I feel that he is merely a paid employee of either Symington or Johnson to try to stop the Kennedy band wagon in West Virginia in a primary neither Symington or Johnson dare to enter. Knowing Humphrey's dirty tactics, he will center his fight on the religious issue since there are only 4% Catholics there. I am sure his will be an anti-Catholic campaign. We will win, but it is going to be an extremely tough fight. Once we win in this strongly Protestant state, the religious issue will be put to bed for good.

I will always remember you both as, actually, yours was the first visit I made in the state, and you certainly were nice to me. It makes me wish I did not live so far away from Wisconsin because I met so many nice people like you. I know how much Jack appreciates all the hard work you did during the campaign.

Best wishes to you both,

Sincerely,

K. LeMoyne Billings
Vice President
Mr. Ambrose Tracy  
Lyndon Station  
Wisconsin  

May 4, 1960

Dear Mr. Tracy:

Now that the Wisconsin Presidential Primary is finished, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for the diligent work you did in my behalf during the campaign.

It is with gratitude for your generous assistance that I remember the Wisconsin campaign. Knowing of your efforts was a source of encouragement to me during the days preceding the primary.

With thanks and every good wish, I am

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

JFK: Jms