

William De Marco Oral History Interview – 4/8/1964
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Biographical Note

De Marco was the campaign manager of John F. Kennedy's first congressional campaign in Boston's North End (1946). This interview focuses on De Marco's first impressions of John F. Kennedy, and the 1946 congressional campaign, among other issues.

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William DeMarco

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Oral History Interview

with

William DeMarco

April 8, 1964

Boston, Massachusetts

By Frank Bucci

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BUCCI: The interview is taking place in the office of Senator Edward M. Kennedy in Boston. The interviewer is Frank Bucci of the *Boston Traveler*. The date, April 8, 1964. Mr. William DeMarco, you knew President Kennedy from the days when he first decided to run for public office?

DEMARCO: Yes, I did. I met him in early 1946, about July '46, on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

BUCCI: Can you remember what happened on that rainy afternoon?

DEMARCO: He was accompanied by one of his secretaries, who later became his secretary, Billy Sutton [William J. Sutton], and I was across the street on Hanover Street and he waved to me to come over. The weather was very, very bad. It had been raining all morning long. This was around two o'clock in the afternoon. Billy Sutton introduced me to a Jack Kennedy who had just recently graduated from Harvard and who was a candidate for Congress.

BUCCI: Do you remember what the appearance of the future president was on that Sunday afternoon?

DEMARCO: Well, he had just a very expensive suit on. He had no raincoat and it appeared as if the suit was shriveling to bits. I meant it was raining that bad, and he had no hat. I told him that I could take him up to my club and introduce him to some of the boys.

BUCCI: What was the name of the club?

DEMARCO: The name of the club was Club 28.

BUCCI: Where was that located?

DEMARCO: At 317 Hanover Street in the Testa Building.

BUCCI: Now, is this the first time that the future president came to the North End?

DEMARCO: To my knowledge, yes. No one had known him prior to then in the North End. In fact, Billy Sutton had told me that I was the first person that he took him to. Billy Sutton said that I was the only one in the North End that he knew. Billy was a Charlestown boy, and he had very few friends in the North End.

BUCCI: So you took him up to the club in the Testa Building on Hanover Street. Were there many people there?

DEMARCO: There were about 65 boys and they were all celebrating their return; coming home from the wars.

BUCCI: Do you remember some of the names of the boys who were there?

DEMARCO: Yes, there was Ernie DelloRusso, Chippy Califani, who the party was being run for, Stanton, better known as Tony, DePrizzo, Ernest DelloRusso, Dominic Butera, Joseph Butera, Sal Venezia, and many, many more.

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BUCCI: This was the summer of 1946, when you came home from the service?

DEMARCO: The summer of '46.

BUCCI: And what happened when you got into the meeting?

DEMARCO: Well, actually it wasn't a meeting. It was a party, a celebration and the

boys were playing whist and playing the Italian game of three sevens for a glass of beer or a bottle of wine. And they were all enjoying themselves. It was one of those things, a day of relaxation and a day of rejoicing. I called the meeting to order and they all started to grumble a bit. This wasn't a day for a meeting. They didn't know who the person was with me, but I started to clang the table for order and finally I did tell them that I had a very important person with me, a Jack Kennedy, whose mother lived around the corner, oh, many years before. And I told them that the grandfather was well known to us in the North End. In fact, he was a Sunday parishioner of St. Stephen's Church.

BUCCI: That was on Hanover Street, too?

DEMARCO: Oh Hanover Street, right. And I was fortunate enough to see Mr. Fitzgerald [John F. Fitzgerald] very frequently attending Mass at the St. Stephen's Church. And I introduced Jack Kennedy as one of the future greats of Congress. I told them that he was going to be elected to Congress with our help and where he was a Harvard boy, well educated, and came from a family that was well known in the North End.

BUCCI: What kind of reception did he receive from these Italian-American boys up at the Testa Building where he was, well, non-Italian? It's not easy for a non-Italian to come into the district and gather some support.

DEMARCO: Well, Mr. Bucci, he sort of blended in with the people in the North End for the simple reason that a lot of people did remember his mother living on Garden

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Court Street and also remembered the grandfather as coming to church on Sundays at St. Stephen's and there are quite a few elderly people in the North End that remembered all these things. And they sort of took a liking to this boy and they endeared him to their hearts and it just sort of took a liking to this boy and it just sort of went together like bread and butter.

BUCCI: Well, now what was your personal impression of Jack Kennedy on that first day? Honestly, did you think he had a chance to go ahead in politics?

DEMARCO: Well, looking at him, he was very, very thin. I mean, probably coming home from the wars, he was just home from the wars, and I believe he had just recently been out of the hospital, I was told later on by Billy Sutton that he was sick a long time. To me he looked like a man destined for greatness. He had that greatness in him, and it showed in him with the little people.

BUCCI: Well, did he display that magnetism which we came to accept as just common later on, but in those days, wasn't he a shy individual?

DEMARCO: Yes, he was sort of shy. But he made friends very, very easily. One thing in his favor, he had a remarkable memory. He picked up nicknames right away. And all he had to do was see you once and he remembered you the second time.

BUCCI: What did he call you?

DEMARCO: Well, he knew my nickname. Everybody called me “Yammy”.

BUCCI: Did he call you Yammy too?

DEMARCO: He did, on more than one occasion, yes, he did.

BUCCI: Well, after the meeting did you make plans to organize a campaign?

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DEMARCO: Well, going down the elevator, he wanted to thank me for the work I did for him. In fact, he wanted me to take care of the North End for him, and I told him that I would. He offered me some money to take care of incidentals and I said, “Look, I’m not interested in money. I’m interested in seeing you go to Congress and being elected because we need representation here in the district.” And I was, of course, interested in the politics of our area.

BUCCI: Well, actually, Jack Kennedy at that time, was living in the ward.

DEMARCO: He was. He was living on Bowdoin Street. Pardon me. He wasn’t living on Bowdoin Street, he was at the Bellevue. And I went there a couple of times to see him and talk over the campaign with him.

BUCCI: Do you have any memories of incidents during the campaign which would give us insight into Kennedy the man of 1946?

DEMARCO: Well, approximately in ’54 or ’55, I had written the President a letter at that time, explaining to him that I wasn’t too active in his campaigns, but I was sort of interceding for a good friend of mine who was looking for the governorship of Massachusetts who happened to have been a neighbor of the President’s in Hyannis Port. His name was Eddie Gallagher [Edward Gallagher]. And I wrote a letter to the President which I cherish very, very much, explaining to him my position, that I wanted to see Eddie Gallagher made the governor of the Commonwealth. And it happened on a Sunday morning. He was coming out of St. Leonard’s church on Prince Street and he had gone through his operation. He was on crutches. He was accompanied by Ambassador Brosio [Manilo Brosio] of Italy and Gabriel Piemonte [Gabriel F. Piemonte]. I was standing about twenty yards away from him out in the street as he was coming down the steps of the church, and he called to me, “Billy”.

BUCCI: Billy! He didn't call you Yammy then?

DEMARCO: He didn't call me Yammy. Evidently...

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BUCCI: It must have been Sunday.

DEMARCO: It was a Sunday. There was too much of a crowd around and he called me by my right name, and I went over. I talked to the Senator for awhile. And he said he got my letter down at Hyannis Port. He was very, very thankful for my letter, and he said that he had never forgotten his old campaign manager from the North End, that was campaign manager in '46. And he assured me that Eddie Gallagher would make a fine governor of Massachusetts some day, and I looked at him and I said, "Well, Senator, one word from you, and he would be governor." "Well," he said, "You know that I don't like to throw my weight around. But if there's anything I can do to make Eddie Gallagher governor, I will gladly help him out in any way, shape or manner."

BUCCI: Did you continue to take an active part in the Kennedy campaign once it got started? After he went to Congress and his reelection bids or running for the Senate?

DEMARCO: Actually, no, but I did keep in contact with Billy Sutton up until about ten or eleven years, and I did missionary work on my own. And all the people knew in the district that I was sort of friendly with the President, and they all knew that I was one of the first in the nation to see greatness in the man, and they all knew that I was the first one to make the first speech for him, and everybody knew that he made his first speech at my club, the Club 28 on Hanover Street.

BUCCI: That was his first campaign speech?

DEMARCO: It was, definitely.

BUCCI: It was in July of 1946?

DEMARCO: It was in July of 1946 and that was his first campaign speech.

BUCCI: Of course, Jack Kennedy had tremendous opportunity in the North End since his mother was a native of the district. She lived on what street, did you say?

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DEMARCO: On Garden Court Street.

BUCCI: And, of course, you don't remember Rose Kennedy [Rose F. Kennedy]?

DEMARCO: No, I'm not that old. No, I don't.

BUCCI: But there are many people down there who remember Rose Kennedy?

DEMARCO: Well, there were some people that I found out did remember Rose Kennedy living there. And they said, "Yes, it was true. She lived on Garden Court Street for a while, and she did worship at St. Stephen's Church." In fact, I happened to see one of the program books that old St. Stephen's Church had around 1900, and there was Rose Kennedy's name in there along with her father, the Honorable Fitzgerald.

BUCCI: Well, do you remember any individual who took part in that campaign that year from the District? Now you were the campaign manager. Who did you have working for you?

DEMARCO: Well, I had six pollworkers with me.

BUCCI: Who were they?

DEMARCO: Well, Sal Venezia was one, Dominic Butera was another, Vito Capraro was another.

BUCCI: This was Charlie Capraro's brother?

DEMARCO: No, it was Charlie Capraro's cousin. There is three. And I had Vito Maniscalco, who was with the city of Boston as a social worker, and there were two others that escape my mind. But it's part of the records that Joe Kane has up at the Parker House. He was in charge of the campaign that year, and he would have the names.

BUCCI: What happened? You sent the workers up there?

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DEMARCO: That's right, I sent the workers up there to get their badges and get their literature and find out if they were going to be paid workers. They did, and they paid them fifteen dollars apiece for their work. And it wasn't a payoff, so to speak, but the boys were loafing. They didn't have any work, and they did a days work for fifteen dollars and they did a remarkable piece of work because they got a lot of votes out and they acclimated people with the likes of John Kennedy for Congress.

BUCCI: What else do you remember of the President's younger days?

DEMARCO: Well, I met him on four or five different occasions. In fact, I met him the day that Truman was here in the Hotel Sheraton Plaza. He was there along with Truman, and I spoke to him. He asked me how Eddie Gallagher was, and I told him that Eddie was down in Connecticut at that time at some convention. Evidently he had a personal liking for Eddie. They were golfing partners, they did a lot of golfing together. And on many occasions there would be crowds around and he would call me over and talk to me for three or four minutes.

BUCCI: Billy, during the campaigns, did the President ever enter the tenement homes down there in the North End? Did he eat in any homes, sit at a dinner table, or have a glass of wine? That campaign he was on crutches, if I remember, and it was difficult for him to get around.

DEMARCO: That's right. No, he couldn't get around then because he really was on crutches. He had had an operation, and he had just got through with the operation.

BUCCI: But in subsequent campaigns, I know he traveled into the stores. I remember seeing him myself on Hanover Street – into Burden's [Burden's Pharmacy]. You don't think he... You never went into any homes with the future President?

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DEMARCO: No, I never did take him into any homes. All I did with my missionary work was in stores, meeting people out in the street, because I thought that was the best way to campaign.

BUCCI: Well, of course, in the North End on the street you meet them all. I guess most people come to the street rather than stay in their homes. Were there many people who didn't like Jack Kennedy, who considered him an outsider? Well, first of all, were there any Italian-Americans that year running for Congress?

DEMARCO: The only one that I know that ever ran against him was Bevilacqua [Frank Bevilacqua].

BUCCI: Bevilacqua?

DEMARCO: Bevilacqua ran against him?

BUCCI: Who's that, Cookie?

DEMARCO: No, his brother, Frankie. Frankie Bevilacqua ran against him. It was on account of some misunderstanding that he had, but it was strictly ironed

out. He did run against him, but it was to no avail.

BUCCI: But generally he was well accepted?

DEMARCO: Everybody took to him right away. Very few anti's, anti-Kennedy in the North End.

BUCCI: And you don't remember them?

DEMARCO: No, I don't. In fact, he was so good – the thing that cemented the relationship there was Kennedy made a big contribution to the Youth Center we have in the North End.

BUCCI: Well, that's right. Now, the Youth Center is one subject I wanted to get into.

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DEMARCO: And the people have never forgotten that.

BUCCI: That's right. In fact, the Kennedy Foundation got it rolling with a \$50,000 contribution. And then the Storrow Fund came in with another \$50,000, so we had \$100,000 to start with to build the Christopher Columbus Catholic Youth Center. And so that this was their favorite son. Actually, Kennedy was considered the favorite of the North End.

DEMARCO: He was.

BUCCI: How about rallies in those days? I know that you resurrected the rallies two years ago, the old "Last Hurrah," but in those days, did you have any rallies?

DEMARCO: Well, the rallies, we used to have them at Michelangelo School. They were filled to capacity. They were the days of James Michael Curley, and, in fact, I'm glad to say that the President superceded the rallies we had at Michelangelo School by attendance. Curley would have 1,000 people. Kennedy would have 1,200 and, in fact, the greatest thrill I had in my life was when the President's wife, Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], addressed a crowd of about 600 people at the Michelangelo School when he was running for the senatorship against Lodge, and the gracious lady stood up before the big crowd and the Italian people, the elderly people, were there, didn't know who she was, and when she opened her mouth and introduced herself in Italian, fluent Italian may I say, as the wife of Senator Kennedy, all pandemonium broke loose in the hall. All the people went over and started to kiss her, and the old women spoke to her as if she was a native of the North End. And I think that actually is what cemented the

relationship between Kennedy and the Italo-American of the district. They figured, at this time, that not only was he representative of the district, he was one of them.

BUCCI: Did any of the sisters go around with Jack Kennedy?

DEMARCO: Yes, they did, at the Michelangelo School on three or four occasions. All the sisters were there, all the sisters.

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BUCCI: And, of course, they were all single at that time?

DEMARCO: They were single.

BUCCI: When did the female of the North End start being attracted to Kennedy as...

DEMARCO: I think it started the year that he called Mayor Impellitteri [Vincent R. Impellitteri] of New York to rally for him for Senator. Jack didn't think – I'm sorry to call the President Jack – but he didn't think that the campaign was going at too fast a pace and it needed some Italo-American name, and he called Mayor Impellitteri in New York. Lo and behold, the people didn't come out for Impellitteri. The rally was held at the corner of Hanover and Prince Street, which has become a mecca in politics, and there was about 4,000 people. They didn't care about Mayor Impellitteri; they all came out for Kennedy. And that's when the girls sort of saw a Sinatra of politics, and they all started, "Kennedy" here, and "Kennedy" there, and that's really when it started.

BUCCI: How about his grandfather, Honey Fitz, did he take an active part in the campaign?

DEMARCO: No, he didn't. he was along in years. All he did was sing the song "Sweet Adeline."

BUCCI: Did he sing that at the corner of Hanover and Prince?

DEMARCO: No, not at Hanover and Prince, but at all the affairs that I attended, the hotel affairs.

BUCCI: He mostly stayed out of the district.

DEMARCO: That's right. All he did was attend Mass on Sunday at St. Stephen's.

BUCCI: Billy, what happened to some of these people who originally were with Jack? Where are they today? Now, I know Sal Venezia is a very successful insurance agent.

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DEMARCO: He's an insurance agent. Dominic Butera works in a meat market, I mean, and Joe Butera is an executive with a food or produce company. But we are mostly, the ones that were with me, were all little people. They owned their own business, fruit stores and candy stores, and they were all little people.

BUCCI: From my observation, these fellows always stayed with Jack. They didn't leave him. They didn't expect much from politics, but they always were there for help.

DEMARCO: That's right. They were not politically minded people. They just saw greatness in a man, and they went out and they did the job for him. They knew that he was the best man for the congressional district that he represented and they knew that he was the best man for our people. When I say our people, I mean the people of the area, of the North End area.

BUCCI: Well, of course, in the North End area there has always been clamor for change in the immigration laws, the McCarran Act, the repeal or amendment of the McCarran Act. How about the first generation Italian? They had a leader here now who was an Irishman fighting for the repeal of the immigration law?

DEMARCO: Well, I have a lot to do with a lot of these Italo-American boys in the district and the elderly people that come to me for advice on citizenship and the like. I keep telling them that it was only through the insistence of Senator Kennedy that helped immigration laws.

BUCCI: We had the Refugee Relief Act and...

DEMARCO: It seems to be that even prior to Kennedy becoming President the only name they ever knew was Senator Kennedy.

BUCCI: That's right. Any time they wanted to get their family over...

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DEMARCO: And I think that stems from where his wife had a great influence on the thinking of the Italo-Americans, where she spoke fluent Italian and where she studied in Italy for a few years. I think that made a great impression on the President, and the President was very much interested in everything that was Italian.

BUCCI: So, you say that as far as the Italian-Americans of the district were

concerned, his wife had a tremendous influence, she was a tremendous help.

DEMARCO: She did.

BUCCI: It's not often been told about the influence she had in winning votes for the President, at least in that stage of his career.

DEMARCO: Well, I saw it actually in action, as I explained to you, at the Michelangelo School with a crowd of about 800 people.

BUCCI: Well, you remember the Columbus Day parade so well. She marched the street with Jack, and people thought they were looking at a Hollywood couple.

DEMARCO: That's right, and they seemed to think that they were the ideal couple – Italo-American couple- because you can't tell the Italo-American elderly people that they're Irish. No, they say they're Italian because she speaks Italian so well. Of course, you've heard the joke that Kennedy even made of himself, that probably somewhere back he had some Italian percentage, the Giardini family from Italy, and there may be something to it.

BUCCI: What do you think is the quality you think most Italian-Americans found most favorable in Jack Kennedy? What was the magnetism for the Italian Americans to an Irishman like Jack Kennedy?

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DEMARCO: Well, I think that when he said something, he meant it. And I think that the President had sort of a liking for the Italo-American. What it was I never could put my finger on. It could be that the Pope being an Italian, he had a great admiration for the Holy Father. And I think probably that was it. I really don't know. But the President really had an admiration for the Italo-American, and he showed it on more than one occasion.

BUCCI: Is there anything else that you remember of the President?

DEMARCO: No. As I say, I was at conventions with him. I was close to him, spoke to him. I wrote to him, oh, about a year ago, asking him for a little help in work, and he was kind enough to have me appointed to the BRA [Boston Redevelopment Authority]. I didn't accept it ultimately because I didn't think I was qualified in doing the work. But he did appoint me right away, and he never did forget that I was a little help to him during his early life in politics.

BUCCI: Our interview today was with William DeMarco of Prince Street in the

North End. The interviewer was Frank Bucci of the *Boston Traveler*. The date, April 8, 1964, Boston, Massachusetts.

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