

**J. Thomas Godby Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 9/9/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** J. Thomas Godby  
**Interviewer:** William L. Young  
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**Biographical Note**

Godby, (1926 - 1994), member, West Virginia House of Delegates (1959-1960); campaign worker, Kennedy for President campaign, Logan County, West Virginia (1960), discusses meeting John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey during the 1960 campaign in West Virginia, the religious issue, and aid to West Virginia, among other issues.

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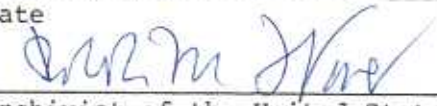
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of J. Thomas Godby

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J. Thomas Godby – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

J. Thomas Godby

September 9, 1964  
Logan, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with Mr. J. Thomas Godby, who at the present time is assessor of Logan County. In the 1960 primary he was a candidate for office and was therefore in a very good position to watch the primary activities. Mr. Godby, would you say a word about your role in the 1960 campaign and the effect that you and Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] may or may not have had on each other?

GODBY: Yes, sir, I'll be glad to. I think I would like to go back to the legislature. I was then a member of the West Virginia legislature, when the talk went around of Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] entering the presidential preferential race here in West Virginia. Senator Humphrey, I believe, made the first entrance into West Virginia. No, Senator Kennedy, I believe, came into Parkersburg first; then Senator Humphrey. He spoke at the West Virginia legislature. The House of Delegates and the Senate combined to listen to Senator Humphrey. I will say, at that time I was very much impressed with Mr. Humphrey. Later on at the Daniel Boone Hotel Senator Humphrey met with the delegates and the senators and reminisced over his exploits in Russia and talking with Krushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Krushchev], et cetera, and I will say he was a very warm person. I was very much impressed. I was then talking with one of my

delegate friends from up in Wood County, James Haught [James F. Haught], and he said to me, "Wait until you see my boy!" Of course, I asked him who his boy was, and he said, "John F. Kennedy, the senator from Massachusetts." Well, slightly thereafter, I met John F. Kennedy, in the very crowded Daniel Boone Hotel lobby. Jim Haught – who is now, by the way, the FHA [Federal Housing Administration] director of the state of West Virginia – pushed his way through the crowd, and just before Senator Kennedy went up to his room, Mr. Haught introduced me to him, as "Big Feet Godby." Of course, that's more or less a trade of mine here in the county. I wear size fifteen shoes, and I'm six feet six inches tall. So, I met him briefly just for that one time. Then, I guess maybe four or five or six months elapsed between that time and the time we were to meet him between that time and the time we were to meet him between the lines of Logan and Boone County, when he was coming in with the motorcade from Williamson. He, as I remember, came up to the line from the motorcade out of Williamson with the group from Williamson leading him up and then the group from Logan bringing him down through Omar into Logan – in this convertible, as I remember. And I think this is one of the things I probably cherish more than anything else, the fact that when he got out of the car, he shook my hand and said, "Hello, Big Feet." There was no one around to tell him actually who I was; he just remembered, I guess, the meeting in the Daniel Boone, some six months past. Then we came with him, with the motorcade, down to the Shaheen shopping center, in which he made a speech to the miners. Of course, he went down through the coal camps shaking hands. And a lot of those pictures – the press was there – later on appeared in Look magazine and numerous other magazines. Then, on to the hotel, possibly to freshen up a little. Then to the Smoke House, which is the meeting place of all the business and social – or political conventions, more or less – here in the city of Logan. The Smoke House – we always meet there – where friends meet friends. As I remember, a picture was made of the proprietor of the Smoke House, which he cherishes. The Smoke House burned not too long ago, and the gentleman that owned the Smoke House saved the picture; that's about all he got out. Then after that, why, he went to the courthouse to make his talk, and as I remember and reminisce back, I can remember my friend, my big friend, Claude Ellis,

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who was then leading the campaign for Kennedy. He doesn't like for me to tell his weight, but he weighed 318 pounds, and certainly Senator Kennedy picked a man big enough to do the job. Of course, he and I have been friends for years, Claude and I. I weigh 254 pounds, so by each one of us we are a group. So, Claude solicited the different politicians in the county to introduce Senator Kennedy – and to no avail. He then decided – "By gosh," he said, "I'll introduce him myself." And I don't think I can remember anything that impressed me more than when big Claude Ellis stood on the tiny platform and said, "I now introduce to you the Senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy" – and the crowd roared. I think everyone there was impressed with Senator Kennedy. I think that's the first actual glimpse that the people as a whole in Logan County got to see him – Senator Humphrey had been in prior to this talk – and to evaluate the two contenders.

YOUNG: May I interrupt a minute, Mr. Godby? I wanted to go back to your membership in the legislature, a fairly representative body, we would assume. Prior to the 1960 campaign, how did the members of the legislature informally assess the possibilities of Senator Kennedy's victory? What would a Gallup poll of the legislature have indicated prior to the primary?

GODBY: I don't think the Gallup poll, as you speak, would have been any different in the legislature than it was generally speaking in West Virginia. I think possibly the general feeling was that Senator Kennedy was a Catholic, and a rich boy, and so forth, to those that had never met or heard him. I think that was more or less the general opinion in the legislature at that time until they met, talked, and broke bread with him, to really know him.

YOUNG: One other thing I'd like to ask that came out of your earlier discussion before we began the tape: You told me how you first got to know so many people in Logan County. Would you tell that story, please?

GODBY: Well, as I told you before, I had probably one of the most unique jobs. I worked the miners' payroll for thirteen years in Logan County, selling made-to-measure

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suits over the payrolls. And there's not a miner in Logan County – and I can say this without reservation – that I'd either know his face, or I could say I know 90 percent of them by name. I think by that method alone I could pretty well gauge the feeling between Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey's campaign.

YOUNG: Well, did you first enter politics, then, in 1958, when you ran for the legislature?

GODBY: Yes, sir. I was favored by the people of Logan County. At that time I led my ticket, and since then I have more or less led the ticket. I will say this: In the primary.... I go back a little bit. When I ran for the House in 1958, I led the ticket. Then I chose to run for the county assessor. As you know, this is a highly industrialized county. This is the leading coal-producing county in the state, too, I might add. And being such, it's more or less concentrated, by the big industry, on the county assessor, or you might say the state senator. When I teamed with Dan Dahill [Daniel D. Dahill] and ran for office for county assessor and state senator, the two incumbents we were to unseat had been in office thirty-four years, so that will give you some idea of the uphill struggle. We were more or less on the same line as not being Catholics, leastways not myself; Senator Dahill is Catholic, it's been brought out in the conversation with Mr. Ellis and the county chairman – I myself am of the same faith of President Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]; I'm a member of the Church of Christ. And I'd like to note here when accepting John F. Kennedy as my choice, I put his stickers on my car and rode right into



Sunday school; and that – if you’re running for office and trying to unseat someone who’s been in office for thirty-four years – is a feat in itself.

YOUNG: I would like to add this as a footnote simply because of my own special interest: I teach in a college which is related to the Disciples of Christ. Now, is the Church of Christ a part of that group, the group started by Alexander Campbell?

GODBY: Alexander Campbell, that is correct.

YOUNG: Do you call yourself Disciples here, or Church of Christ, or Campbellites – what term?

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GODBY: Well, we’ve been called all three. Actually, we’re Disciples of Christ; we call ourself the Church of Christ.

YOUNG: The moderate branch, then, of the church, rather than the one that’s oriented to the South.

GODBY: Yes. That is correct.

YOUNG: Well, among your fellow-parishioners did you notice a great deal of discussion about the president’s religion?

GODBY: Oh, very much so. Some were mild, some were a little more than mild, and then some were very bitter.

YOUNG: Did your minister take any official position? Or did he stay out of it?

GODBY: In our church – and this, too, is very unusual because ministers, as a general rule, come and go – our minister, A.J. Coffey, has been a minister of our church for around twenty-five or thirty years. He more or less stayed out of it.

YOUNG: I didn’t quite get his name; would you repeat it?

GODBY: A.J. Coffey; he’s a legend in this county.

YOUNG: How do you spell his name?

GODBY: C-o-f-f-e-y. I’d like, too, to mention, as I teamed up with Claude Ellis to help Senator Kennedy, although I’ve never sent a bill to the Kennedys, I wore out a station wagon. I had a new 1958 red station

wagon, which was the sound truck for Senator Kennedy. Not only for Senator Kennedy, but for FDR Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] when he was in here for Senator Kennedy; and for Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] when she landed her airplane at Bluefield and we took the tour down through the southern part of West Virginia. And I might add, too, Mr. Ellis attended these drives, and also

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for Governor DiSalle [Michael V. DiSalle] when he came in Logan to speak on behalf of Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Of the various people that came in to speak for Senator Kennedy, which would you list as most effective?

GODBY: Oh, by far, Franklin Roosevelt, Jr.

YOUNG: I'd like to go back to this business of your running at the same time as Senator Kennedy. You evidently had no feeling then in the primary that being associated with Senator Kennedy would detract from your own victory. What gave you this assurance that you felt that religion would not be a factor and that the senator would not be a liability to you?

GODBY: Mr. Young, Senator Kennedy, to me, was more of an individualist. In meeting with him and talking with him and those that heard him and read of him – going back to my suit-making days, and going into the coal companies and into the homes and talking to the people – I thought I had sort of a pulsebeat on what the people thought. And they were really for Senator Kennedy. Of course, a lot of people said, “Well, they have lots of money.” And the women say he’s good-looking. And of course these two things were true, for sure, but other than the fact that I was really for him, I thought the people were for him. Because the sentiment of the miners around the payrolls, as I was measuring them up for their suits, indicated to me that I was not wrong. I more or less run in this county on that assumption. Mr. Ellis and I are about the same age. We were then thirty-two years old when we were working for Senator Kennedy, the president, here in West Virginia. The younger people were then, I think, more or less bursting the bonds of the so-called factions, especially in the southern part of West Virginia, the southern counties. I could see definitely a trend toward Kennedy. And, of course, it made it much nicer for me; because of the fact I was really for him, the people, I thought, were for him. They came out of the hollows with their bibbed overalls and said, “I’m going to vote for John Kennedy for president. He’s going to do something for us.”

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YOUNG: Well, do you feel, perhaps, that in the very beginning the feeling that there would be an anti-Catholic vote was perhaps exaggerated, itself, that there was this myth of 1928 which had never quite died? Where

did the feeling come from that there would be a large anti-Catholic vote?

GODBY: Well, actually, I will say I had some reservation as far as the political part of the anti-Catholic feeling toward Kennedy. But at the same time, well, I think I might have expressed it when Senator, or rather Delegate Dahill, who's a member of the legislature, was running for state senator at that time – when some of the New York writers came in to interview him because of the fact that he was a Catholic. It wasn't generally known by all the people, due to the fact that Dan was raised in this county, that he was a Catholic; and I didn't think it would be a good idea, on Dan's behalf – because we were running more or less as a team – to get out and say, "Well, I'm Catholic, and I'm the only Catholic elected in the county." I played down the Catholic part as much as I could, for the simple reason that we were Americans; we were not running on a religious issue at all. Of course, Kennedy helped that out a lot by going back to his war years and the loss of the brother in service, and so on. The opposition or the faction that was against us was playing the Catholic thing up, I think, more than the people themselves were, because we got into some bitter primary fights here in West Virginia, especially here in Logan County and surrounding counties, Mingo, et cetera.

YOUNG: This interview is unique in the sense that I think you are one of the few assessors that has been interviewed in this project. I'd like to ask this question: We know that property evaluations have gone up in every county in West Virginia because the legislature has forced a reevaluation, but, at the same time, has the real value of property here gone up? In other words, in the last four years have you seen an increase in the real wealth of the county?

GODBY: Well, I'm afraid not. When I became assessor in 1960, the evaluations in Logan County at that time were hovering around a hundred million, in valuations

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counting all four classes. They have slipped somewhat, due to the closing of some mines, down to around ninety-five million, which leaves no room for a scare. At the same time, mechanization is taking over, as we well know, in the coal fields, and the coal production itself is staying up. But I can see no room for alarm.

YOUNG: Well, to go back to the votes for Senator Kennedy in the general election – we've gone through the primary – was there at that time any widespread feeling of resentment against the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration which perhaps rubbed off on Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] as a candidate? Did Senator Kennedy point out that the area had been sort of a stepchild, and was this a factor, do you think, in the November election?

GODBY: I'll go back to Senator – or rather President – Kennedy at that time when he came into West Virginia to speak on behalf of Congressman Cleve Bailey [Cleveland M. Bailey]. He said then, and I'll quote to the best of my ability, “West Virginia should not feel alarmed at the fact that they are getting federal aid or asking for federal aid because of the fact they have been paying in monies, down through the years, at a tremendous pace, and getting very little federal aid back. To the Republicans. As someone mentioned not too long ago, we were just part of Virginia. I will say this: Had Logan County alone been getting back in proportion to.... Of course, as you know, as the taxes are taken from the big coal companies here, they go into the general fund and are proportioned out according to the size of the county. But Logan County would not need federal aid, had they been able to retain their taxes that have been taken out through the years – if you follow me.

YOUNG: Yes, this would be a question of state fiscal policy, rather than federal.

GODBY: Say, one thing impressed me very much. Dan Dahill and I introduced a bill to the House of Delegates – rather not a bill either, a resolution – asking.... I believe it was Secretary of Agriculture Benson [Ezra Taft Benson] at that time under the Republicans. It was backed by the Senate, and nothing was ever heard of it. We were just wanting

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to get, at that time, some cheese, or rice, or what-have-you, because people at that time – seriously – were starving. And President Kennedy, after becoming president, as soon as he had made his inaugural address, dispatched foodstuff back into here. That was one of his first signings, if you remember – just on an emergency basis, to help out. He broadened the welfare or the commodity program just as a first step, to get things started. Then, of course, later on – which is history – the [Food] Stamp Program and the ADCU [Aid to Dependent Children of the Unemployed] program which gives these fellows here.... And many, many, many of them that I made suits for are working on this ADCU program and are happy to have the job. Of course, they would like to do better, but just simply to have enough money to purchase the stamps and buy the bare necessities to exist on until they can do better.

YOUNG: Well, what other aspects of the New Frontier affected Logan, or what aspects do you think the people of southern West Virginia approved of or disapproved of? Any criticism of President Kennedy with respect to West Virginia?

GODBY: Oh, well, the Republicans always like to say that he's trying to buy West Virginia with federal aid. All I actually ever heard was that some Republican, or maybe some diehard, would make a statement, “What's Kennedy trying to do, buy West Virginia and hold it in the palm of his hand?” I'm sure West Virginia meant very little to Kennedy if he were looking at it from a political point of view after the election was over. He was only fulfilling a promise he had made, and I think he

fulfilled it 100 percent.

YOUNG: What do you think West Virginia contributed to the political and economic education of President Kennedy?

GODBY: Oh, I think Claude Ellis alone, in his ability to maneuver.... To speak very briefly about Claude, he's been in the political warfare here in Logan County much longer than I have. And he may not like for me to say this, but I've been taking a few lessons from him. He knows the ropes, and he knows if it need be, in a very dignified way where to apply the pressures. As our chairman mentioned in his interview, Claude knows the steps to take and he knows the

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right time to make them; and I think Senator Kennedy was very fortunate in getting someone of Claude's caliber and ability to head his campaign here in the southern part of West Virginia. Well, it actually has done a favor toward Claude, too, because at the same time helping Kennedy, Claude also made a better name for himself, and since then has held down a very responsible job as recreation director here, and just been elected to the JP [Justice of the Peace] office here in Logan. And who knows, he may go on farther.

YOUNG: Mr. Godby, have you any other stories of personal interest with respect to President Kennedy?

GODBY: One I thought very cute, a thing that happened back during the primary when we were running. This old man here in town who was very bitter toward Catholics and Senator Kennedy made a statement to one of my friends. He said, "I'm not a-gonna vote for Dan Dahill, or I'm not a-gonna vote for Kennedy." And, of course, my friend said, "Well, why aren't you going to vote for them?" He said, "They're Catholics." My friend said, "Why Godby's not a Catholic." He said, "Yeah, I know, but he's a Catholic sympathizer."

YOUNG: Guilt by association. Mr. Godby, have you any other observations or remarks on your political career with Senator Kennedy, as a sharer of the ticket in 1960, or as a resident of Logan County through these years of economic crisis and redevelopment?

GODBY: Well, I would like to say this. I mentioned this before. I've been carrying my ticket down through the times that I've run for office, until the primary elections with Senator Kennedy, and he beat me nine votes. I had a time or two outrun Senator Robert C. Byrd. So that in itself – just a thought – proved to me that the people of this county believed in Senator Kennedy at that time. And since, he has proven to them his willingness to do the things that he had told them he would do. I made a statement right after the assassination of Kennedy that I hoped it would not be true: I said that it takes our country back years, even back to the death of Lincoln [Abraham

Lincoln] when he was shot. I think John Kennedy will long be remembered in

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Logan County and in West Virginia and throughout these United States, as the greatest president – a man who was an individualist, a great orator, a man that could handle himself in any situation, a man that could make a decision, and a man that could meet the demands of our times. This is about all I have to say. I will remember him, as I'm sure everyone here in Logan will.

YOUNG:                    This has been an interview with Mr. J. Thomas Godby who is now  
                                  assessor in Logan, West Virginia. In 1960 he was a candidate for  
                                  assessor and supported Senator Kennedy for the presidency, in the  
primary and then again in the general election, of course.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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