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Biographical Note

Meredith, a Missouri political figure, federal judge, and associate of Senator Stuart Symington, discusses Symington's 1960 presidential campaign, the Missouri delegation to the Democratic National Convention, and the 1960 general election campaign in Missouri, among other issues.

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James H. Meredith

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Oral History Interview

with

James H. Meredith

July 7, 1967
St. Louis, Missouri

By Larry Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Judge Meredith, how did you become involved in Senator Symington's [Stuart Symington, II] political career?

MEREDITH: I'd known Senator Symington, casually, for some time prior to his being a candidate for the Senate in Missouri in 1952. At that time I was chief counsel for the Insurance Department in the state of Missouri. I had managed the campaign for Senator Emery Allison [Emery W. Allison], who ran for the United States Senate in 1950 against Senator Hennings [Thomas Carey Hennings, Jr.]. And of the 116 counties in the state of Missouri, we carried 110 counties in the state and lost the primary by four thousand votes. The reason, primarily, was the fact that Hennings had great support in St. Louis and St. Louis County, and Allison had very little, if any, in those areas. And on that primary day they had a constitutional question for which the voters turned out in great numbers as to whether or not they would or would not impose an earnings tax on the citizens. So the vote was heavy in the city of St. Louis and the County, and Hennings was nominated and later elected. When Symington got interested in the Senate in Missouri, he came to Governor Forrest Smith of Missouri, who was my boss, and tried to obtain his support, which he did. Senator Symington asked me if I would manage his campaign, and I agreed to do it.

HACKMAN: Did you have any connections with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]

before 1956 at the Convention?

MEREDITH: No.

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HACKMAN: Could you talk about Kennedy's efforts for the vice presidency as it applied to the Missouri delegation, what his popularity was or was not with the delegation?

MEREDITH: In 1956, the Missouri delegation went for Estes Kefauver, and one of the reasons for it is the Catholics in the delegation of Missouri were very much concerned about having a Catholic on the ticket. One of the leaders of the delegation was Richard Nacy [Richard R. Nacy], who was a devout Catholic and a very strong force in the Missouri delegation. It was his opinion that, as far as the state ticket was concerned, Estes Kefauver would lend more support to it than Jack Kennedy. In addition to that, the Missouri delegation felt that the Republicans were going to win on a national basis, and their primary concern was for the state ticket.

HACKMAN: Other than the religious issue, do you recall if any other issues in relation to Kennedy were raised, agriculture or anything like that?

MEREDITH: No.

HACKMAN: Did Kennedy, or people on his behalf, make any efforts with the Missouri delegation, or do you recall who was in contact with it at that time?

MEREDITH: I don't recall any concerted efforts to get the Missouri delegation at the '56 Convention in Chicago.

HACKMAN: Do you have any recollections of that second ballot when the Kennedy tide had built up, and then Kefauver stopped it and got the nomination, particularly pertaining to recognition of delegations? I know about the time the Missouri delegation was recognized, the tide started to swing in the other direction.

MEREDITH: No, I don't.

HACKMAN: In the period then after the '56 Convention, let's say up to the time of the '60 Convention, did you have any contacts with Senator Kennedy at all in that period?

MEREDITH: Only casually, no real intimate contact with him.

HACKMAN: To what extent were you involved in Senator Symington's plans for 1960?

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MEREDITH: We, two or three of Symington's good friends here in Missouri, advised Symington that if he wanted the nomination for president, in our opinion, he should start immediately after his election in 1958. He delayed doing anything about it. I think he was of the opinion that the Convention might very well be deadlocked and that he would be a compromise candidate. Those of us here in Missouri who had watched the situation pretty closely were of the opinion that Jack Kennedy was going to make a very aggressive campaign, which he did. We thought the only way that Symington could win was to go into the primaries, which he didn't do. We asked Symington for permission to go out and start an organization in his behalf and to raise money for him, and he was not interested in that course. By about January of 1960, he began to make some efforts toward the presidency. Those of us in Missouri who were close to Symington had very little hope of his doing anything about it by that time for the reason that Kennedy by January of 1960 had an organization in every state in the union, and his people were working; they were even in Missouri suggesting to the Symington people, "Well, we're not going to do anything about the Missouri delegation, but in case anything happens to Symington, we want you with us." So it was, in our opinion, an impossibility to really build an organization for Symington at that late date.

HACKMAN: Who were some of the other people, along with yourself, that had attempted to get him moving in the earlier period?

MEREDITH: Sidney Salomon, Jr., Jack Dwyer [John J. Dwyer], the three of us primarily.

HACKMAN: Do you know of anyone who was particularly advising Symington in the other direction, to hold back, or was this more or less his own idea?

MEREDITH: Well, I think Symington was very close to Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford], who was an old Missourian, and he was also a good friend of Sam Rayburn's. And I think both Sam Rayburn and Clark Clifford were of the opinion that Kennedy couldn't get this because of a number of reasons, and the Convention would be deadlocked and Symington would be a compromise candidate.

HACKMAN: When you talked about the Kennedy people coming in and talking to Missouri people, who particularly, on behalf of the Kennedys, was working on that? Do you recall?

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MEREDITH: No. Not at the moment. But I know I had a number of calls from people who purported to represent the Kennedy people, and I assumed that they did because they were knowledgeable about what was going on.

HACKMAN: These were Missouri people or people from outside the state?

MEREDITH: No, people from outside the state.

HACKMAN: I think there was some effort on behalf of people supporting Symington in relation to getting, in an effort to get delegates from other states even at that late date. Were you involved in that?

MEREDITH: Yes. In a very minor way. Charles Brown [Charles H. Brown], who was a congressman, headed up his campaign, and we had a meeting in Washington, I believe at Clark Clifford's house, probably in either December of '59 or January of '60. And I think Charlie Brown, Clark Clifford, Sidney Salomon, myself, Jack Dwyer were all present. Charlie Brown agreed to take the chairmanship of it and did make some effort around the country.

HACKMAN: Was this at all effective or well organized from your point of view?

MEREDITH: No. To set up a national political organization requires time, requires money, requires concerted effort, and none of these were available at that late date.

HACKMAN: There had been no earlier effort to get any funds at all as far as the national scene?

MEREDITH: No.

HACKMAN: In this small effort, were people primarily doing this voluntarily?

MEREDITH: Yes. Symington had standing around the country, and they raised some money. I don't know how much or who it came from. The people in Missouri, of course, raised some money for him in his own state. But I don't know the details or extent of that.

HACKMAN: Did Kennedy's victories in the primaries have any significant effect on the Symington effort?

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MEREDITH: Yes, Kennedy's primary victories in these other states, each one, added to the situation, and after he defeated Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] in...

HACKMAN: Wisconsin.

MEREDITH: ...Wisconsin, then the full impact of his organization began to be seen publicly.

HACKMAN: Do you recall attending the Democratic State Convention in Jeff City [Jefferson City] in May of 1960, where the candidates were selected?

MEREDITH: Yes.

HACKMAN: Do you recall if there was any problem at that point in keeping people bound to the unit rule at the Convention? Was there any resistance at that point?

MEREDITH: Some, some resistance, but not too much. I don't recall the vote, but I remember that we didn't have a great deal of problem with that.

HACKMAN: Was there any discussion at that point, and maybe you can carry this on through, as to who would succeed Symington as senator or who would run for the Senate in Symington's place in Missouri if he were to get the presidency?

MEREDITH: No, there really wasn't because while Missourians were proud of Symington, they really didn't think that he was going to win it.

HACKMAN: Did you have any contacts with former President Truman [Harry S. Truman] in this period as to what his role was in relation to the Symington effort?

MEREDITH: President Truman liked Symington, and he also liked Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. Of course, Truman was very close to Sam Rayburn as well. And I think Truman was a factor in Rayburn's thinking about the fact that Kennedy could not win this thing and that there would be a deadlocked delegation at the Convention. Truman had supported Symington's opponent in the primary, Buck Taylor [J.E. Taylor], in 1952, but Mrs. Truman [Bess Wallace Truman] made a statement that she was going to vote for Symington which to some extent blunted the impact of Truman's endorsement of Taylor. And actually, while Truman endorsed Taylor, he really didn't do anything about it in '52

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in the senatorial campaign. Truman, I think, thought that the president should be either Lyndon Johnson or Stuart Symington.

HACKMAN: I know at the time of the Convention, he had expressed the thought that he didn't want to be bound by unit rule, and there was some discussion at that point on the part of some people of leaving him off the delegation. Or at least that was written in the newspapers at that time.

MEREDITH: Yes, I do recall something about that. I think he didn't think that we should be bound by the unit rule, but he didn't press the point very strongly, and there wasn't ever any serious consideration of him not being a delegate. Of course, later on, as the matter developed, Truman didn't attend the Convention.

HACKMAN: He waited for a certain period to endorse Symington. Do you recall if that was a reluctance on his part or more a political move to increase the drama of the announcement at a later time? Do you remember?

MEREDITH: I really don't know. I think Truman had very, very strong and close ties to Sam Rayburn, and while the people of Missouri were urging Truman to endorse Symington, Sam Rayburn was urging him not to. What his reasons were, I really don't know.

HACKMAN: What about his decision not to attend the Convention, were you at all involved in efforts to get him out there?

MEREDITH: To a minor degree. However, I think, actually, by the time we got down to Convention time.... Several of us went out to Los Angeles and spent about a month prior to the Convention, but I think most of us were pretty well convinced that it would be a miracle if Symington got the nomination because Kennedy had won the primaries, and he had a working organization. He was going great, and I figured he would be nominated on the first ballot, which he was.

HACKMAN: What were the people who went out to Los Angeles early primarily involved in or trying to do out there?

MEREDITH: Oh, we were hoping that something might happen, which is always possible at a Convention. But as far as any real thought that he would be nominated, I think cold reasoning showed us he wouldn't be.

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HACKMAN: What role did you play during the Convention itself? What were you primarily involved in?

MEREDITH: Oh, I don't know. We had a number of contacts with different camps, and Charlie Brown, who had managed the actual campaign for the presidency, we put ourselves at his disposal for anything that he might want us to do.

HACKMAN: Were you working specifically with any states, assigned to any particular states?

MEREDITH: I think I contacted several states, but I can't particularly recall. I know we

had a number of conversations with the Texas delegation, and at one stage of the game, they suggested to us that Symington withdraw. And I remember we had a conversation with Governor Connally [John B. Connally, Jr.], who was not governor at that time, and we told him that in our opinion if Symington withdrew, those states which were committed to him, a number of them, would go immediately to Kennedy and not to Johnson, and if Symington got out of the race, Kennedy was a cinch to win on the first ballot then.

HACKMAN: Did Symington ever, that you know of, consider withdrawing at that point?

MEREDITH: Not that I know of.

HACKMAN: We had talked about this a little earlier. At the time of the Convention, what type of problems came up in keeping the Missouri delegates in line for Symington—at the Convention itself in those caucuses?

MEREDITH: I don't recall any particular problem. Like any other Convention delegation, Kennedy had some friends in the Missouri delegation who thought that he was going to win; some of them were for Johnson. But we had no real problem in view of the fact that the Convention in Jeff City had bound the delegation until released by Symington. So there wasn't really anything they could do about it.

HACKMAN: What elements were primarily for Kennedy at that time? Any one area or type of group within the delegation?

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MEREDITH: Mark Halloran [Mark R. Halloran], who was the National Committeeman, I think thought we ought to release the delegation and let it do whatever it wanted to do. I don't remember any particular support of any type that you could call for Kennedy in the delegation.

HACKMAN: Did the Kennedy people keep in contact with the Missouri delegation at all at the Convention?

MEREDITH: Yes, they did. Actually the Missouri delegation was in a very interesting position between Lyndon Johnson's Texas delegation and the Kennedy people. I think some of the Kennedy people suggested to Stuart that he withdraw because they were convinced that if he did withdraw, that Kennedy would have no problem on his first ballot. But his final decision was to do nothing and just let the votes go.

HACKMAN: Do you recall who of the Kennedy people were in contact with the delegation...

MEREDITH: Well, Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] was one. I don't recall who else.

HACKMAN: Was there ever any discussion of Symington as a vice presidential choice if he should withdraw, or anything like that?

MEREDITH: Yes, there was some discussion of that. As a matter of fact, I think Symington was Bobby Kennedy's choice for vice president; I don't think he was Jack Kennedy's choice for vice president. Some of the labor people who were for Kennedy, Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] and George Weaver and his boss—he was the head of the....

HACKMAN: Carey [James Barron Carey]? Is that the one you're thinking of? George L-P. Weaver, he was in the electrical workers, wasn't he?

MEREDITH: Yes.

HACKMAN: Was James Carey the head of that?

MEREDITH: Yes, Jim Carey. Carey and Reuther both wanted Stuart for vice president, Stuart Symington, and the labor people came to Symington during this period of time, particularly—of course, after Jack Kennedy was nominated—and wanted him to be vice president because they thought he would help in their areas. The Missouri delegation wanted Stuart to take the vice presidency.

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HACKMAN: Was this voted on in caucus or anything like that?

MEREDITH: No, but a number of delegates talked to him, wanting him to take it if it became available. Actually, it never became available because Jack Kennedy asked Lyndon Johnson to be the vice president, and he took it. So that ended that.

HACKMAN: Did you ever hear Senator Symington express an opinion as far as what his attitude would have been if the vice presidency had been offered?

MEREDITH: I think he would have taken it. The reason I say that, if it had been offered to him, I think he would have discussed it with his friends in the Missouri delegation, and I think they would have insisted that he take it.

HACKMAN: You said a minute ago you thought Symington was Bobby Kennedy's choice but not Jack's. What has led you to that conclusion, do you recall?

MEREDITH: Well, because Jack extended the invitation to Lyndon Johnson. And when you analyze what happened in the election, they needed that Texas delegation and Lyndon Johnson at that time was a Southerner, in effect, even though he was from Texas. He had a lot of friends in the South, and I think his being on the ticket strengthened the places where Jack was weak. And I think Jack realized that.

HACKMAN: What was the reaction of the Missouri delegation to the choice of Johnson for the vice presidency?

MEREDITH: Well, they thought it ought to be Symington, but they were happy with the ticket.

HACKMAN: After the Convention, then, what role did you play during the presidential campaign?

MEREDITH: It was a relatively minor role in the overall campaign because I was busy practicing law. I helped arrange some dinners and meetings and things like that, but on a local scale in Missouri. Jack Dwyer was primarily in charge of the St. Louis campaign; he was chairman of the Democratic City Committee in St. Louis. There were a number of different Kennedy groups, such as Volunteers for Kennedy, in addition to the regular political machinery. My role was relatively minor in the general election.

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HACKMAN: Did these volunteer groups create any problems for the regular Democratic organization at all?

MEREDITH: Yes, they did. And it was a problem to keep Jack Dwyer from getting mad because he was an old-line politician and all these kids were getting in his hair. And he would fuss about it and raise Cain about it, and the rest of us would keep him quieted down and going on about his business. So it created some problems, but I think, frankly, the volunteers reached a different category of people than the regular organization reached. And Kennedy had strong appeal to the liberal element in the community and the younger people which the regular political organization didn't reach. And the vote was, if my memory serves me right, Kennedy carried this state by approximately fifty thousand votes.

HACKMAN: I think it was only eight or nine thousand.

MEREDITH: That's right. It was only eight or nine thousand the first time. It was a very close election.

HACKMAN: Did these volunteer groups that grew up, were they primarily instigated by groups on the local level or were Kennedy people coming in and working

with these groups?

MEREDITH: Kennedy people were coming in; I don't remember the boy's name, but some boy from New Orleans....

HACKMAN: Phil DesMarais [Philip H. DesMarais].

MEREDITH: Yes, he was here, primarily in charge of these volunteer groups.

HACKMAN: Did you have any contact with him at all?

MEREDITH: On a couple of occasions I gave him some advice and suggestions as to how to get along with Jack Dwyer and how to work with the regular organization to create a little less friction.

HACKMAN: Was he effective at all, or was he receptive to your ideas?

MEREDITH: Yes, I think he was.

HACKMAN: What type problems came up between him and the regular organization?

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MEREDITH: Well, Jack Dwyer thought that all of the political activity of the state should funnel through the regular organization without any deviations, variations, or exceptions. And, of course, at that point in Missouri, the Catholic issue was being raised by the Republicans. An example of it was that the head of the Masonic Lodge in Missouri, a man by the name of Massey, wrote a letter to all the Masons, in effect saying that a member of the Masonic Lodge just couldn't vote for a Catholic for president. This, of course, was ridiculous. I was a Mason myself, and I know it infuriated me when I received the letter, a form letter, which he sent out to everybody in the state. As a matter of fact, I think the Lodge finally took some action, and he made some statement that it was a personal letter even though it was written on Lodge stationery. And the Baptist ministers were preaching sermons on the fact that you oughtn't to have a Catholic for president. So the situation was getting pretty stirred up on that issue. That's the only place where they created a problem, was this business of having a Catholic for president.

HACKMAN: What was the reaction of the other candidates in the state to this issue? Was there ever any common strategy evolved on how to handle the thing or was it shied away from?

MEREDITH: No, there really wasn't too much you could do about it because you didn't know just all the places it was hitting. I think one of the most helpful things that happened during the campaign was the meeting that Jack Kennedy had down in Texas with a group of Protestant ministers.

HACKMAN: Right, that Houston meeting.

MEREDITH: That's right. And I think eventually, in Missouri, we got a group of Protestant ministers to individually, publicly announce and endorse Jack Kennedy and to make statements to the effect that this was a very bigoted and prejudiced attitude for a Protestant to say you couldn't elect a Catholic president. I think that helped some, but I still think it hurt the vote here in Missouri.

HACKMAN: We were talking a while ago about the role of this fellow DesMarais in relation to Dwyer. Do you know anything about his relationship with the other people, let's say the outstate people in the organization?

[-11-]

MEREDITH: No. I don't. I really don't know how that worked out outstate because I was in St. Louis at the time and didn't spend a great deal of time outstate. And actually, the outstate organization, I think Bill Daniels [Wilbur F. Daniels] was chairman of the Democratic State Committee at that time, and Bill didn't care if they had fourteen hundred volunteer organizations; it just didn't make a bit of difference to him. Anything they wanted to do suited him all right, so they didn't have any problems with the outstate organization.

HACKMAN: I think he was state chairman until, oh, around August sometime, and then Dalton [John M. Dalton] was running for governor, and if I'm not mistaken he brought in his man about that time and Daniels went out. I'm not sure.

I had heard that at one time there was some problem about some TV time when Kennedy came into the state. I'd wondered if you knew anything about that.

MEREDITH: No. I don't.

HACKMAN: What about the Negro vote in the state? Did the Kennedys work with any of the younger leaders or were there younger leaders here for them to work with? Or did they go through, I believe, Jordan Chambers [Jordan W. Chambers] at that time who was working with the Negro vote in St. Louis?

MEREDITH: He was one of the Negro leaders. Jordan Chambers was an old-line politician, and there really wasn't any big problem with the Negro vote. At that time the Negro vote was predominantly Democratic, and we never had any real problem with the Negro vote.

HACKMAN: Within the regular organization, was there much of a problem of getting people to work for the presidential ticket since Symington hadn't been a

candidate and had lost and hadn't gotten the vice presidency, or hadn't been offered the vice presidency?

MEREDITH: No, because Symington was very active for Jack Kennedy, and there wasn't any resentment about that. Symington made a number of speeches for Jack Kennedy; they had Kennedy out here on several occasions. I remember we gave a thousand dollar a plate breakfast on one occasion to raise some money for Kennedy out here. Bobby Kennedy spent some time in the state. So there wasn't any resentment against Jack Kennedy, as such, and the regular organization supported him all the way.

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HACKMAN: Do you have any specific memories of his trips into the state, did you ever accompany....

MEREDITH: Yes, I remember one Saturday he spent the full day in which he went from shopping center to shopping center, and he made short talks. That was the day they had this thousand dollar breakfast out in Kirkwood, as I recall. And they got Harry Truman down there to make some speeches for Jack Kennedy as well during the campaign.

HACKMAN: How was he received by the crowds in the area?

MEREDITH: Enthusiastically.

HACKMAN: As far as the outcome of the election in the state when he had this very narrow margin of victory, what was the primary issue or issues? Was religion the overriding thing?

MEREDITH: Yes. I don't recall what the overall majority was, but it was considerably more; Jack Kennedy was the tail end of the ticket in this state. The state ticket, let's see....

HACKMAN: Dalton had won by over three hundred thousand, I believe, and Kennedy had won by over eight.

MEREDITH: Dalton won by three hundred thousand, and the rest of the ticket.... Dalton led the ticket and I think the others trailed down to less than that, and Jack Kennedy was the low man. And I think religion was the primary cause for it.

HACKMAN: After he was elected, was there any problem as far as state relations with the Kennedy Administration that you know of because of his small margin of victory?

MEREDITH: None at all.

HACKMAN: Do you know anything about Kennedy's attempts to get the support of the *Post-Dispatch* in St. Louis? I believe at one point he met with the Pulitzers during that campaign.

MEREDITH: No, I don't.

HACKMAN: After the election, did you have any contacts at all with Kennedy or the people around him at the time of your appointment as a federal judge?

MEREDITH: Not any great contact. No.

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HACKMAN: Was there any problem at that time on your appointment? Do you know if there was any opposition within the Administration to it?

MEREDITH: Byron White [Byron R. White] was the Assistant Attorney General who was in charge of the appointment of federal judges. There was some suggestion that it might be a good idea to appoint a Republican. Having two Democratic senators, that was not received very well. And as you know, federal judges, while they're appointed by the President, their appointment is due largely to the senator from the state. When Judge Moore [George H. Moore] retired or announced his intention to retire, the senators announced support for me. Then shortly after that was announced, after they announced their support of me, we had another federal judge, who was a Republican, who died. Then at that point the senators agreed on Jack Regan [John K. Regan] as a second federal judge. And that, I think, is when the suggestion came that, perhaps, in order to balance the federal judges, they ought to appoint a Republican. And the two senators from Missouri rejected it. Other than that there was no opposition from the Kennedy Administration.

HACKMAN: Was that feeling primarily on the part of Byron White or where did it stem from, do you know?

MEREDITH: Well, the American Bar Association, Kennedy had encouraged the American Bar Association to take an interest in the appointment and selection of federal judges, and the American Bar Association tried to promote the idea of not appointing all Democrats. And I think in some instances they did appoint some Republicans. I don't know how many, but around the country I think there were a few. And I think that's where the idea primarily stemmed from.

HACKMAN: Do you have anything else of interest that you think we should put down here that you can recall?

MEREDITH: I don't think so.

HACKMAN: That's all I have. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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