

Elaine Burnham, Oral History Interview – 2/13/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Elaine Burnham
Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey
Date of Interview: February 13, 1966
Location: Portland, Oregon
Length: 6 pages

Biographical Note

Burnham, a volunteer for the 1960 Kennedy for President Campaign in Oregon, discusses that campaign, among other issues.

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Elaine Burnham, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, February 13, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Elaine Burnham

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Oral History Interview

with

Elaine Burnham

February 13, 1966
Portland, Oregon

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let's start by my asking you how you got involved in that Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] for President Committee in Oregon?

BURNHAM: Well, in the early fall of 1959, a friend of mine called me at work, and she said, "How'd you like to go to a meeting with me tonight?" And I said, "What kind of meeting?" She said, "Well, it's a political meeting." And I said, "What kind of a political meeting?" And she said, "You'll find out when you get there, but you like to go to meetings." I said all right, and she told me where it was going to be; it was to be at Dean Anderson's [E. Dean Anderson] home. So I arrived and, oh, there were twelve or fifteen people present. Most of them I didn't know at all. And it was the John F. Kennedy for President group. And that's how I got involved.

MORRISSEY: Was that Edith Green [Edith S. Green] that called you?

BURNHAM: No, Wortha Justice. I don't know if you've met her or not.

MORRISSEY: No, I haven't. Were most of these people new to politics?

BURNHAM: I would say not.

MORRISSEY: Had most of them worked before Edith Green or some other candidate?

BURNHAM: Some of them had. There were, oh, several that this would have been their first venture, but most of them were friends of Edith.

[-1 -]

MORRISSEY: So what kind of work did you do during the campaign?

BURNHAM: Oh, you know, the usual. Things that you wouldn't hire out to do: typing lists, stapling speeches together, folding letters and stuffing envelopes and licking stamps.

MORRISSEY: Did you get many volunteers to help?

BURNHAM: Yes, part of what I did was to get more people.

MORRISSEY: Where did the volunteers come from?

BURNHAM: Well, I got quite a few girls from the telephone company. This was their first political endeavor of any kind, and I got some of them to contribute a little bit of money. One of the banks had a book that held thirty dimes, and it was called a "Happy Day" account. So I got a handful of them, and I passed them out to these girls and I said, "Now this is an easy way to do it. This way you get a book full of dimes and bring it in." And that's what we used for our petty cash in the office.

MORRISSEY: Had you met John Kennedy?

BURNHAM: No.

MORRISSEY: Did you meet him during the campaign?

BURNHAM: Yes, for a while. Haggerty and I had sort of a thing going that we would be the last to ever meet him of the workers because something always happened whenever he was here, and we somehow were in the kitchen or some place. And she never did meet him. I did. He and Mrs. Green appeared on a television show where people called in questions, and I was one of those selected to answer the telephone and so forth, and so I met him in the studio. And then the night of the primary election he was in Idaho and he called to see how things were going, and I answered the telephone call.

MORRISSEY: Was he pleased?

BURNHAM: Well, I was so surprised. He said, "This is the Senator." Senator who?

Of course, I knew. Afterwards I thought I had such a big opportunity, you know. I could have told him. But he wanted to speak to Mrs. Green. And we had a speaker arrangement that everyone in the group could hear him, could hear the conversation.

MORRISSEY: Was it your impression that this campaign was well organized?

BURNHAM: Yes.

MORRISSEY: More so than others that you had worked in?

[-2-]

BURNHAM: Oh yes.

MORRISSEY: At any time before you were asked to go to that meeting did you think about working for one of the other candidates? Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], for example?

BURNHAM: No.

MORRISSEY: Why?

BURNHAM: Well, I think for many of us John Kennedy was unique, and the very thought of him running for the presidency in our own minds started much earlier. And the 1956 convention, I think, was the thought in the minds of some of us. And with the kind of communication that we have today, we become much more knowledgeable about public figures than was true in the past.

MORRISSEY: How about his religion? Did some people prefer not to work for him because of his religion?

BURNHAM: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Did you run into that?

BURNHAM: Oh yes.

MORRISSEY: How about the other side of that?

BURNHAM: Well, now the first time I went into the campaign headquarters, which was then a very small office, it was very early—about February I imagine—before they opened the street headquarters. We were sending out the initial information to people who had said they were interested and were going to help. And the very first question when I was introduced to one of the women was

“What parish?” So I said, “Well, I’m not really sure. I’m not sure if I’m in St. Ignatius or St. Peter’s.” And she looked at me. [Laughter] And I said, “Well, you know, I’m a whoop and holler Baptist.” And so I told the office manager, Margaret Scaife, and Stan Weber [Stanley E. Weber] who was his executive secretary. I said, “Look, I think some of these people are very well meaning, but I’m sure there are a lot of us that want Kennedy to be president, and we’re not all Catholics.” Of course, I thought it was kind of funny, but it did bother me because one might really have been annoyed.

MORRISSEY: Was there a telephone campaign in that campaign?

BURNHAM: No. It was kind of amusing because when Larry O’Brien [Lawrence F. O’Brien] and Kenny O’Donnell [Kenneth P. O’Donnell] and Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] and so on arrived for the final week from the West Virginia campaign where they had used it, they wanted us to do it, but we didn’t want to.

[-3-]

MORRISSEY: Why?

BURNHAM: I think the people here are a little different from perhaps some other parts of the country. And they would consider that an intrusion. They consider questions about their political affiliations and their political interests and thought on how they are going to vote and so forth is their private matter. And to have some stranger call them and ask them questions....

MORRISSEY: So there wasn’t a telephone campaign?

BURNHAM: No, there was a little testing but not a wholesale run down the telephone book and call up everyone.

MORRISSEY: Was the testing kind of an informal poll taking?

BURNHAM: More of that nature.

MORRISSEY: What did the polls indicate?

BURNHAM: Well, the outcome, in the primary. It seemed to me very early.... I couldn’t understand all the concern because I was very confident from the very beginning that it would be no contest, and I wondered why all of the organization was scurrying around to the extent that was done.

MORRISSEY: Well, I know from the vantage point of the East Coast, a lot of people felt that since John Kennedy was competing against a favorite son, his chances in Oregon really weren’t that assured.

BURNHAM: Well, I don't mind saying this for posterity that I think—and John Kennedy said here many times himself—that the Oregon electorate is very sophisticated, and we have never gone in for this favorite son business. While we may think that a particular individual serves some great purpose in a particular position, it does not mean that we would think that he could be placed in any position and we would view him in that same light, or that he would make that contribution. Now out of one hundred senators, the United States can stand one of a type, but that doesn't mean that we would think that that person should be president of the United States. And that was the feeling.

MORRISSEY: I would assume, then, you didn't find many people that felt they should support Senator Morse [Wayne L. Morse] simply because he was Oregon's senator.

BURNHAM: No, the people who felt they should support Senator Morse are the people who would support Senator Morse, no matter what position he took on any issue or what he decided to run for or who he was against, automatically. But the general public, they

[-4-]

would not feel that way. I don't think Senator Morse understood or understands that to this day, either, that that just doesn't add up. And I think that this was reflected in this last presidential Republican primary in this state because Nelson Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] came here, and he said, "I want to be." And Henry Cabot Lodge did not. The one who will come out and want to be is the one that the Oregon voter will give their vote to because we have a particular feeling for them—the person who is direct and who is forthright. And I don't know if that's unique, but it's pretty predictable in this state.

MORRISSEY: Did you have a title in the campaign organization?

BURNHAM: No. In the general election we had, but not.... No, I was just a volunteer.

MORRISSEY: How many hours do you think you put in?

BURNHAM: I wouldn't have any idea. The last week I took a week's vacation because he was going to be here and there were all of these appearances set up. You know, the motorcades and so on. And at times like that you need a lot of volunteers in the office because they all want to follow along. So I asked Stan Weber and Miss Scaife and Hy Raskin [Hyman B. Raskin], you know, if it would be all right, because I thought that I would be needed and asked to help in the office. They said yes. It was one of the best vacations I ever had. [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: This is probably a hard question, but what was your biggest problem in that whole campaign? Was there any one thing more than anything else that took most of your time or was most difficult to accomplish?

BURNHAM: You always get the funny people and the strange ones, the telephone calls that ramble on, or the people who come in and you can't answer their questions because they don't really have one. I think the thing that really bothered us the most was the hate literature.

MORRISSEY: Did anyone ever save that?

BURNHAM: Well, Stan had a file on it. We were trying to remember the other night. He had a particular name for this file and we couldn't remember the name. But Mrs. Green may have it. I'm not sure.

MORRISSEY: It would be interesting to gather a lot of that stuff together. Well, do you think I'm overlooking anything in my questions?

BURNHAM: No.

[-5 -]

MORRISSEY: Is there any topic that you'd like to emphasize that maybe I've slid over?

BURNHAM: Well, I do think that, more so than any other campaign I have ever worked in, the people wanted this man to be president. I know immediately afterwards, some people were sitting around and, "Well, now we have a president of our party. Now we can have some say in who's going to be what and so forth." And they went around the room, and they got to a particular individual. They said, "What do you want?" He said, "I have what I want." They looked surprised and said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, I wanted John F. Kennedy to be president, and he is. And I have what I want. Why? What do you have to offer? The postmastership in Scappoose?" I think that feeling very much prevailed. There are always a certain few who expect, because they licked a few stamps and so forth, that they're going to gain something personally, monetarily and so forth, from it or promote themselves in some way. But I think that most of the people who worked wanted nothing else than for him to succeed. And that was what did it.

MORRISSEY: Yes, the personal magnetism of the candidate. Well, unless you have anything else, I think I've run out of questions. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-6 -]

Elaine Burnham Oral History Transcript
Name Index

A

Anderson, E. Dean, 1

G

Green, Edith S., 1, 2, 5

H

Haggerty, 2

Humphrey, Hubert H., 3

J

Justice, Wortha, 1

K

Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 6

L

Lodge, Henry Cabot, 5

M

Morse, Wayne L., 4, 5

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 3

O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 3

R

Raskin, Hyman B., 5

Rockefeller, Nelson A., 5

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 3

Scaife, Margaret, 3, 5

W

Weber, Stanley E., 3, 4