

**Kirk LeMoyne Billings Oral History Interview – JFK#9, 06/11/65**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Kirk LeMoyne Billings  
**Interviewer:** Walter D. Sohier  
**Date of Interview:** June 11, 1965  
**Place of Interview:** New York City  
**Length:** 60 pages

**Biographical Note**

Billings was a Kennedy family friend and associate. In this interview, he discusses his unofficial role working for John F. Kennedy [JFK] in the government, and JFK's collecting habits, among other issues.

**Access**

Open

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed **April 25, 1967**, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

**Suggested Citation**

Kirk LeMoyne Billings, recorded interview by Walter D. Sohier, June 11, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

"GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT"

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, KIRK LEMOYNE BILLINGS, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of personal statements approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

This material shall not until my death or expiration of fifty (50) years from date of delivery of this material (whichever shall last occur) be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine them.

This restriction shall apply to and include employees and officers of the General Services Administration of the National Archives and Records Service and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

A revision of the above stipulations governing access to the subject material may be entered into by the donor and the Archivist of the United States if it appears desirable to the donor to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights shall pass to the United States of America.

Dated:

Kirk LeMoyne Billings  
Kirk LeMoyne Billings

Dated:

April 25, 1967

ACCEPTED:  
Robert H. Baker  
Archivist of the United States

Kirk LeMoyne Billings – JFK #9

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
639	The jobs that John F. Kennedy [JFK] had offered Billings, and his ultimately unofficial role in the government
652	Billings' work on the National Cultural Center (now known as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts)
666	JFK's collections (scrimshaw, ship models, antiquities etc.)

Ninth Oral History Interview

with

K. LEMOYNE BILLINGS

June 11, 1965

New York City

By Walter D. Sohler

For The John F. Kennedy Library

This the First Tape, First Part of One Tape of the Ninth Interview with K. Lemoyne Billings, done by Walter D. Sohler at Mr. Billings' apartment in New York City, on June 11th, 1965.

Mr. Sohler: At the end of the last interview, we were talking about what jobs President Kennedy had offered you, Lem, and we mentioned the Peace Corps, but you also brought up the matter of the U. S. Travel Service. I wonder if you could talk a little about that...his interest in this, and what role he had in mind for you, and so forth.

Mr. Billings: The President asked me after he was elected if I didn't want to go to work for the Government. At that time I had told him that I hadn't anything in mind, but that I would certainly think about it. Between elections and inauguration, I took a trip to Europe. I remember that one of the problems which the President faced when he came into office was the fact that we had a very bad balance of gold. I don't remember the exact ratio now but I think that possibly about one-third of the imbalance was due to the travel of Americans abroad versus the very minimum travel of foreigners to the United States. This had been recognized during the Eisenhower Administration

and there had been an attempt to pass a Bill establishing a U. S. Travel Service. The job of this service would be to attract visitors to this country. The United States was the only major country without such a department. In New York City alone there were approximately 72 to 80 travel bureaus of foreign countries; even the Congo at that time was represented. The United States on the other hand had no travel offices in any foreign countries and did nothing to encourage travel in the United States. Actually, at the time President Kennedy came in to office, everything was being done to discourage tourists from coming to our shores. Visas were difficult to acquire - we were generally unfriendly hosts. President Kennedy recognized this. While I was in Europe I read an article in Time about this problem. I became very interested - and upon my return made a study of the problem - of course I also talked to the President about it.

Mr. Sohler: Was he President-elect at this point?

Mr. Billings: Yes, he was President-elect. I asked him what his ideas were on this subject. He was extremely anxious to bring the U. S. Travel Bureau Bill before Congress again.

He was, in fact, determined that a U. S. Travel Service be established. I felt that this was something in which I would like to become involved. Of course, since the Bill had never been passed, no director had been appointed. The Service, of course, would come under the Commerce Department. The President discussed the whole matter with Secretary Hodges and it was decided that if the Bill passed, I would be appointed the first director. It was a terribly difficult job to steer this law through the Senate and the House - even with the help of the White House it took a very long time.

Mr. Sohler: Did you get involved in the effort to get it through Congress?

Mr. Billings: I became very involved. It was much more difficult than you would think, even though we were only talking about a budget of \$3 million a year - added to this, if the efforts of the Service were successful, this money would be repaid in tourist spending. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of opposition. Needless to say it was my first experience on the Hill in lobbying for a bill. It was a most interesting experience.

Mr. Sohler: How were you billed as you appeared on the Hill? I mean, you sort of were a little incongruous in this, I suppose because you had no status as a Government official.

Mr. Billings: I never appeared in public hearings - I merely visited key members of the House and Senate. I worked very closely with the Commerce Department. I particularly worked with Senator Warren G. Magnuson's Senate Committee and became very involved with the office of the Committee. The most dedicated man in this office was John Black. He had been working on this law ever since it was first introduced. Incidentally, later he was Assistant Director and now is the Director of the Travel Service. Senator Magnuson was extremely interested and was most helpful. Actually, I worked behind the scenes representing President Kennedy. Of course those who had endorsed the bill during the Eisenhower administration were on record - and I worked closely with them. There was never any announcement that I would be the Director. Of course there was no need for that since the Travel Service didn't exist.

And naturally the Director would not officially be named until the law had been passed.

Mr. Sohler: How did it all come out?

Mr. Billings: I spent a great deal of time in Washington and worked constantly with those involved. However, although I was determined that a U. S. Travel Service be established, I discovered in the process that I basically did not want to work in the government. I realized that I didn't want to work for the President - because I felt it would change our relationship. Of course I wanted to help in every way I could in any area in which he was interested, but officially, I didn't want to be in the government. I told the President that it was for those reasons that I did not want to be Director. The President understood and so informed Secretary Hodges. I continued to work diligently on the project because there was no Director designate. I continued until the time the law was established, working closely with the Commerce Department and helping establish the U. S. Travel Service within the department. Of course my main ability to aid was the fact that I was representing the President.

Mr. Sohler: Did he understand your reasons for not wanting to take the job? I think that earlier in a previous interview you mentioned that in one way working for him might change your relationship with him.

Mr. Billings: I don't think that he had any feeling about the fact that this would change our relationship. I don't think it ever crossed his mind. This was probably all in my own mind, but I felt very strongly about it. I think hindsight proves that I was right. Certainly my relationship with him was much more important than anything else to me. Aside from that I did have a good job with Lennen & Newell and they were very anxious for me to stay with them. They were very good in permitting me to keep my time flexible enough to go to Washington whenever I could be helpful there.

Mr. Sohler: Speaking of that, you really were something more than unofficial in connection with the Cultural Center project and have been ever since the beginning, so in a way you really had a Government job of a kind there. I wonder whether we could get into that.

Mr. Billings: Let me stick a little with the Travel Service.

There are some more interesting incidents involving it. When I decided not to be Director, it was my impression that one of the assignments the President gave me was to recommend to him somebody who would be highly qualified for this job, chosen strictly on a non-partisan basis. Naturally, I had met many of the leaders of the travel industry and had in the past several months worked closely with them. I was therefore in a position to find the most highly qualified man in the field - one whose experience and ability could insure the success of the future service. With the help of those in the industry whom I respected, we chose Donald Petrie. Petrie was Executive Vice President of Hertz as well as President of Hertz International. It was Petrie who had set up Hertz's highly successful international business. He had been promised the presidency of Hertz. However, he was passed over. He had recently resigned from Hertz. We were indeed fortunate to have such a man available, who was ready and willing to take on this challenge. I introduced him to the President - and the President was most impressed with him. Incidentally, he also happened to be a

good active Democrat -- which did not hurt his candidacy. He was the perfect answer. The President discussed the appointment with Secretary Hodges. The Secretary went into shock. He said that it was his impression after I had resigned that the President had left it up to him to choose my successor. He told the President he wanted to recommend Voit Gilmore of South Carolina. Mr. Gilmore was a close associate of the Secretary's and incidentally had no experience of any kind in the travel industry. The Secretary told the President that the situation put him in an embarrassing position - in that he had offered the job to Gilmore dependent, of course, on the President's confirmation. This was a most unfortunate misunderstanding since the President felt that he had not asked Hodges to find a man to fill the job.

Mr. Sohier: This was a little unclear in everybody's mind. Hodges thought he had the job; you thought you did; and the President....

Mr. Billings: Hodges knew that I had the job, there was no question about that.

Mr. Sohier: You think you were given the treatment

on that one?

Mr. Billings: Oh, no; I mean, President Kennedy when he...Don't misunderstand me...

Mr. Sohler: Oh, I mean the job of appointing someone.

Mr. Billings: Oh yes, I thought you meant...on the job of finding someone. Whatever it was, it was a complete misunderstanding. President Kennedy was very satisfied with Petrie; he talked to him and he felt that he was the man for the job and was very pleased that we'd found someone so highly qualified. However, the whole thing turned into a bad experience.

Mr. Sohler: When did this occur - in the White House?

Mr. Billings: You mean after the President was in the White House? Yes, this took place in the Spring of '61. Remember at the time, the bill had not yet passed into law. Therefore, this was not a public misunderstanding. It was a play for power, a play for favorites on the part of Luther Hodges. Luther Hodges is a very strong, pig-headed man. He went much too far with this. Actually, he crossed the

the President of the United States. On the other hand, it wasn't important enough for the President to overrule his Secretary of Commerce.

Mr. Sohier: Actually, it's a little more normal for him to seek out the man than to ask you to do so, in the scheme of things.

Mr. Billings: I want to make it very clear that it wasn't me seeking out the man; it was the President's office seeking out the man. I was acting for the President. Of course Petrie had been screened by everybody in the President's office.

Mr. Sohier: Well, what happened then?

Mr. Billings: Well, it came down to the point that the President didn't want to make it an issue with Hodges.

Mr. Sohier: So Petrie didn't get the job?

Mr. Billings: So Petrie didn't get the job and Gilmore did, but I think I'll state here President Kennedy's comment to me at this time. "Billings, all you have accomplished so far for me is to make me hate a member of my Cabinet."

Mr. Sohier: That's interesting.

Mr. Billings: So it shows that Luther made a mistake. I don't think that President Kennedy ever got along with Hodges. There were other reasons, of course, I think probably it just wasn't a simpatico relationship.

Mr. Sohler: Did it continue as non-simpatico?

Mr. Billings: I don't know why President Kennedy kept Hodges in office. He didn't really respect Hodges; Hodges's fiasco with the Business Committee, which had been named by President Eisenhower was most irritating to the President. This was an Advisory Committee to the Commerce Department and was made up of the leaders in business. Through some disagreement with Secretary Hodges, they all resigned. This reflected on the President and was partly responsible for the President's poor relationship with business. This was really unfair and unfortunate because certainly President Kennedy was not anti-business in any way. In fact, no President has ever been more conscious of the importance of keeping an eye on our economy than President Kennedy.

Mr. Sohler: Did he ever mention to you, or did you ever note firsthand, that he expected or wanted Franklin Roosevelt

to step into Hodges' job?

Mr. Billings: Well, we're way ahead of the story. Remember, Frankling Roosevelt was named UnderSecretary of Commerce only a few months before the President died. I don't know whether the President ever intended to name him Secretary or not. Through most of his administration we had an excellent Undersecretary in Edward Gudeman. Gudeman was a very strong man, a man with the respect of the business community and one who had a lot of ability. It's difficult to talk about Franklin in the Kennedy administration, as he was only in it for so short a time. Roosevelt was brought in when Gudeman resigned. Of course, Jack Kennedy's loyalties to those who helped him when he needed help were very great. If Roosevelt wanted that job, I suppose the President felt like Fay's job, it wasn't a key one. Of course Roosevelt is very able in certain areas. He doesn't always use these abilities, however.

To get back to Voit Gilmore. The U. S. Travel Service bill was passed and Gilmore became its first director. The Service has accomplished a lot in its short life - and to

Gilmore credit should be given. There is no question that Petrie would have accomplished more. Gilmore had many troubles with the Congressional Committee headed by John J. Rooney. These troubles could have been avoided if handled properly. Gilmore rubbed Rooney the wrong way - and this has held up the proper financing that the service needs. If President Kennedy had lived he would have given great strength to the Travel Service. I'm very concerned about what's going to happen to it. I would like to add another point - then we'll leave the Travel Service. President Kennedy wanted visitors from other countries to have the kind of reception that would make them welcome to the United States and it was really he who directed that - the whole Custom Office should approach foreign visitors with friendliness rather than suspicion. He directed that the State Department should completely revise the visa and reduce it to the shortest form possible. Formerly all visas had contained such questions as: "Have you ever had a moral problem; have you ever been a prostitute?" The visitor would have to check "yes" or "no". It was a long, insulting and antiquated form. He insisted that all embassies

treat potential visitors with politeness. Before his administration, it was the policy to suspect that everyone visiting the United States wanted to stay and become a citizen.

Mr. Sohler: What was his technique? For example, he cut down the form. Did he actually get a copy of the form and look at it?

Mr. Billings: He read the form and was shocked by it; You know he was a great man for detail. I don't mean doing it himself but reading it and saying "something had to be done about this." He made sure it was sent to the right person for action.

Mr. Sohler: Well, let's turn to one of the other things that you worked very closely with him on - the Cultural Center - and I don't know where you want to begin on that.

Mr. Billings: Well, I have become much more involved in this than I originally anticipated. When President Kennedy came into office, he was faced with the problem of the National Cultural Center in Washington. By an Act of Congress in 1958, passed during the Eisenhower Administration, the National Cultural Center was established, as a

place for the performing arts in our capital. Every administration has made some attempt to establish a showcase for the performing arts in the Capital. The first time anything was accomplished in this direction was in the Eisenhower Administration, when the bill was passed. In this bill, land was given by Congress on which this center could be built with private funds. Funds would be raised by a Board of Trustees, who would be Presidential appointees. When President Kennedy inherited this problem in 1960 there was little money in the till. President Eisenhower actually wasn't too interested in the whole project.

Mr. Sohler: Very little private funds - you mean they started to raise private funds at this point?

Mr. Billings: They had tried to raise private funds during the Eisenhower Administration but very little had been accomplished. Money mainly had come from a man called Corrin Strong, who was interested in this project. His money had kept the project going. President Eisenhower named Secretary Arthur S. Flemming of the Health and Welfare Department as Chairman; obviously he didn't have the time to

be a working Chairman. The result was that nothing important was accomplished. President Kennedy had to make the decision as to whether he wanted to support this project. He looked for advice from the leaders in the performing arts. He realized quickly that this project was necessary for Washington, that we were the only important Capital in the world which didn't have such facilities. He put his support behind it 100 per cent. He spent a great deal of time finding the right kind of leadership. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to find leadership in this area and I'm sad to say that a great many of the qualified people didn't accept.

Mr. Sohler: What kind of people was he anxious to get in the job? I won't necessarily ask who was asked and who refused, but...

Mr. Billings: Lincoln Center in New York fortunately had proved that such a project could be successful. The President knew so much of its success was based on its leadership. They were fortunate to have John D. Rockefeller, III as their Chairman.

Mr. Sohler: Also you have a lot of big money in New York

that you don't have in Washington for example.

Mr. Billings: Yes, but also their leader was a man with the Rockefeller money behind him - John D. the Third. If there's trouble he could draw on important financial facilities. A man with that kind of wealth also can demand certain aid from many, many areas, and this I'm sure is the kind of man that President Kennedy was looking for. He never found such a man - he did find Roger Stevens who was willing to give the leadership, time and effort - but the President knew he would have to give the project much of his own personal aid.

Mr. Sohler: He picked him, didn't he?

Mr. Billings: Yes, he did. Roger wasn't his first choice. Although Roger has been dedicated in time and effort, there have been an awful, awful lot of problems. I think some of them could have been avoided with stronger leadership.

Mr. Sohler: What was President Kennedy's conception of this?

Mr. Billings: Well, first of all, the Eisenhower Administration had retained Edward Durell Stone to plan a building. This building that President Kennedy inherited was a \$76 million

project. President Kennedy immediately realized, and rightfully so, that this was something much too big and not necessary.

Mr. Sohler: Was this the same Watergate site?

Mr. Billings: The same site. This site was given to the Center by Congress in the bill.

Mr. Sohler: It was specified?

Mr. Billings: It was specified and that's why any argument against the site was in a way ridiculous because that site is valued at \$13 million. That was a gift from the Government to this project. And to find another site would mean another Act of Congress. Where would the money come from to buy other land? We're digressing, but there are always arguments about the sites of public buildings anyway.

Mr. Sohler: Did these arguments occur when President Kennedy was alive? We know they occurred afterward, but...

Mr. Billings: They occurred mostly during the Eisenhower Administration and, in all fairness to Eisenhower, this kind of a fight is always the biggest detriment to the raising of money. It may be the reason so little money was raised in his

Administration. These people, many of whom had no interest at all in contributing in any material way to the project, were almost successful in putting an end to the Center. Of course, it was partly Eisenhower's fault in that he never took a strong stand on the site. However, when President Kennedy took office he was very firm about the question of the site - stating publically, "This is where it's going to be." During his lifetime there was never any further problem about the site. There were many, many people who didn't agree or who wanted to confuse the issue and begin the argument again, but as long as the President of the United States said, "This is the site.", then the money-raisers could go out and raise money on the basis of President Kennedy's firm decision.

Mr. Sohler: Did people get to him like Bill Walton, for example, and say, "Gee, this is a mistake; it ought to be.."?"

Mr. Billings: Yes, Bill Walton got to him every day but I also got to him the day after Bill Walton was there.

Mr. Sohler: But he had made his mind up?

Mr. Billings: Yes, he had.

Mr. Billings: But also....I've sort of digressed. You asked me where I fit into this and I've just told you the background of the Center. The Travel Service had been established and we not only had a Director but more importantly, we had as Deputy Director, John Black, who even back in the days of the Eisenhower Administration was deeply involved with promoting the establishment of the Travel Service. I was able to insure his appointment and the Travel Service's success has been largely due to his talents. Although I was appointed to the Advisory Committee, my responsibilities towards the Travel Service were finished. It was at that time that the President asked me to serve on the Board of Trustees of the National Cultural Center. It was important to him to have a personal representative on the Board. He realized that only through his help could the \$30 million dollars be raised. He was determined that the Center be built during his Administration. President Kennedy will be known as the President who encouraged the Arts - Nothing in this area was more important to him than building a showplace for the performing arts in our national Capital. Accordingly, he helped in every way he could. For an example, at Roger Steven's

suggestion, we produced a closed circuit television show - emanating from four or five major cities. It was an enormous undertaking and Roger Stevens worked very, very hard on it. It was a very expensive way to raise money. We needed the help of local people to sell tickets. This was particularly difficult in that we didn't have a national organization. To answer the organizational needs, we approached local cultural groups, people who were interested in their own operas, etc. We agreed to share the profits with them on a 50-50 basis. They would sell the tickets and we would furnish the entertainment and the President of the United States.

Of course the President attended the dinner at the Armory in Washington. We all know the Armory is an enormous place to have a dinner - perhaps we were too optimistic and since the President was going to be there it had to be a big one and a successful one. The tickets were \$100 tickets. Mrs. Arthur Gardner was chosen as Chairman and from the start things weren't going well at all. And I remember - I'm giving an example of the President's interest - he held two meetings at the White House, two fund raising meetings at the White House,

to make sure that the dinner for the Cultural Center at the Armory was a success. The President was willing and happy to do anything in the way of fund raising for this project. Of course now it's named, "The John F. Kennedy Center," but at that time it was the National Cultural Center," and he was doing this strictly because he felt that Washington needed this facility. When we were working with the Center's Business Committee, he had a luncheon for over a hundred businessmen, strictly on a money-raising basis. He gave a strong talk on what was needed. We can trace at least a million and a half dollars from that one luncheon.

Mr. Sohler: What was the conception? We were talking about the rather mammoth building involved and so on. What was his conception as opposed to that?

Mr. Billings: Well, after advice, and after looking and talking to many, many people who he felt were qualified to advise him, he saw that it was going to be difficult to raise money for whatever we did. Therefore he felt the facilities should be adequate but nothing should be built which was not functional - only what was needed and nothing more. He asked

Edward Durell Stone to re-design the building and to design it on the basis of completely materialistic needs. Stone reduced the building from a \$76 million one to a \$30 million one.

Mr. Sohler: It will still have beautiful halls, but not...

Mr. Billings: It's still beautiful. There's not wasted space in this building.

Mr. Sohler: What were his other involvements with the Cultural Center that you want to bring out?

Mr. Billings: I think I would like to establish here that many people think that his interest in the arts was based on the fact that he was married to Jackie Kennedy and her influence was largely responsible for his interest in the Cultural Center. Possibly she did make him more interested in cultural affairs generally, but I don't believe Jackie Kennedy knew anything about the Center. I don't think he ever even talked to her about the Center.

Ninth Oral History Interview

2nd Tape of 3  
with

K. LEMOYNE BILLINGS

June 11, 1965

New York City

By Walter D. Sohler

For The John F. Kennedy Library

This is the Second Tape of the Ninth Interview with K. Lemoyne Billings, done by Walter D. Sohier at Mr. Billings' apartment in New York City, on June 11th 1965.

Mr. Sohier: I was going to ask you what interest Jackie took in the early planning for the National Cultural Center.

Mr. Billings: I never talked with her about it at all. As far as I know, the President didn't talk to her about it either. Of course I became too deeply involved with this project myself <sup>and</sup> ~~that~~ I'm afraid I discussed it with him to the point of boredom. However, he was always interested in it, as he was in so many different subjects. He was a terrific listener. As I remember, Jackie's only involvement was when he decided that Jackie should be honorary chairman of The Center. This did not mean she would take any active part, but that merely her name would be used to indicate his own interest. He also felt Mamie Eisenhower should be an honorary chairman. Stupidly, none of us had thought of this but he realized the importance of the project being completely non-partisan. He had already emphasized how non-partisan The Center was by naming Republicans to the Board of Trustees.

Mr. Sohier: Of course, if you're going to get money, you have to have a few Republicans.

Mr. Billings: I know, but President Johnson hasn't been as intelligent about this. Johnson hasn't named any Republicans to date. He's merely used the appointments as a political football. Jack Kennedy left it completely up to the Board to recommend to him the new Board members. At this time, of course, the primary job was to raise money and the President was the kind of an administrator who gave his Board the authority and tools necessary to do the job. Actually, it is obvious that Board members should be people who could bring in money. That's all we were interested in at that point. We needed money desperately. This was all he was thinking of.

Mr. Sohler: Do you think we've covered everything?

Mr. Billings: No. We were having a bad time raising money. It's always difficult to raise \$30 million. He said, before he died, that if we could arrange to find people who would be interested in helping - rich people who could afford to give at least \$100,000 each - he would be glad to have a really fantastic dinner at the White House for that group. We were planning to arrange such a dinner for February of 1964. Of course, this dinner never took place.

Mr. Sohler: Were there people who gave that amount?

Mr. Billings: Of course a few had already given that much, but it was our job to find such potential givers who could be personally encouraged and recognized by the President at the White House. This kind of a dinner had already been proven successful as evidenced by the luncheon he gave for businessmen at the White House shortly before he died. We raised a million and a half from that luncheon. Maybe the proposed dinner for potentially big contributors would have been successful and maybe it wouldn't, but he wanted to try. After he died, of course, we asked President Johnson to do what President Kennedy had planned to do. However, President Johnson had absolutely no interest in the Center. None. Another point is that President Kennedy felt that we didn't have enough trustees. We had fifteen Presidential appointees. He felt that perhaps if we had more trustees, carefully chosen as money raisers or givers, we could get this job done faster. He recommended to Congress that a bill be passed increasing the size of the Board. This bill passed just before he died. He never had the opportunity to name these new members. Of course, the people named by Johnson...

Mr. Sohler: Were all on a political basis, I guess.

Mr. Billings: Yes, so we didn't gain a thing except a whole

lot of extra trustees. I just want to say this. We, on the Board of the National Cultural Center, which is now the John F. Kennedy Center, had a ball when President Kennedy was alive. All of us had fun. We enjoyed it; we worked hard; we had a wonderful feeling of excitement and pleasure. Our reward for hard work was the knowledge that he was always behind us ready to help. After he died, it was just hell. Without any help from the White House, the job became almost impossible. Those of us who have continued to work hard are only sticking with it because it now is his National Memorial. It was rightfully named for him, because without his help, the Center would never exist anyway.

Mr. Sohler: Yes.

Mr. Billings: It's a most wonderful living memorial to President Kennedy. He made it possible. If it weren't for him it would never have been built. It's rightfully his. Just before he died, I came to him with the idea that a way to raise money would be to name all three Presidential boxes after ex-Presidents. I suggested in that way we would find new people to raise money who wouldn't normally be involved or interested in the project. For instance, we would have an Eisenhower Box. We would get the Eisenhower people to raise three or four hundred thousand dollars -

and Truman and Roosevelt supporters would raise money for their boxes. He said, "How about old Johnny?" (Laughter) I said, "we really should have something bearing your name in that place," and he said, "It wouldn't be bad," however, we both agreed it would be pretty tough to do this. We also discussed actually giving the name of each of the three theatres to someone who would really give big money. I mean if, Mrs. Post for instance, had given three million dollars we would name the Symphony Hall, the Marjorie Merryweather Post Symphony. That seemed like quite an incentive. Her name would live forevermore with Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Andrew Mellon. We felt that someone would come along and perpetuate their name in this way. "Maybe after we get somebody to pay for the Symphony Hall and the Theatre," I remember saying to him, "we can name The Opera, "Kennedy Opera House," and we laughed. That's why I think it was so appropriate naming The Center after the President and making it his memorial. He would have liked that.

Mr. Sohler: I wonder if while we're on this general subject whether we might look at the collections that he had. Of course this is another area. What kind of things did he collect?

Mr. Billings: Although the President never showed any interest

in being a collector until after he married. I do not think there is any question that he basically was one. Up until that time he had been too busy and he certainly never stayed in one place long enough to house a collection:

Mr. Sohler: He didn't collect stamps when he was a kid?

Mr. Billings: No. In fact, I always thought the Kennedy family was very strange in this way, because I've always been a collector and I've always sort of had possessions. It wasn't just Jack. None of the Kennedys, as they were growing up, showed any desire to acquire permanent possessions. This was due largely to the way they were brought up. Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy had little interest in collecting things. Of course, their houses were nicely furnished, but this was usually done very impersonally by decorators. With the exception of Bronxville, they never had any real home. Even in Bronxville, they never even had their own personal rooms. I mean rooms where everything on the wall belonged to a particular child -- a room where the desk, bureau, and bed, etc. was their very own. A place where they could leave their possessions and know they would be there when they came back from boarding school. When the Kennedys came back for vacation, often they would find they were assigned an entirely different room --- and god knows where their possessions would be -----

so I guess they never got into the habit of collecting anything.

Mr. Sohier: Was it always camping out?

Mr. Billings: Camping out isn't the word. Of course, they lived very comfortably. They just never had their own rooms. I'm really talking about Bronxville where they were raised. I'm not talking about Hyannisport or Palm Beach. Of course these houses were obviously hotels. None of them ever had any of their own rooms. Perhaps the very youngest did like Teddy, Jean and Bobby. The others just used on a temporary basis any room that was available when they were home. I used to go and visit in Bronxville a lot. It was a big house and there were a great many bedrooms on the second floor and third floors. The occupancy of the third floor rooms was always switching - you never knew who would be sleeping in the room next to you. Whenever we came home Jack would always have to ask, "Which room will I sleep in?" Mrs. Kennedy always had trouble sleeping - and you might find her on the third floor, or it could be one of the girls - or Joe or a governess, a maid or even a butler. The next time we visited, Jack and I might be assigned a room on the second floor. In other words, what I'm really trying to say is that it was so different from the way I was raised. I always had my own room - and when I

went away to school it was always there untouched when I came home. My pictures were on the wall; my stamp book was on the table, and so on. At the Kennedy house everybody switched their rooms around all the time and I guess maids would move their clothes from room to room. The funny thing is that in Hyannisport and Palm Beach, Jack was one of the few who actually had his own room. However, when he wasn't there, these rooms were used as guest rooms and he could never have any of his possessions there.

Mr. Sohier: They still talk of "Jack's room" at the Cape.

Mr. Billings: That room may have acquired that name in later years. The point is he never really owned anything except his clothes which he carried with him wherever he went. So Jack wasn't a collector. I think my upbringing in this area was the more normal way. In my room all the pictures on the wall were the ones which I had chosen or at least had been given to me and were mine. Nobody else's pictures were in that room. Nobody else's books were in that room. Nobody else's toys were in that room. Anyway, I'm just saying that Jack couldn't have been a collector because he never had any place to keep his possessions.

Mr. Sohier: But then he became a collector. What do you know about that?

Mr. Billings: I don't think anybody in that family could ever have collected anything until after they were married. I think it's true of the whole family. But in Jack's case he was married rather late in life - and until that time he wasn't interested in collecting at all. Of course, it was a great deal of fun when he became interested in acquiring and possessing things of his own. It meant I had something else in common with him. However, his collector's obsession didn't develop fully until he moved into the White House.

Mr. Sohier: Yes, but what did he start collecting?

Mr. Billings: First, he started with scrimshaw. I think Jackie gave him his first piece.

Mr. Sohier: Scrimshaw is what?

Mr. Billings: Well, I guess it's good to explain. Scrimshaw is anything handmade by sailors on whaling ships in the days when whaling ships were out at sea for possibly a year at a time. Of course, time was absolutely of no essence, so they made unusually detailed things out of the teeth or the bones of the whale or walrus. Their importance is based on the fact that these are items where labor time is of no importance.

Mr. Sohier: Are they of wood primarily?

Mr. Billings: No, as I said, they are primarily made out of parts of the whale - their teeth, their bones - of course this was the material which was at hand. Scrimshaw could also be knitting or wood pieces. I mean, you can't limit it to the bones and the teeth of the whale, the material they normally used. Most people think of scrimshaw as bones that have been fashioned into something, some decorative thing. The President limited his collection to beautifully worked whale's teeth. The unworked whale's tooth is very rough - black and unattractive. It is necessary for the tooth to be polished so that it looks like ivory. It was always smoothed by hand and this took countless hours. Unlike the elephant's tusk, which is naturally smooth and beautiful, the whale's tooth has to be laboriously polished before the actual decorating can begin. I think Jack became interested in scrimshaw primarily for two reasons - one was the fact that this was the work of whalers - and he always had a keen interest in anything pertaining to the sea and secondly, most of the whaling ships were of New England origin and this coupled with his natural interest in American history made scrimshaw collecting a hobby he could really enjoy.

Mr. Sohler: Who put him on to it do you think?

Mr. Billings: Jackie.

Mr. Sohier: Oh, she knew about it.

Mr. Billings: Not really but she gave him his first whale's tooth. And this was some time before the White House.

Mr. Sohier: He probably had never heard of scrimshaw before, had he?

Mr. Billings: I don't think he necessarily had. He certainly knew a lot about the whaling industry. He was terribly interested about whalers and their stories. He had read a lot about the history of whalers in his native New England but I don't think he knew too much about scrimshaw. The whale's tooth Jackie gave him was always on his Senate office desk and later it was on his desk in the White House. It wasn't until after he was in the White House that he decided to start collecting scrimshaw seriously. He thought it could be well exhibited in his office. He was anxious to have Americana around him. He didn't want a decorator to come in and do his office for him - so he talked to museum people about what he could borrow in the way of paintings, etc. It was a great deal of fun for me - as I've always loved to collect and since, of course, he couldn't go out and look for scrimshaw himself - it was up to me to bring it to him.

Mr. Sohier: He sort of sent you out to the field to do this..

Mr. Billings: I don't know whether he sent me out or whether it

was a natural thing for me to do. I knew of his interest and so when I found pieces I knew he would like, I would bring them to the White House on approval. So during the White House days, this is one of the things I did which were fun with him. You know, it was always fun to have things in common with him.

Mr. Sohler: How many pieces did he pick up? A dozen, or..

Mr. Billings: We did this all during his entire Administration. I think we collected (I don't know, the whole collection will be in the Library) probably 20 or 25 pieces. At the time of his death we were constantly buying. At the very beginning, I found that the Seamen's Bank for Savings in New York had been collecting scrimshaw for years and has one of the biggest collections in the country. As a marketing plan around their name - they collect all types of early Americana pertaining to the sea. I discovered this when I saw some of their collection displayed in the Bank's windows. I moved my savings account to that bank and...

Mr. Sohler: Did you get scrimshaw if you deposit something there?

Mr. Billings: No, I just did it to get to know them. I found out who was in charge of this program at the bank. I found the bank had all sorts of Americana - old ship models, marine paintings

as well as scrimshaw. They also collected old toy banks - in which we weren't interested at all. I got to know George Wintress at the bank very well - and he proved to be most helpful in finding scrimshaw and ships' models for us.

Mr. Sohler: Did the President come down and look at the Seamen's Savings Bank collection?

Mr. Billings: No, but I would get all the scrimshaw that was available and I would take it down to Washington. He would go over it with me and he would decide what he liked. He usually liked everything I brought down because I knew what he basically liked. There are lots of different kinds of scrimshaw. He primarily liked whale's teeth engraved with American ships. He particularly liked engravings of whaling scenes - anything to do with the sea engraved on a piece of scrimshaw he liked. Later he began to like engravings of famous American personalities such as Washington or Alexander Hamilton. Once I found a whale's tooth beautifully engraved with the face of an 18th Century King of Saxony. I didn't think he would want it but he did. He didn't limit himself completely to American subjects. Of course the President was very grateful to George Wintress for his help. I suspect he was a Republican. Certainly the bank itself was not in the least pro Kennedy. I knew this because Mr. Wintress had

suggested to the bank's officers that they present to the President a model of the U.S.S. Constellation. It was a duplicate of one they had. The officers were not in the least interested, but Wintress was helpful in every way. I said to the President, "We've got to do something for this guy. You know, he's doing so much to be helpful." And he said, "Well, have him down to a State dinner."

Mr. Sohier: You're kidding.

Mr. Billings: No.

Mr. Sohier: And what was this man? Was he an official of the bank?

Mr. Billings: No, he wasn't. He was a rather humble man. A minor executive who was in charge of the bank's collections. He had a very keen interest and knowledge in Americana.

Mr. Sohier: That's all he did?

Mr. Billings: Actually, he was their marketing man. Most of their marketing was based on the collections. The Seaman's Savings Bank closely tied in with Americana from the sea therefore his job as custodian and collector for the bank was not entirely unimportant.

Mr. Sohier: And they have a lot of branches, I guess.

Mr. Billings: Yes, but he was at the main office in charge of his

own department. He's not at all the banker type. He appears not to be college educated. I'm sure he was surprised to be invited to a State dinner.

Mr. Sohler: Well, did he come?

Mr. Billings: Oh, yes, of course. He and his wife.

Mr. Sohler: Were you there too?

Mr. Billings: No, I never went to a State dinner all during the entire Presidency.

Mr. Sohler: You're kidding.

Mr. Billings: No, because I...

Mr. Sohler: Why didn't you?

Mr. Billings: I always thought that I could go when I wanted to go and I thought there was so much time left. Anytime I felt someone needed special recognition I could usually arrange an invitation. Of course Mr. Wintress was very pleased.

Mr. Sohler: The bank President must have been a little surprised when he heard about it.

Mr. Billings: Since they were not Kennedy fans - I suppose it made little difference to him.

Mr. Sohler: Is there any more about scrimshaw?

Mr. Billings: He had a wonderful collection. I remember just

before he died, actually a week before he died, there was the biggest sale in the history of scrimshaw at Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc. As you probably know at Parke-Bernet they estimate the prices of everything before the sale, so we had an idea of what things would go for. Both the President and myself were terribly excited about it since it was such an important sale. Another point which is interesting here...there's a place near Parke-Bernt called "Graham Galleries", whose owner Bob Graham was a friend of Joe's at Choate.

Mr. Sohier: Right up on Madison Avenue.

Mr. Billings: Yes, of course they were aware of the President's scrimshaw collection even though at the time this was not highly publicized. The sale at Parke-Bernet we're talking about was primarily made up of one fabulous collection of scrimshaw. Before the collection's owner turned it over to Parke-Bernet he was approached by the Grahams and they brought from him all the pieces they thought might be interesting to the President. For instance, there was a walrus tusk three feet long, completely engraved on either side with a complete scene of the Port of Boston, the streets, carriages, everything.

Mr. Sohier: They bought it for that purpose, do you think to mark up the price to the President.

Mr. Billings: So it would appear. They took it out of the auction sale and then approached me asking if the President would be interested in these pieces.

Mr. Sohler: Well, was this expensive stuff?

Mr. Billings: Well, scrimshaw pieces at that time, good ones, were costing two to three hundred dollars, or at the most maybe four hundred. The price was actually growing from the time that we first started to collect in 1960. The price was slowly inching up but I don't know if that was just because of the economy like everything else or because of the fact that the word was getting around that the President was a collector. Anyway, Parke-Bernet as well as the Grahams had some fantastic pieces - just the kind the President liked because they were all Presidential pieces with Presidents' faces on them or they were the perfect American ships, the "Constitution" you know, or that wonderful piece of Boston harbor, which I have already discussed. So I bought everything Graham had on approval. But I was furious at them and told them I thought that it was very unfriendly of them to do this to the President. I said, "I think the President will be shocked and surprised that you have all the best pieces out of the Parke-Bernet sale where he is forced to pay your prices rather than taking his chances with the rest of the people at

the auction." They kept reducing their prices until I bought them on approval. These were sent down to the White House. Later, we went to the sale and it was an incredible one.

Mr. Sohier: You mean the President went to the sale?

Mr. Billings: No, I went. And I saw Graham while I was there. Never in the history of scrimshaw has anything happened like that. Many of the pieces went for thousands of dollars. Some of them went for two and three thousand dollars and they weren't as good as the pieces I had bought from Graham.

Mr. Sohier: Oh, he must have gone out of his mind!

Mr. Billings: Graham was fed up. You could tell by his face. You see, scrimshaw had never been sold for prices like that before. There was no way to pre-judge that the President's interest had increased the demand so much. Of course, also, there was no way for Parke-Bernet to estimate what the sale would bring since scrimshaw had never brought that much in the past. Graham came up to me after the sale and said he would like to have everything back that the President didn't want. Of course, nothing was sent back. These pieces became the most important ones in the President's collection. I must put in here that Joe's friend at Choate, Bob Graham, was not the Graham I was dealing with. I was dealing with his brother.

Bob handled only the painting department of their mutual business. There was one piece which I purchased from Graham which the President never saw - it was the most beautiful of all. The walrus tusk I spoke of before. Jackie had gone to Europe and as I said, the sale took place in the fall of 1963 - just before Jack died. Before she left, Jackie had heard about the sale and she asked me to get the best piece of scrimshaw at the sale as her Christmas present for Jack. As we know, Graham had the best pieces and the best of all was the walrus tusk depicting Boston Harbour. At the time it seemed a very high price at \$500 - but after the Parke-Bernet sale I realized it was worth over two thousand. Anyway, I bought it for Jackie and of course Jack never saw it as he died before Christmas. Afterwards, I got word from Jackie that she didn't want it and would I return it to Graham.

Mr. Sohier: What have you done with it?

Mr. Billings: Well, I didn't want to return it because I really felt I shouldn't. Remember, it was the most beautiful piece I had ever seen. I showed it to Ethel and Ethel gave it to Bobby. If you ever want to see it, it's at Bobby's house now over the mantel in his room\*.

---

\*/After Bobby died, Ethel gave it to Teddy.

Ninth Oral History Interview

with

K. LeMOYNE BILLINGS

June 11, 1965

New York City

By Walter D. Sohler

For The John F. Kennedy Library

This is the Third Tape of the Ninth Interview with K. Lemoyne Billings, done by Walter D. Sohler at Mr. Billings' apartment in New York City, on June 11th 1965.

Mr. Sohler: What about ship models? He collected those. Did he have a big collection of ship models?

Mr. Billings: When he went into the White House, I don't think he had any ship models. Nevertheless, he was terribly interested in acquiring some - particularly models of historical American ships. Through Mr. Wintress at the bank - I acquired for him a beautiful model of the Constitution. It was quite expensive - at least it seemed expensive at the time. Now I can't believe we got it so cheaply, but Jack wasn't too pleased about forking out the money.

Mr. Sohler: Tight with his money?

Mr. Billings: Oh, boy; very, very close with the buck. He was probably tighter than any of his brothers and sisters. I can't remember what the price was compared to the way they were three years later, it was nothing perhaps \$500. It was truly a beautiful example, and so he said, "Well, maybe Dad will give that to me for my birthday." His birthday is May 29th, and so,

well, I talked to Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Kennedy was very happy to give it to him. It was sent down to the White House with great care. It was absolutely the most beautiful example of the Constitution I had ever seen. And then later when (I'm going into the future but that's all right). .then later I was up at the Cape after his birthday, I don't know what the timing is on this, but anyway it must have been after he had received it or knew he was going to receive it. He was going to Europe in the next two or three days. This was his first trip as President. This was a weekend; he might have been going on a Tuesday and this was a Sunday. He was going to France and then to Vienna to meet Khrushchev there unofficially. We were out on the Marlin and we were talking about his trip and he said, "The funny thing is that I don't have any gift for Khrushchev. Since this isn't a State visit, there isn't really any protocol on this, but perhaps I should have a gift for him anyway - just in case he gives me one." We talked about that at length. It was of concern because we hadn't any time to have an appropriate gift made up. Of course he always wanted to give Americana,

I mean everything had to be historical and with some reason; he didn't just give out stupid Steuben glass like Eisenhower did. He wanted to give something with a purpose - something that was appropriate with a special meaning. At that time he didn't have the ideal gift he later used for Heads of State - a perfect copy of Washington's beautiful ceremonial sword. I remember the copies were so perfect that they had to be carefully marked so that they would never get mixed up with the original. He was only able to give two of them away before he died, but he felt that finally he had found something that he could give with pride. Anyway, for Khrushchev, he hit upon the idea of giving his father's present to him, the model of the Constitution. Of course he hated to give it up as it was something he adored - yet he felt that there was not time to find anything as appropriate. Appropriate because this was such a really right kind of present. The Constitution represented the United States as a young Republic - it represented our strength, our youth and our love of freedom. This was just the kind of message he wanted to get across to Khrushchev. I said, "Do you really want to do that?" "You haven't

even seen it." He hadn't seen it at that time because it hadn't been shipped to the White House as yet. Therefore, there wasn't time to get it packed and put on the Presidential plane to go with him. He said he wanted to give it to Khrushchev and that I should get it and bring it over to Europe on a later plane.

Mr. Sohler: That's not a bad assignment at all.

Mr. Billings: Of course, I was terribly excited. He hadn't asked me to go on that European trip. He was terribly sensitive about his friends and particularly his family going on those trips. He was a new young President who had won a very close election. The last thing he wanted was to be accompanied by an entourage of family and friends who were there under no official capacity. As it turned out, in spite of this, he ended up with many of his family and me. Obviously, he wanted to take me but he felt he had to have a reason. His jet left without me and of course I missed a most important part of his visit - the State dinner in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. I went to New York and had the model packed for travelling - and

also I worked with Mr. Gerald Shea in finding a suitable gift for Madame Khrushchev.

Mr. Sohier: Well, what did you give her?

Mr. Billings: Gerald Shea has known the Kennedys for years and always had been their advisor on the purchasing of antiques. We settled on a very important Sandwich glass sugar bowl. Our choice was based on the fact that Sandwich glass is an American invention coming from New England.

Mr. Sohier: Sandwich glass?

Mr. Billings: Sandwich glass was made in Sandwich, Massachusetts. It is a form of pressed glass - an innovation in glass making discovered by the Americans in early 18th Century. It is an example of American inventiveness, so it was a most suitable gift.

Mr. Sohier: I hope you gave her a brochure to go with it.

Mr. Billings: There is a department in the White House where they do lettering by hand for invitations, etc. I had a beautiful hand-lettered brochure made up explaining the background of Sandwich glass.

Mr. Sohier: Were the Kennedys please with it?

Mr. Billings: Yes; I'm not so sure Madame Khrushchev was. Sandwich glass at best doesn't look very expensive. It is expensive, however, because of the rarity of pieces as large as the one we gave her. The Kennedys were pleased because this was in the right spirit.

Mr. Sohier: Speaking of that, to digress a minute, currently wine drinking has become popular in America - and this is encouraged by the fact that wine is served at the White House. How did President Kennedy feel about American wine.

Mr. Billings: Well, I think American wine has come more into its own now rather than three years ago.

Mr. Sohier: Yes, but did he have a feeling on that subject?

Mr. Billings: No.

Mr. Sohier: They had rose wine - I guess it was California- but that's only because that's a good rose wine.

Mr. Billings: He might have felt strongly about it today, but I don't think he did at the time.

Mr. Sohier: That wasn't anything that he made a...

Mr. Billings: No, I don't think they had American wine in the White House, quite frankly.

Mr. Sohler: I think they did have, but I don't know...

Mr. Billings: Well, I don't know. Let's change the subject.

Mr. Sohler: Let's get back to ship models. Are we through ship models?

Mr. Billings: Well, no; I just wanted to complete the story about Krushchev's model. A plane was going to Europe several days after the President left. You will remember that General Rafael Trujillo was killed, murdered, just before the Presidential plane took off. This made it impossible for Secretary Rusk to go to Europe with the President. He had to be in this country to watch the aftermath of the assassination. Everything seemed under control in the Dominican Republic - so Rusk was able to leave for Europe several days after the President. He went over in President Truman's old plane which was not a jet. It seems rather strange now to send him in that plane - but remember this was 1961.

Mr. Billings: It seemed very slow and it took us hours to cross the Atlantic. Only Rusk, myself, the Presidential Russian interpreter and several State Department people were on the plane. The end result of the ship model was that President Kennedy felt it was lucky we had it because in Vienna Khrushchev showered him with gifts. Not gifts that President Kennedy was too excited about and perhaps gifts that were in rather bad taste. For instance, the most important gift was rather an elaborate silver gilt coffee service. It was of Czechoslovakian make and I remember the President felt it was obviously something that had been confiscated from the Czechs. And a lot of other things of that nature.

Mr. Sohler: Did the President feel he was one up on the gift exchange?

Mr. Billings: Well, he was awfully pleased that he had a gift to give but afterwards he wished he had kept the Constitution for himself. He wanted it. We never could find as good a model again.

Mr. Sohler: Well, now, did he get other gifts?

Mr. Billings: On the other hand, it shows that Khrushchev was rather self-conscious about it because after he returned to the United States, a Russian ship model arrived.

Mr. Sohler: Oh, how was that?

Mr. Billings: Ugly. You may remember it in the White House. It was in a glass case in the hall outside the President's office.

Mr. Sohler: I don't remember that.

Mr. Billings: Of course, it will be in the Library. Khrushchev also sent him a little dog which was the daughter of the first dog sent up by the Russians in a missile.

Mr. Sohler: What other ships did he collect? Was this...

Mr. Billings: That was his first. After that I spent a lot of time finding others for him. I think by the time he died there were six or seven - one was an excellent model of the Morgan which was one of the more famous American whaling ships. He was particularly fond of that one. I believe we acquired another model of the Constitution not as fine as Khrushchev's though. We had ordered a model of the Constellation - sister ship of the

Constitution - but we cancelled this order after he died. All the models, of course, will be in the Library. Had he lived, we would have developed a really fine collection, as he had become really interested in this collection. He started that collection himself - at the time he died he was getting more and more interested in it.

Mr. Sohier: What do you mean by "antiquities"?

Mr. Billings: Ancient works of art of the Grecian and Roman periods primarily. He first became interested when the Prime Minister of Greece, during a State visit to the White House gave him a very beautiful little Greek marble child's head dated approximately 2nd Century BC. This was the first in his possession. It is an exquisite little head.

Mr. Sohier: That was about the first gift they got, wasn't it?

Mr. Billings: Well, I don't know that it actually was the first gift they ever had in the White House. It certainly was the first gift of importance and it was the first that remained in display in their living quarters. Many gifts they received, you know, went

into the Archives immediately. Those that they particularly liked were kept in their living quarters on display. I remember the little head was always kept in a table in the living-room between the dining room and the kitchen doors. Jack loved it, and kept showing it to everyone. I'm sure it was the start of his interest in collecting antiquities.

Mr. Sohier: I remember the first time I saw the head was on the way from their living room into dinner and he pointed to this and said that they had gotten it from the Prime Minister of Greece and wasn't it wonderful and then he said, "You can't imagine what we gave them," and I don't remember what he said but it certainly wasn't anything comparable. He indicated that he was working on this with the protocol people to try and improve the gifts that he gave to visiting dignitaries.

Mr. Billings: Well, possibly he'd given them a beautiful silver frame containing he and Jackie's picture signed etc. The frame had the great Seal of the President engrave in it. Quite lovely, but..

Mr. Sohier: But that's a different...

Mr. Billings: That's not very important compared to the gift from Greece. If that's what the Prime Minister got I can see why he would have been mortified. He was constantly working on something that would be appropriate.

Mr. Sohier: And this sword was what he came up with?

Mr. Billings: I think the sword was the final thing but that only came into being shortly before he died. Between the picture frame and the sword, he tried many other things. I'm trying to think what some of them were.

Mr. Sohier: He spent time on this himself?

Mr. Billings: During one period they gave beautiful stones, quite large, wrapped in ropes of vermeil. I don't know what the significance of this was - probably only that it was very beautiful and unusual and undoubtedly was designed by Jackie. He never liked this gift as he wanted to give Americana.

Mr. Sohier: What about his own collection of antiquities?

Mr. Billings: I gave him a little carved stone crouching lion which had been the tope of a cane. I bought it in Cairo in 1942. It was Egyptian about 1500 B.C. He always kept it on his desk in

the White House. From time to time he would have Klegeman in New York send down items on approval, but it was not until our second trip to Europe that he acquired a quantity of pieces. These all came from Rome. We did very well there, which of course, is unusual because we all knew the Roman shops thrive on false antiquities - I had been visiting these shops for years and was well aware of this. I'm getting ahead of myself because I am sure we will want to discuss the different trips we made to Europe more fully - but this involves the subject we are discussing. The Government gave an enormous official dinner for him at the Presidential Palace in Rome. Of course I was the only civilian on the trip with absolutely no protocol status.

Mr. Sohler: You had no Government status so you sat at the end of the table?

Mr. Billings: I was always placed as far down the table as possible. I always sat next to a couple of men - as they usually had run out of women by that time. Whoever the men next to me were I always looked at them with some discomfort because if they were government people I knew they were really at the bottom of

the totem pole.

Mr. Sohler: As I recall, Pam used to outrank you. She at least had a position.

Mr. Billings: Yes, except of course, she wasn't ever invited to those top Presidential dinners. I remember the only time this protocol thing was rather fun for me - it was at this particular dinner in Rome. I really am digressing. Charles Emglehart was in Rome at the time. He is a great friend of Senator Mansfield. Mansfield had had him appointed as an American representative at the Coronation of Pope Paul VI. You will remember this took place immediately before the President's visit. Charles was at the dinner and he sat about three seats below me - a source of enjoyment for me! During this dinner I watched the President who was having some language difficulties with the Italian President - rather serious ones since neither one spoke the other's language. I was surprised when he sent word down to me that he would like to see me at the head of the table. He told me he was scheduled for an audience with Pope Paul the next morning and that while he was there he would like me

to visit the different antiquity shops and bring back to the Embassy Residence some choice items for him to choose from. I said I would but I thought how could I possibly do this in an hour and a half - I knew of no shops where the items were certain to be authentic.

Mr. Sohier: You mean you only had that much time because the plane was going to leave?

Mr. Billings: No, but we had something else we had to do. I can't remember what it was. I had about an hour and a half to go and find antiquities and bring them back.

Mr. Sohier: And you didn't know anything about antiquities?

Mr. Billings: Well I knew antiquities because I majored in the History of Art at Princeton but I didn't know where to go where I could be sure that they were authentic. So I went back to my seat feeling rather unhappy. Fortunately the man sitting next to me was the Italian President's assistant and I told him my problem. He said this could be arranged - and arrange it he did. I was accompanied on my shopping tour by the top archeologist in Rome as well as a government man and someone from our own Embassy who was

knowledgeable on the subject. We visited three important shops. All of them had been prepared beforehand that a representative of the President would visit them. Naturally, they were forced to bring out their really authentic pieces. Can you imagine them selling fakes to the President of the United States - particularly since the archeologist carefully examined every piece. Furthermore, we had everything checked when we brought them home to Washington. I bought 27 pieces on approval, all of their treasures. I've been back to all of these shops many times since, and if they still have such treasures, they have them hidden from my eyes.

Mr. Sohler: Well then, let's be mercenary - what would that come to - 27 pieces - \$10,000?

Mr. Billings: I don't remember the cost except for what they were, they weren't expensive. Antiquities are one of the last bargains anyway. I took them back to the President at the Embassy residence. I knew he wouldn't want them all. As I've said before, the President was always very careful with a buck. Can you believe it - out of all this he chose two pieces!

Mr. Sohier: You're kidding! Did he take the smallest and the cheapest?

Mr. Billings: No, not necessarily. I can't remember the first two pieces that he chose, but he chose two pieces and I chose two pieces and the rest of them we sent back to the stores. Only those four came back to America with us. As soon as we were back in the White House we unpacked them and he said, "God, I don't know why we didn't get more."

Mr. Sohier: "Go back, Billings, to Europe"!

Mr. Billings: No, but he said, "Why didn't we bring back more? At least we could take a more careful look and send them back later". I telephoned the Embassy man who had been to the shops with me and told him to ship everything we had seen to the White House on approval.

Mr. Sohier: And it came over?

Mr. Billings: Not only that, but I asked him to send anything else of interest he could find. This man was very knowledgeable and somewhat of a collector himself. He sent over a terrific bundle. The President and I really enjoyed going over and over everything.

This time the President bought a whole lot more and so did I. Whatever was left, Mary Lasker bought so nothing went back.

Mr. Sohier: That's a pretty good deal.

Mr. Billings: As a matter of fact, Pat Lawford bought one. It was a little Roman head that no one wanted. She still has it in her apartment (laughter). The President's choices were really treasures and they're all in Jackie's apartment today. We were really fortunate because you never buy quality antiquities like that any more. The President was really pleased.

Mr. Sohier: Just cite a few prices since they're probably...

Mr. Billings: Well, they weren't high..

Mr. Sohier: What do you call high? What would one be?

Mr. Billings: Look, I think history will say we got gypped - well, we didn't. They have all been check by museums. The most expensive item we bought was \$900 for a little 6th Century B.C. Greek horse. Probably the most impressive item was a bigger than life size head. It was a Roman copy of Praxiteles Hermes. It had been recently found in a wall under the Tiber. Jack paid \$500 for it and it now dominates the front hall of Jackie's New York apartment.

Mr. Sohier: Well, on that note we'll complete the Ninth Interview with Mr. Billings.

Mr. Billings: Yes and I think we ought to probably talk a little bit more about antiquities next time.