

Luella Hennessey Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/26/64
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Hennessey was the Kennedy's family nurse from 1935 – 1963. In this interview she discusses meeting the Kennedy family, her role as the family nurse, accompanying them to London, her memories of her time spent with the Kennedys, among other issues.

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Luella Hennessey – JFK#1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First time meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK]
2	Living at the Kennedy compound in 1938
3	Kennedy family dinners
4	Serving as the Kennedy family nurse at the American Embassy in London
6	Activities and trips while in London, Presentation of the Kennedy family at Court
7	Memories of JFK in London
8	English customs the Kennedy children picked up while in London
10	News of the death of Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.
11	JFK's wedding to Jacqueline Bouvier
11, 12, 14	Caring for Jacqueline Kennedy during childbirth
11	JFK's nomination as Vice President
12	The Democratic Convention in Los Angeles
13	Taking care of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. in 1961
14	Visiting the White House
15	JFK's assassination
17	Memories of JFK

Oral History interview

With

LUELLA HENNESSEY

November 26, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Luella, do you recall the very first meeting with the late President [John F. Kennedy] and some of the circumstances surrounding that meeting?

HENNESSEY: The first time that I met the late President was at Hyannis Port when I arrived home with Pat [Patricia Kennedy Lawford], now Mrs. Lawford. I was going to stay with her for the rest of the summer. She had just been operated on at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Boston. And when we arrived at the house the whole family was on the front porch to greet Pat, and of course Jack was among the ten tousled head, fun-loving Kennedys.

MARTIN: How old was he then, Luella?

HENNESSEY: He was just about twenty years old.

MARTIN: Now during this summer you took care of Pat throughout the summer?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I stayed until Labor Day, from about the middle of July. And besides taking care of Pat I joined in the everyday fun with the rest of the family and this

included swimming and tennis, sailing or perhaps acting as crew for the sailboat races.

MARTIN: You acted as crew? That must have been some experience. Did they always have some sort of a solution, whenever the boat was coming down the home stretch there? Do you recall any occasion...

HENNESSEY: It seemed that everybody wanted to sail and it was quite difficult to get somebody to crew so they all were very anxious to have me as crew. I recall one afternoon that I acted as crew for Jack. He was getting along pretty well and as we were coming down towards the goal line he threatened to make me jump overboard, so that it would lessen the weight and he would be sure to win, but he didn't quite make me do it.

MARTIN: Luella, what year was this?

HENNESSEY: This was 1938.

MARTIN: What was living like, at the Kennedy compound then, you know, at the father's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] house? How did they treat somebody who was not an immediate member of the family?

HENNESSEY: Well, of course, this was a lot of fun for me. And at Hyannis Port this was the home that all the Kennedy children seemed to love the best and shared the happiest moments of their childhood. They engaged in all the fun that Cape Cod offers to children, and actually anything that kept them outdoors playing: lawn games, tennis, horseback riding, swimming. And I joined in with them in many of these games.

MARTIN: Now how about the evenings around the dinner table? Were you invited to sit in with their meals?

HENNESSEY: Oh, yes. I was treated as a member of the family there, and it was really quite a lot of fun to be at the dinner table with them. The food was simple and nourishing, and certainly cooked and served in a very tempting way.

Mr. Kennedy was the chairman or moderator of the discussions that were held. And each child had a chance to give his or her

[-2-]

opinion. And in this way Mr. Kennedy taught them to recognize and understand that every person has a right to his own opinion even though it differs from yours.

MARTIN: Well during the meals, of course some of the children were quite young, Luella, did he ever have an occasion to chastise or scold the children?

HENNESSEY: Yes, Mr. Kennedy wanted to have them well disciplined and there's always a need for correction and guidance in a family of that size.

MARTIN: What form of discipline would it take. Would he have them leave the table?

HENNESSEY: Yes, or he would correct them right there and explain to them why it was wrong and to have them understand that this should not happen again.

MARTIN: Well, now, as the children were growing up did the father discuss his business with them? Did he tell them what he was doing?

HENNESSEY: No, he seemed to emphasize current events and probably service to your country. I guess he felt that he could tend to the finances of the Kennedy family.

MARTIN: Yes, but I mean were they aware of what their father did for a living?

HENNESSEY: I think only in going to his office. He kept most of his business, I think, outside the family and he just discussed current events and what the country was doing.

MARTIN: Now Mrs. Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], what was her role at the dinner table?

HENNESSEY: Mrs. Kennedy sort of led the discussion on feminine and cultural things. Both Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy wanted the children to have a well rounded education and she often discussed fashion and music and literature, and left it to her husband to handle the diplomatic and government discussions.

[-3 -]

MARTIN: Oh, I see. Well, in other words this was sort of education time at the dinner table, with the father and the mother both imparting certain interests to their children.

HENNESSEY: Yes, I think in this way they stimulated the...interest of the children in many different fields.

MARTIN: Well, now, Luella, you left the Kennedys in the fall of 1937. When was the next time you met them?

HENNESSEY: Well, after I left them at the end of that summer, they went back to Bronxville, and I returned to Boston to do private duty nursing. And the

next time I met them was when Mrs. Kennedy came to Boston for a visit with her parents before going abroad. And during this time, the few days that she was here, she was operated on for an emergency appendix at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, so I took care of her during her hospitalization there.

MARTIN: Oh, I see And then following this, I believe, Kennedy was appointed Ambassador to England.

HENNESSEY: Yes, that's right, and on one occasion, when he came to Boston to visit his wife at the hospital, he asked me to come along to London with them as the family nurse. At first the adventure seemed quite awesome, but after discussing it with my family and friends I decided it would be a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of and I was very glad to go.

MARTIN: This, I take it, was the first trip to Europe for you, and I suppose it involved a lot of details and you were perhaps quite excited about it. It involved a lot of shopping?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, that's right. No I had never been abroad before and I guess we women like to have an excuse to do a little shopping, and as I didn't intend to wear my uniform in London, I had to get a lot of clothes to fit the British weather.

[-4-]

MARTIN: Was there anything unusual about the trip aboard the ship going across at all?

HENNESSEY: Well, it was rather a rough trip, but we all survived it. And when we landed at Plymouth, England, Mr. Kennedy and several members of the Embassy were there to greet us.

MARTIN: Where did you stay in England, Luella?

HENNESSEY: Well I stayed with the family at 14 Princess Gate at the American Embassy.

MARTIN: Was it a big house?

HENNESSEY: Yes, the Embassy had about twenty-seven rooms. It's quite interesting. This residence was given to the American Government for her British Ambassador by Andrew W. Mellon. And the Embassy was one in a long row house type building a whole block long and each family in this block was titled. Besides Mr. Kennedy there were the Ambassador of Egypt [Bert Fish] and the Duchess of Northumberland [Helen Percy]. We often used to laugh about it. The Duchess of

Northumberland, her duty was to care for the Queen's formal robes. And the children used to think that this was quite a position to hold.

MARTIN: Well now of all the families in England at that time, perhaps there was none quite as big as the Kennedy's.

HENNESSEY: The Kennedy's had the most children.

MARTIN: Oh yes, they always tried to photograph one of the children and we had to warn young Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy], who was then only six, not to grant a private press conference with anyone that happened to ask him.

MARTIN: What kind of a life was it, Luella, for an American nurse in London at that time?

[-5-]

HENNESSEY: Oh, it was most exciting and unusual, in my opinion. I felt as if I were sharing a little bit in the history of America as an informal ambassador of American nurses. The Ambassador and Mrs. Kennedy made sure I took advantage of all the historical and cultural aspects of London, as well as their children did.

MARTIN: Did you have a chance to get around? Did you make any trips while you were over there?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, both by myself and with the children. I visited the Tower of London and the Changing of the Guard many times, and took boat trips up the Thames River to the Shakespeare country, and I suppose just everything that every American tourist does.

MARTIN: Well how about, you say you took the children along on some of these trips? Did they get a chance to get a good look at London, outside the Embassy?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, and besides doing the British Isles several times the children and their governess [Elizabeth Dunn] and I took trips to Ireland and also on the Continent. And if the governess went, she just took two or three of the children, but if I went along with her more children were added to the tour. These trips included visits to Germany, Holland, and Belgium, and I am sure the governess and I enjoyed the whole trip just as much as the children did.

MARTIN: Well they apparently did get around. How about your health over there at the time you were living in London?

HENNESSEY: Oh, I've always been healthy, thank the Lord, and I continued to retain my good health all the time that I was with the Kennedys abroad.

MARTIN: Well shortly after they arrived there, isn't there a British custom, Luella, in which the family of an Ambassador is presented at Court? Do you remember that? Can you tell us about that?

[-6-]

HENNESSEY: Well the governess and I, of course, did not go to the presentation, but we joined in all the excitement, getting Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] and Kathleen [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish] and Rosemary [Rosemary Kennedy] ready for the presentation, which was one of the highlights of our season there.

MARTIN: Did you ever have the occasion to visit Buckingham Palace?

HENNESSEY: Yes, at the close of the social season in 1938 I received a royal command from Their Majesties to attend a garden party at Buckingham Palace. This had all been arranged by the Ambassador and Mrs. Kennedy. This was certainly a lot of fun, to be sipping tea with Queen Mary [Mary, Queen Consort of Great Britain] and eating raspberries and cream with the Archbishop of Canterbury [Cosmo Gordon Lang], in the garden at the rear of Buckingham Palace.

MARTIN: Tell us something about Jack now. How old was he at the time? What was he like about that time?

HENNESSEY: Jack was a real young American boy and just full of fun, and awfully good-looking, both he and Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]. They performed different services for American Ambassadors in the different European countries and so they traveled a lot and weren't at the Embassy too often. But when they were, there was certainly a lot of life and fun at the Embassy. There wasn't a dull moment in their social life when they were back in London. Sometimes Jack would invite the governess or myself to go to the movies with him. And as he used to say, it was much better to take one of us, because some little English girl might be getting ideas if he was too faithful a caller to her.

MARTIN: Did he get along well over there?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, he was very popular with the English girls, but he didn't want to become involved with any of them, I guess.

MARTIN: Luella, how long were you in England?

HENNESSEY: I went over with the family and stayed all the time that they were there, from March 1938 to October 1939.

[-7-]

MARTIN: Back to Jack again. You say he dated. Were there any serious moments that you can recall with Jack?

HENNESSEY: I remember on one occasion, when we were in the South of France. It was sort of a rainy day and Jack and all the children and the governess and myself were sitting beside the fireplace. And Jack was explaining the history of all the different countries in the world and how they all had risen to power, but then had become a monarch and had been destroyed. And he explained to the children that this was the time for America to show that democracy could work, that she was the one that was coming up now to be powerful. And after he got through talking I said, "Well Jack you know so much about it, you'd think you were the President of the United States," and he said, "Well, I'm not now, Luella, but some day I will be." So I guess he had it in his mind then that he wanted to be President.

MARTIN: During your stay over in England, did you notice whether or not the children picked up any of the English customs?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I suppose all children are very prone to that kind of thing. They adjusted to their new surroundings and really became a part of them. I think the habit that lasted the longest, when we returned here to America, was the continental way of eating and this sort of upset the governess when the children used this type of eating.

MARTIN: What type of...

HENNESSEY: Well I think the British, they don't change their fork back to the right hand after they have been cutting their meat. And the fork is in the left hand and they sort of spear their food. And this is done in England and also on the Continent, but of course in America we change the fork back to the right and then lift the food with it. And in spearing the food, this disturbed the governess to no end, especially when we came back.

MARTIN: Luella, how about yourself now. Did you meet any interesting people while you were over there?

[-8-]

HENNESSEY: Oh yes. I guess every young girl likes to have a little romance in her life and I wasn't any different. I did go out with an English gentleman and one in particular with whom I became fairly serious, but when war started I returned to the United States with the Kennedy family.

MARTIN: Well now this person you're talking about, did you ever hear from him? Did you keep in contact with him?

HENNESSEY: Yes, he joined the British armed forces after I left and we corresponded for several years, but I guess distance and time kept us apart and so we... I guess the romance ended.

MARTIN: Well now Luella, when you went back to America, did you resume nursing as a career?

HENNESSEY: Yes, when We returned to America I went back to private duty nursing.

MARTIN: And this was during the war years, wasn't it? What did you do during that time?

HENNESSEY: I was made supervisor at St. Mary's Hospital at West Palm Beach, Florida.

MARTIN: Oh, I see. Well down in Florida, did you visit the Kennedys?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I did. Quite often and Mrs. Kennedy was just as kind and considerate to me as she had always been, and invited me many times to go over to their home for a good sleep and good food and I knew what this meant, because I had been with them so long.

MARTIN: Well, at that time of course Jack and his older brother, Joseph, were away in the war.

HENNESSEY: Yes, they were serving with the Armed Services in the South Pacific. I think Joe was in England. Jack was in the South Pacific.

[-9-]

MARTIN: Did the mother and father discuss the boys while they were away, with you at all?

HENNESSEY: Well, not particularly with me, but they would mention where the boys were and I suppose they were just as anxious about them, as any mother or father who had sons in the service.

MARTIN: Luella, were you with the Kennedys when word was received that Joe was killed?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I was in Boston and when I heard he had been killed I went down to Hyannis Port to stay for a few days and see if I could help.

MARTIN: Now after the war did you maintain any contacts with them?

HENNESSEY: Yes, we always kept. Of course the children were busy growing up and I was busy nursing, but they always seemed to let me know what they were up to.

MARTIN: By then Jack had returned from Service and he began moving around Massachusetts with an eye on political life. And in the course of his travels did he ever run across you? Did he ever get down to Norwood, where you were living?

HENNESSEY: Yes. My family likes to think that we gave him a good start on his political career. One of his first speaking engagements when he was going to be representative, he came out to Norwood to talk. So my sister and her husband, Dr. O'Toole, invited him to come to dinner at their house. He came to dinner, but he seemed quite anxious at coffee time, so he excused himself to go and read over his speech once again. He said that this is what his grandfather used to do, Honey Fitz [John Francis Fitzgerald].

MARTIN: Then of course he went on and entered political life as a congressman. And then there was a time when he began his problem with his back. When he had the operation were you called in by the family?

[-10-]

HENNESSEY: Not only by the family, but Jack called me several times. At the time I was working for the Walpole Visiting Nurse Association and I was unable to go. The directors didn't feel they could give me the time off and I have always regretted that I didn't go, because I certainly would have liked to think that I helped Jack at a time when he really needed me. While he was in the hospital in New York he called me three different times to, "please come down and help him through the operation," and those three times I had to refuse because otherwise I think I would have lost my position with the Visiting Nurse Association as the directors would not give me the time off. I often wondered since if they had all been Republicans. They wouldn't let me go, because Jack was a Democrat.

MARTIN: Were you invited to his wedding?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes. In fact to all the children's weddings, but I was unable to go at that time because I was ill with quite a bad concussion. However, the bride and groom were thoughtful on their particular, happy day and sent me a telegram regretting my absence at their wedding.

MARTIN: Now on to the birth of Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy], were you present then?

HENNESSEY: Yes, Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had been in touch with me several months before and I had made plans to be with her. Jack lived up to all the traditions of an expectant father and certainly wore a path in the corridor.

MARTIN: How about the occasion a few years later when he was mentioned for the Vice Presidency?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, I remember that time. It was indeed a thrilling moment to watch the convention on TV and see this young man I had known for so long, emerging into national prominence. I suppose I was disappointed in one way that he didn't make it, but knowing Jack I knew this was just the beginning of much greater things.

MARTIN: You were participating in the making of history. Now in 1960 did you go out to the Convention that nominated him for the Presidency?

[-11-]

HENNESSEY: Yes, I joined the Kennedys in going to Los Angeles. And one thing I always admired about the Kennedys, they never forgot their friends, even at their exciting moments like the Democratic Convention. They wanted me to go also to see one of Jack's greatest triumphs out there. But this is one of the big things with the Kennedy family, they always take along their old friends, and I was very happy for it.

MARTIN: While you were out there, Luella, you stayed with the family?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I stayed with Bobby's [Robert F. Kennedy] and Teddy's families.

MARTIN: Well right after the nomination of course I think Jackie was expecting again. Did you care for Jackie during that expectancy?

HENNESSEY: While she was in the hospital I went down and stayed with her during this time. This was quite an experience for the President-elect. At the hospital everybody gathered around in the corridors and outside to watch him every time he came in to visit his wife and he was so kind to everybody. As he came down the corridor he would stop at each door and shake hands with the patient, who was at the door to greet him, or wave to him and they just simply fell in love with him every time he came to visit his wife. I was so happy at this time to be able to share with these two young people two great milestones in their lives, the birth of their first son [John F. Kennedy Jr.] and the preparation for their new life in the White House.

MARTIN: Those are exciting days. Luella, did you attend the Inaugural?

HENNESSEY: When Jackie was in the hospital she asked me if I would be her guest to all the Inaugural celebrations. This just showed what a very generous person Jackie was.

MARTIN: Well what impressed you most down there at the Inauguration?

HENNESSEY: Well I would say the most impressive moment was when

[-12-]

Jack stood on the podium with his hand on the bible and took the oath of office as the thirty-fifth President of the United States. At that time my thoughts went back to the years before, to that rainy day in the villa in the south of France at Cannes when he said, "Some day I will be President of the United States" and now Jack was Mr. President.

MARTIN: Luella, back at Christmas of 1961 the father took ill at Palm Beach. Were you again called in this family crisis?

HENNESSEY: Yes. I received a call from the White House to go to Palm Beach and care for Mr. Kennedy. Of course I was delighted that I was able to go at this time because Mr. Kennedy had been very kind to me and very generous during our days in London. And I was happy to be of assistance to the whole family and to Mr. Kennedy also.

MARTIN: Well you were down there during that particular Christmas, where did you have Christmas dinner?

HENNESSEY: The President and his wife were most thoughtful and invited me to have Christmas dinner with them at Colonel Paul's [C. Michael Paul] home, where they were spending the holidays. And I think again this was one of my most memorable times, to have had a dinner with the President of the United States.

MARTIN: Now you remained with the Ambassador during that winter?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I did. I stayed with him for about a year. The next summer after his illness I went down to Hyannis Port with them and whenever the President was there he would stop by to visit his father at least once or twice a day, and so during these visits I always spoke with him and he was always jolly and we exchanged jokes.

MARTIN: These were sort of informal greetings that you would have when he came to Hyannis Port?

HENNESSEY: Oh yes, and he would always greet the nurses whoever they were and always had a joke or two with them. He had so much humor and fun to him that everybody

[-13-]

liked to talk with him.

MARTIN: Luella, while he was President did you ever get down to the White House to visit?

HENNESSEY: Yes. In the fall of 1962 the President called and asked me if I would accompany his father to the White House for a week or ten days' visit. Of course I was very happy to do it. When we arrived there Mr. Kennedy was ushered to the Lincoln Suite and he occupied this during our entire visit. I mentioned to the President how rich in history the Lincoln Suite was. And he, as always, full of jokes, said, "Now if you get married while I'm in the White House and during my Administration, you can have the Suite for your honeymoon." This was one of the typical JFK quips.

MARTIN: Now you also went back to Palm Beach with Ambassador Kennedy, and while you were down there did you indicate to him that you would like to get back to public health nursing again?

HENNESSEY: Well I thought that in staying a year with Mr. Kennedy that perhaps I was needed more in another field of nursing. Mr. Kennedy was progressing rather satisfactorily and so the President advised me to go to Boston College and get my degree in public health nursing. And he volunteered to help me financially, so the family decided it would be good for me to go back and that's what I am doing at the moment.

MARTIN: Well at this particular time when you started in at Boston College to work for your degree, was there any other occasion when your schooling was interrupted by a call from the Kennedy family?

HENNESSEY: After I had been at Boston College six months, the following summer, Bobby's wife, Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy], was having her eighth baby and so I accompanied her to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Boston, where she had her little child called Christopher [Christopher George Kennedy]. After she went home I stayed with her until Jackie was taken suddenly to Otis Air Force Base Hospital, where Patrick Bouvier [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy] was born. During the loss of this baby, it seemed

[-14-]

to me that the President and his wife were a great consolation to one another, and showed such courage in resigning themselves to God's will in losing this baby.

MARTIN: Well then you stayed with Jackie Kennedy following her recuperation for a while?

HENNESSEY: Yes, I stayed with her for several weeks at Squaw Island. During this time I had many unusual opportunities to speak with the President because he came up every week end and again during the week to visit his wife. At one particular conversation we discussed the shortage of nurses and some possible solutions to the problem. I recall last July that there was legislation passed as a result of some of these discussions. I know he would have been pleased to know that this appropriation had gone through, because he was so interested in recruiting more nurses for the profession and this bill allows for scholarships and traineeships to both the three-year diploma program for nurses and college baccalaureate degrees for nurses.

MARTIN: Luella, that was the last summer of the President's life. On the day of his assassination, can you tell up step-by-step what you were doing and where you were, when the first news reached you?

HENNESSEY: I was at Boston College that day and I was walking down the corridor, when suddenly a student called me and said, "Do you realize that the President has just been shot?" It was such a shock to me and such a tragedy that I just stood still in the corridor. The Dean of the School came and invited me into her office, where I stayed for the next hour, until we got the news that the President had died. He had been not only a close friend, but a very dear friend and it seemed as if I had lost one of the best friends I had ever had. Soon I left Boston College and I drove home and when I arrived at home, there was a call from the White House telling me to come down as soon as I could to stay with the family. So I went down the next morning.

MARTIN: How did you get down there, Luella? Did you fly commercially?

[-15-]

HENNESSEY: Yes, I went down the next morning. I really couldn't face such an ordeal that night so I waited until the morning. I knew I could not have been of any assistance that very night.

MARTIN: Well when you went to the White House, who did you first meet down there?

HENNESSEY: I went right up to see Jackie. And I told her that I would be with her and I would stay within call, until the following Wednesday, when they all went down to Cape Cod for Thanksgiving.

MARTIN: Where did you stay down there, Luella. Did you stay at the White House?

HENNESSEY: I stayed right at the White House on the third floor, where all the guests were staying and where the Kennedy girls and the family were staying.

MARTIN: Did you attend the funeral?

HENNESSEY: Yes I did, and I marched to the church, right behind the family.

MARTIN: After the funeral, did you keep in touch with the family?

HENNESSEY: Yes, we exchanged greetings at Christmas. In February I went to Washington again, because Eunice Shriver was having her fourth child and so I was down there; I had to visit all the families again. Her little boy was named Mark Kennedy Shriver [Mark Kennedy Shriver] and I think this is the only one of the grandchildren that bears the name Kennedy, excepting of course where the last name is Kennedy.

MARTIN: Luella, what in your estimation was the outstanding quality of President Kennedy?

HENNESSEY: I suppose his leadership was the most outstanding quality and he certainly showed signs of this very early in life. Then it came to the fullest capacity

[-16-]

during his Presidency. This was even noticed during his early teenage life at the Cape. He was the one that always organized and acted as the leader for the rest of the family. But I think that leadership, coupled with his understanding of people from all walks of life, was really what made him the great person that he was. Perhaps you could almost summarize it up with the little quote, "He could walk with kings nor lose the common touch."

MARTIN: Now if somebody should ask you what you cherish most as a memory of the President, what would you say?

HENNESSEY: Well, to me, the greatest moment was during the Inaugural Parade when the President's car stopped at the reviewing stand, where his mother and father were seated. Jackie blew them a kiss and the President stood and bowed to them. And I thought of the quote from Charles Dickens: "In love of home, the love of country has its rise," for in this his greatest victory of triumph, he didn't forget those who made it possible.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-17-]

Luella Hennessey Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

C

Cavendish, Kathleen Kennedy, 7

D

Dickens, Charles, 17

Dunn, Elizabeth, 6-8

F

Fish, Bert, 5

Fitzgerald, John Francis, 10

K

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 11

Kennedy, Christopher George, 14

Kennedy, Edward M., 5, 12

Kennedy, Ethel Skakel, 14

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 11, 12, 15-17

Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 7-16

Kennedy, John F., Jr., 12

Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 2-7, 13, 14

Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr., 7, 9

Kennedy, Patrick Bouvier, 14

Kennedy, Robert F., 12, 14

Kennedy, Rose Fitzgerald, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9

Kennedy, Rosemary, 7

L

Lang, Cosmo Gordon, 7

Lawford, Patricia Kennedy, 1

M

Mary, Queen Consort of Great Britain, 7

Mellon, Andrew W., 5

O

O'Toole, Dr., 10

P

Paul, C. Michael, 13

Percy, Helen, 5

S

Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 7, 16

Shriver, Mark Kennedy, 16