

Robert J. Beaudry, Oral History Interview – 12/8/1965
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Biographical Note

Beaudry, secretary and treasurer of the Wisconsinites for Kennedy and Nelson organization in 1960, discusses the 1960 presidential primary and presidential campaigns in Wisconsin, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Robert J. Beaudry

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Robert J. Beaudry

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Oral History Interview

with

Robert J. Beaudry

December 8, 1965
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let's start with the late 1950's. What were you doing when people first began to think there might be a Kennedy-Humphrey [John F. Kennedy; Hubert H. Humphrey] campaign in Wisconsin during the primary season of 1960?

BEAUDRY: Well, I think it occurred in 1956 when the Democrats lost the election to Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. The parties that appeared on the scene were certainly Kennedy with his bid for the vice presidential nomination, and I think it was known in Democratic circles that Senator Humphrey also desired to become president. Myself, I was greatly impressed with Senator Kennedy when he spoke at the 1958 Wisconsin Jefferson-Jackson [Thomas Jefferson; Andrew Jackson] Day Dinner at the Milwaukee auditorium. He not only impressed my wife and I, but when the function was over and we were shaking hands with everybody, Senator Proxmire [William Proxmire] brought my wife over to then Senator Kennedy and introduced her as just having had her ninth child five days prior to this. My wife is a petite little girl who wears a size ten dress. He stopped the line and took my wife over to Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and said, "Jackie, this young lady just had a baby five days ago. Guess which one it was." She said, "I don't know. Which one was it?" And he said, "Her ninth." So I gathered at that time that there had been some difficulty in bearing children on the part of Jackie which was born out by stories in the press, and he was rather impressed.

We were greatly impressed with Senator Kennedy at that time, felt he would make a good presidential candidate because of his name, because of his appearance, and because

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of his sincerity and his zeal to do good not only to the people in this country but mankind as well.

We didn't make our final decision until the state convention in Milwaukee just prior to the primary when we heard both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey speak. I must say we were very impressed with Senator Humphrey, but we felt that Kennedy would have a better chance of winning because of his appearance and because of his name and because of his warmth and because of his family wealth--the necessity of being able to finance a campaign yourself and to organize money. We felt that coming from the East he would be able to get the large blocs of eastern voters. So our decision that we had made prior to that and which had been kept alive by then-Senator Kennedy because we received communications from him from time to time--Christmas cards, letters... We then were off and running on the Kennedy bandwagon. What else? Do you want me to talk on a little bit more?

MORRISSEY: Well, tell me how the Kennedy people organized the people in Wisconsin like yourself to work on his behalf.

BEAUDRY: Well, I think the spark was Pat Lucey [Patrick Joseph Lucey]. Pat Lucey put up a nucleus of people that he had developed in prior Democratic campaigns throughout the entire county. Mr. Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] of Senator Proxmire's office came into Milwaukee to work. The Senator's brothers [Edward Moore Kennedy; Robert F. Kennedy], you know, came in to work, and his sister came in to work. In fact, I remember Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] one night at the Milwaukee airport after she had been in Wisconsin campaigning for several days was catching a plane back East. Mr. Bruno was with her. She was thoroughly exhausted but full of the Kennedy enthusiasm and energy.

I feel that the Wisconsin campaign, although it was intensely campaigned by both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey, the results would have still been the same with a campaign without such intensity. I think the importance of the campaign was the fact that both of the candidates were attempting to establish themselves as serious contenders for the nomination. Their intense campaigning was not so much to get Wisconsin but to establish themselves as serious candidates.

Now, if you'll recall, there was a half vote finally in Wisconsin after the primary. This was the result of infighting on the party level and not on the public level. In Wisconsin we don't have the voters register as Demo-

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crats or as Republicans, but they step in and ask in the primary for a Democratic or a Republican ballot. In the case of a machine, they use a lever which indicates and they have to

do all their voting in their particular column. I think that Kennedy may have and should have received an additional half vote out of Wisconsin. I don't think he got the results that people who were on the executive board of the voluntary Democratic party led him to believe he would get not directly, but through his friends and representatives on that board.

Now the campaign did give a better insight and a better light into who Kennedy was in Wisconsin, to Wisconsin voters, but I think what it did do was to give a better insight into the nation--that here was a man who was earnest and sincere; that he was not just out for the ride; that he wasn't looking for something to do, but he felt that this was a challenge--not particularly that he was called on by some divine providence to carry out, but that he as a young man in this nation, one of many young men, it was their function and their duty to come forward and give this nation the leadership that it needed domestically and in foreign affairs as well. His Wisconsin campaign dramatized to the nation and to the political leaders of other states that here was a man that was sincere and he was capable of doing the job that he said he could do. What else would you like?

MORRISSEY: So many people have told me that Hubert Humphrey was really Wisconsin's Democratic senator for many years there when you had two Republican senators. I also have the impression that many of the organization Democrats of this state were for Humphrey.

BEAUDRY: Well, I would say that when you refer to the Democratic party you in many areas refer to it as the liberal party. Obviously the intellectual liberals in this nation have gotten into the Democratic party, and this is especially true in Wisconsin where we were the founders of so many liberal actions which ultimately got to be nationwide and worldwide. So we had many liberals who were active in the Democratic party in Wisconsin.

Certainly Senator Humphrey is and was a very brilliant man. Senator Humphrey was one of the pioneers in the idea that a man, regardless of his race, color, or creed, should have as good an opportunity and every right under the law as any other person, regardless of their race, color, and creed. Senator Humphrey was one of the original champions of the idea that every human being whether he's a minor or widow, whether he's mentally retarded, whether he's

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skilled, whether he's educated, required a minimum amount of income for housing, for food, for clothing, for recreation. Many of these liberals who were active in the organization rallied behind Humphrey. I don't think it was because he was our neighboring senator. I think that that sentiment was expressed in the western part of the state. I think that it had to do with ethnic origins; I think it had to do with religion. One would be a fool to say that religion had no effect in the Wisconsin primary. One may favor another human being because of his religion, but when he looks at two great men and one towers in greatness over the other and the one who towers is a man of a different religion, he's going to select him. I don't think that either Kennedy or Senator Humphrey towered over each other. They were great men in their own particular ways.

Senator Kennedy brought moderation to liberalism. He was a liberal, but he was a moderate. He had an appeal to all people. I think that the strong liberal is the most unliberal person, in want of a better word. The vigorous liberal is intolerant. The vigorous liberal says, "I'm for this and this is what it ought to be. I'm against prejudice, but I hate the guy who doesn't believe the way I believe." I think that Senator Kennedy brought a moderation, an understanding. He was able to take and attract people to the liberal cause who were indifferent to it and many who were mildly opposed to it.

I think the Kennedy organization.... After all, the campaign in the primary in Wisconsin was relatively short. It was a matter of weeks. Organization didn't have too much to do with it. It became spontaneous. The people were just attracted to him. Before you knew it, Kennedy was going to speak here, they wanted to go to the speech. They wanted to get a car top. They wanted to get a bumper strip. They wanted to get literature. They wanted to do something. What else?

MORRISSEY: In other words, the overriding factor in Kennedy's favor was, as you put it, he could put moderation on liberalism. And this was enough to defeat Humphrey despite Humphrey's being a neighbor, despite the favors he had done for Wisconsin Democrats for so many years, despite his strong standing with organized labor, despite his good votes on farm issues?

BEAUDRY: I would say that this was it. I think that this offset the Humphrey campaign. I think that the Humphrey campaign started too late.

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I think it was poorly organized, and it was underfinanced. I think that the Humphrey people were sitting back on their laurels and figured, "This one is in the bag for us." When they got the feeling that they were in trouble, it was maybe three weeks before the primary. Then they came in and, so to speak, ran around like a chicken with their head cut off, could never get off the ground, could never get started.

I remember very well the night that Humphrey came to Milwaukee a few weeks prior to the primary with this big push, attempting to save Wisconsin for himself. It was obvious from the tone of his campaign that he felt he was in trouble. You saw an exhausted, befuddled candidate.

I think that, like all liberals, they had a tendency to feel that their candidate is so good and he's so right and he's so great that nobody else could possibly be a serious contender against him. Once they found this out, they were attempting to undo the work that the Kennedy people had been doing for years in Wisconsin. They just couldn't do it.

MORRISSEY: It's often said that Humphrey stood well with organized labor, but from your viewpoint did labor actually get out and work for Humphrey?

BEAUDRY: Well, I think that organized labor is not very effective in the primary campaign. In Milwaukee County, the one in which Kennedy won,

organized labor on the south side of Milwaukee County in the Fourth District, which is heavily Democratic, in their endorsements for assemblymen for the state assembly, every candidate they endorsed in the primary went down to defeat in the assembly race on the south side. I don't know what the exact number is now but I would say it was four, five, six. Several other assemblymen they endorsed in the Fifth District also went down to defeat. So labor in Wisconsin is not politically effective when a race becomes hot. In an indifferent race, where an individual says, "Well, who am I going to vote for school board? I belong to a union. Let's see who the union endorsed. This is who I will vote for." But once the race gets hot, labor cannot wield an effective vote which was obvious in Kennedy's campaign because if labor were politically effective in Wisconsin, he would have been defeated by Humphrey. He was not, because he had by far the large percent of labor people. In fact, people who were aligned with Pat Lucey for years supported Humphrey very vigorously in the primary

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and then got right on Kennedy's bandwagon in the final election--of course, you're aware, to no avail.

MORRISSEY: That's my next question. Why did Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] carry the state by more than sixty thousand votes?

BEAUDRY: Well, I think Nixon carried the state by that amount of votes because of, mainly, his appearance in Madison [Wisconsin] just prior to the election. Further, I, like most of the Democrats in Wisconsin, felt that Wisconsin was in the bag for Kennedy. But what we failed to realize, and should have realized, is that the only contest in the primary in Wisconsin was the Kennedy-Humphrey primary, and a lot of people who were basically Republican voters crossed over to get where the action was. The action was in the Democratic primary, and they crossed over and they voted for Kennedy.

The Kennedys themselves had very serious problems in other states where many more votes were involved and they had to concentrate in these areas. The campaign sort of fell apart in Wisconsin.

The man who was in charge of the campaign, LeMoyne Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings]--a good friend of President Kennedy--was an easterner. He was given this Midwest district. I don't think that he understood the people. I don't think he communicated with them--I mean, with the people in this area. And I frankly doubt Mr. Billings' ability as a political campaigner in the first instance and doubly so in this particular area. When I would see him in the headquarters, he was calling the advertising agency in New York City and finding what was the result of the polls and what was happening in the East. He wasn't very much concerned about what was going on here in Wisconsin.

The only real push in Wisconsin in the final election was an organization that I was associated with, and that was the Wisconsinites for Kennedy and Nelson [Gaylord Nelson]. We built a thousand car tops at a cost in the neighborhood of seven thousand dollars and distributed them throughout the state. Our idea was that we were going to tie Nelson, then

Governor Nelson, in his bid to get into the state house--to put him on Kennedy's coattails, and Kennedy's going into Washington was going to pull Nelson into Madison. Well, it worked to the reverse. Nelson was ahead of Kennedy.

And the real Humphrey people were crushed by

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Humphrey's defeat. They never got enthusiastic for Kennedy. Subconsciously, I think they were wishing for Kennedy's defeat by overtly saying, "Well, he's not going to win anyhow," and figuring in four years that Humphrey would then have a shot at it.

So, I'd have to sum it up in that the Kennedys had more serious problems, which they really did; the man they selected for the state I think was the wrong man; and the Kennedy people here themselves assumed that they were going to win.

The big crushing defeat was the fact that, I think a great political maneuver was developed by Nixon at that time. I think, if you recall, he went to Hawaii, he went to Alaska; he came to Wisconsin. He spread himself geographically over the entire fifty states in a matter of a few short days. But, again like Humphrey, he was coming at the last minute to do something he should have done long before this. I really don't think that Kennedy won; I think that Nixon lost. Kennedy established himself as a serious candidate in the Wisconsin primary, and Nixon established him as a serious candidate in the national election. Politically they say that you shouldn't fight unless you are going to win and then you still shouldn't fight unless you have to.

It appeared that Nixon violated both of these rules. He had no reason to fight with Kennedy by getting involved in national debates. Secondly, he wasn't sure that he was going to win if he did get into a fight. He thought he was a great debater and public speaker, and he invited a man in to a form which he thought was his and he felt that he was going to soundly trounce him. On the contrary, he got soundly trounced himself. With this, he set in motion the machinery to defeat himself for president. I'm absolutely convinced that if Humphrey wouldn't have run against Kennedy in the Wisconsin primary, neither one of them would have received the nomination for president. And I'm further convinced that if Nixon wasn't so cocksure that he was going to win, not only the presidential race, but that he was going to win the TV debates with Kennedy, Kennedy couldn't have won. If Nixon would have been out tending his own rows and taking care of his own weeds and running his campaign right from the start and avoided the debates, Kennedy would have never caught up. In his attempt to come back, he came back in Wisconsin which has had a tradition of Republican voting and he was able to, at the last moment, spring that tradition back to life.

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The Democrats of Wisconsin got exactly what they deserved. They went to sleep and they lost.

MORRISSEY: Was there a lack of good coordination between Gaylord Nelson's campaign and Kennedy campaign?

BEAUDRY: Well, in Wisconsin where you have the open primary, every candidate for public office is a satellite within the political life of the state by himself. When you say "Was there a lack of coordination?"—the Kennedys came in and set their own campaign in motion. They had to by law because they couldn't come in and organize the party machinery. The result was that Senator Proxmire, who was the first Democratic candidate on the scene, established the format. He established himself as an independent political fixture, and he operated on the fringe of the Democratic party. Once the office holder in Wisconsin gets in office, he extends his entire sphere where he's now invited into organizations which are closed to him when he's only a Democratic candidate. He's invited into trade organizations; he's invited into school organizations, social organizations, fraternal organizations, veteran organizations. When he's merely a Democratic candidate, not an office holder, these areas are not available to him. The result is that the party does not nominate anybody. The party for the most part can only raise enough money to pay for its own housekeeping expenses, so the party is not a source of funds.

So you can't say there was a lack of coordination because there never has been any coordination between any of the candidates for public office except in the case of people who are friends, such as Pat Lucey for lieutenant governor and Reynolds [John W. Reynolds] for governor. This is merely based upon a friendship. There was a lack of coordination, but I think that the die is merely cast in this particular case. The lack of coordination was increased because the Humphrey liberals were the crux of the Nelson campaign. I would say from those viewpoints there was a lack of coordination, but there never has been a coordinated campaign. There was an attempt on the part of Reynolds in his bid for re-election to ride with Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], but this was obviously not effective. Johnson won by over four hundred thousand, and Reynolds lost. So there was maybe a half a million vote difference in their votes. Proxmire couldn't ride along with Johnson. Kennedy couldn't ride along with Nelson. So everybody is an independent political satellite in Wisconsin.

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MORRISSEY: How important was money in that primary?

BEAUDRY: I don't think that money was important in the primary at all because, first of all, the coverage that was given to the primary by the press offset any money that you possibly could have spent. Both of the candidates had professional organizations, and they had people in Wisconsin who became professionals in their campaigns. But this was minimal. They were both organized. I would say that the real crux of the Wisconsin primary--this is what you're speaking about isn't it?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

BEAUDRY: The real crux of the Wisconsin primary took place in the Seventh District. I think that if any one person had anything to do with electing Senator Kennedy president of the United States, it would have to be Pat Lucey who sold Howard Hazen, the party chairman of the Seventh Congressional District in Wausau [Wisconsin] on supporting Kennedy. He went out, and he organized his district.

The district should have been a Humphrey district or it could have been. It was marginal at least. It could have been delivered to Humphrey, but Howard Hazen really went out there and did a job and delivered it. It brought out Senator Kennedy as the winner in Wisconsin. He wasn't a great winner but he was the winner. It's like when you fight for the heavyweight championship of the world. It's fifteen rounds, and you win many rounds and you lose many rounds, and you get many points and you lose many points. When it's over you might only win by three points but you are the winner and you are the champion. When Kennedy came out of Wisconsin, he only won by a few points, but he was the winner and he was the champion and the conquered, the vanquished, is soon forgotten. That was the case with Senator Humphrey.

But as you recall, there was really no hard will because the Kennedys participated in a fundraising function later on to raise money to help Senator Humphrey defray his campaign debts.

No, I don't think money had anything.... It had something to do with it, but I don't think it was the decisive factor, because if you took the square inches of the newspapers and the minutes that television and radio devoted to the primary in Wisconsin, this ran into millions and millions in value, and the amount of money in the campaign was minimal as compared to other races that we have

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in Wisconsin that go on for months and months and months, for senator and governor. What else, if anything?

MORRISSEY: During those last few weeks before the primary election, what were you doing?

BEAUDRY: Well, I was talking to everybody I could. I was passing out literature. I was going to meetings; my wife was going with me. We were just so full of enthusiasm, we were so-called, "I'm Kennedy-drunk," you know. We were really intoxicated and mesmerized and excited and hypnotized by the Kennedy magic and charm.

MORRISSEY: Who was directing all this Kennedy enthusiasm?

BEAUDRY: Well, I think Bobby Kennedy was. He was in here, and he had the thing going. The Senator was in and out. His wife was in and out, but I think that the magnetism that Jackie has shown occurred after his election. I think that in the primary he towered above her. Of course, wherever she was, she was such a dainty, kind, feminine, warm person that she impressed the people that were around her. But I think for the most part that this magnetism did not carry over to the mass media in the primary. It did personally. But his magnetism carried over through the press and through radio and through television.

But, we were out working and passing out literature and attending meetings and fighting with the Humphrey liberals because they were centered here in Milwaukee. They

sure wanted to get the Fourth and Fifth Districts for Humphrey, and they thought they were going to, mainly through labor organizations. But they get a real strong disappointment.

MORRISSEY: Did you hold a position in the party organization at that time?

BEAUDRY: No, not at that time. I was just secretary and treasurer of the Wisconsinites for Kennedy and Nelson, but that naturally wasn't formed until after the primary. I had run for public office. I had held an office in the West Allis unit, but this stimulated me at that particular time because the Milwaukee Democratic county chairman, prior to my holding office, was a Humphrey liberal and, so to speak, sat on his hands during Kennedy's campaign for president. I was very heart-

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broken when Kennedy didn't take Wisconsin because, not only did I work like hell in the primary, work like hell in the final election, I went out and personally obligated myself for seven thousand dollars worth of debts to build these thousand car tops. In fact, recently we just settled one of the debts for eight hundred dollars, and we still have one lawsuit threatened us for about three hundred and some odd dollars.

So, I made up my mind at that time that the least John F. Kennedy, the president of the United States, was entitled to was a Democratic county chairman in Milwaukee County who was partial in favor to him. I set out to win that office against great odds. I was considered to have no chance at all, but I did win. In fact, when I was Democratic county chairman, as you know President Kennedy came to Milwaukee. We had a great dinner at the arena. As he was leaving, I said to him, "Tonight you got the roast beef, and," I said, "next time you come I hope you get the electoral votes." [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: What did he say to that?

BEAUDRY: He laughed, because, as you know, in the primary he got the bulk of the electoral votes from Wisconsin, or the convention votes, and in the final election all he had was the indigestion from the many roast beef dinners in Wisconsin. He made that one day barnstorming tour through Wisconsin. He was at Green Bay, Madison, and Milwaukee. Now he had returned victoriously as president to a state that did not give him their electoral votes, and we thought it was very kind of him, because we're a small state, to come spend the day with us, risk his political reputation on a hundred dollar-a-plate dinner, which was unheard of in Wisconsin. The thing was a sellout. The people jammed the seats at five dollars a seat. I'll never forget, as he left I said, "Well, tonight you got the roast beef; next time I hope you get the electoral votes." I sort of promised him that he would, and I think he would have got them the next time around except for this unfortunate incident.

MORRISSEY: Any final recollections?

BEAUDRY: Well, I think that President Kennedy was the man that we felt was

going to carry on, perhaps for want of a better world, in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] tradition, that is, a man in the White House who had been trained in the federal government--as Truman was as

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a senator and as Johnson was to have followed him--as opposed to President Eisenhower who was a military political figure of great esteem with the voters. He knew government; he knew domestic government; he knew international government. He knew what this nation had to do to go forward. He was aware of the fact that nations are not immortal, that they reach peaks and they slide back and they ultimately decay and fall apart. He was determined that this was not going to happen in his lifetime and for many lifetimes to come. He was determined that we were going to remain an international figure for peace and an international figure for prosperity and an international figure for the good of all people. He appeared with the concept that our international policy is not only going to be what is good for the American people but that it's going to be good for the rest of the people as well.

He knew what direction domestic government was going in, and he was going to fortify it and make it strong. That government would serve all the people, not only the small, not only the young, not only the retarded. He came on with an entirely new concept, and that is, that government should help the big as well because if it helps the big, it will help the small. I think prior to Kennedy the theory was that the big could take care of themselves. Kennedy, I think, was the first man that came on with the idea that our government should be run for all the people not only in this nation but for the people of all the world that we deal with politically and economically. Well, that's about it.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

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