

Harold L. Tinker Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/27/1977
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Tinker was the English master at Choate Academy in Connecticut from 1923 through 1962. In this interview Tinker discusses John F. Kennedy [JFK] at Choate Academy, including JFK's poor health; his relationship with Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. and with his parents; JFK's friends at Choate; the Muckers Club; and comparisons of how JFK was portrayed after his death, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

HAROLD L. TINKER

July 27, 1977

West Tisbury, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TINKER: I met John F. Kennedy when he came to Choate as an underformer from the Canterbury school in New Milford, Connecticut. He came with a great loyalty to Canterbury but also a great interest in Choate because of his older brother Joe [Joseph F. Kennedy, Jr.] whom he idolized even at that stage of his life. I had him in his fifth form year in English. He showed definite signs of mental ability but was weak in detailed knowledge. Spelling was erratic, punctuation was erratic and his vocabulary was extremely good. Extremely adult because of the training at home and his reading of things pertaining to public affairs which was always encouraged by his parents. But he was intensely interested in the class work while he was there. He was out however about one third of the time with illness of various sorts, at one time was in the infirmary for several weeks.

STERN: Do you remember what the illnesses were in any detail?

TINKER: Part of it was injuries. He was very brittle. He would rough house and break a bone. He would -- he had I think difficulties and respiratory diseases. He was always sickly.

STERN: There are many letters from the headmaster to his mother which we have at the Library which, say he was sick very often.

TINKER: I think he was the greatest patron of the infirmary that we had had up to that time.

STERN: Do you recall anything specific about his back? Did he have any back problems while he was at Choate?

TINKER: Not that I can recall. He played football in leagues and played in the line, I think tackle. That may have been where some of the back trouble later came from. But he was interested in all athletics. A great stylist in everything he did.

STERN: What exactly do you mean by stylist?

TINKER: Well, when he would play.... was out for golf for instance, when we were waiting for the bus to come to take the squad up to the country club to play the other fellows would be sort of horsing around, but Jack would always be practicing his swing and it was until he got absolutely graceful and well timed and everything. The pictures was taken later on the Burning Tree Course in Washington, showing the perfect follow through and he prided himself in that. Pictures of him playing football, he always ended up with a flair. He had a stylist.... an athletes style in everything that he did. He mastered it. If he had the body stamina that Joe had, he would have been a great athlete, a great athlete.

STERN: He was very competitive though?

TINKER: Oh very competitive. In the afternoon hours.... in the morning hours in the classroom he would.... he was all school. In the afternoon he was all boy, and from then on up until just before dinner it was athletics and rough housing and horsing around and just having a whale of a time. But then he'd come in and shower and about fifteen minutes before dinner at night he'd come down dressed perfectly with a whole different manner. This was when the boy who was already thinking of what he was going to be and the kind of person he was going to be. The public image he was going to have. You can see it in this memories of him. All of these things he did as a boy. When he appeared with us for dinner, he was at dinner and he had dinner, manners, was interested in everything and that was the time when you could see the possible great man in him. Because this was the image he wanted. As soon as dinner was over and he was a boy again with his crowd.

STERN: You said he was very serious about his studies. Which of the subjects?

TINKER: History was his great love.

STERN: English History primarily or American as well?

TINKER: I think American more. He had.... I know he covered

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American later with Laski [Harold J. Laski] when he was over in England for a few months and as a matter of fact the one thing I cherish about him that he sent me a postcard from Constantinople on his way back from Russia. He had been over in Russia with Harold Laski for a short period but he was taking a very crammed course with Laski on the American Democracy. Which he, Laski had already given to Joe Kennedy Jr., when the father was priming him. He had some difficulty in Latin. Not because of any inability, he just wasn't interested in it. He knew his Latin from church and that was it, and that's all he wanted. I remember his English Master told me once he had great difficulty in mastering the dative case. Which is an ironical thing because Jack was a giver. You'd think he would have got it. He had this history, it was American history with Russel Ayers who was a Harvard graduate, a Harvard athlete in baseball, who had been coach at Harvard baseball by Joseph Kennedy Sr., who had was a.... had graduated from.... I remember in business or banking in Boston and coached.

STERN: That's interesting. You mentioned, you used the word the elder son Joe being primed by his father. Did you ever get any specific evidence of the role of Joe senior in....?

TINKER: Jack himself told me that they hoped, had hopes that Joe would be able to make the presidency.

STERN: When did he tell you that? While he was a student?

TINKER: He told me that when he was at Choate. That I think was borne out by Jack's open admiration for everything Joe did. They were different. Joe did everything he was supposed to do, learned exactly everything that was assigned, factually. You asked him to do a thing he'd do it. I met him downtown one time in the afternoon when he was not dressed properly according to our rules. And I said go on home and get your jacket. "Yes sir." He went back home and he got it. Now if that had been Jack he would probably have said, "Oh sir now." Would make a try of getting away with it. But not Joes. Joe was caught down there without the right dress. He was caught and went and did it. Jack would not have been caught or if he had he would have made it friendly. A friendly gesture. Not really meaning it, give it a try. If he got away with it okay. But if he got away with it he wouldn't think so much of you. In that respect Jack needed a tight reign. Not a yanking on the reign but like a good race horse who knows the driver is there he would do it. Everything in our relationship with all the letters and it was never anything except Mr. Tinker. It was master and a boy and he respected it. There were people who were on a first

name basis with him. It was a question of liking him. Joe was everything, was on that level with everybody.

STERN: Did you ever see them together or did you ever see any evidence of for example of friction between them?

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TINKER: I don't think I ever saw the two boys together. I never felt that I knew Joe as well as I knew Jack. I liked him tremendously and even when Jack told me what his family's hopes were I would go along with it. And I was thrilled when he appeared in... they had to poll the Massachusetts delegation in the convention.

STERN: 1940, right.

TINKER: And the one vote that stood out against was Joe Kennedy and that made a terrific impression. It was very carefully studied I grant you, but it was a prime tactic.

STERN: Did you ever meet Joe Senior [Joseph P. Kennedy] or Rose Kennedy? Did they come up to the school?

TINKER: I met Joe Sr. only once at the reception after the dedication of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. destroyer, up in Fall River there. They had a reception after it and it was summer and I had to go from here and it was war and had to go by trolley and bus and trolley again in order to get there. When I went around and thanked them and said goodbye at the reception I gave my name and Mr. Kennedy said, "You're from Choate." I said, "Yes." He said, "The family are indebted to you, because we know that Jack would have been fired except for you." That's the only time I ever met him.

STERN: Is this in reference to, in reference to being fired, is this a reference to that so-called the muckers club?

TINKER: Yes, it was a flagrant thing, because two of the muckers remained as Jack's close buddies all through his presidency, Billings and Rip Horton [Ralph Horton, Jr.]. My stance was...

[TAPE STOPS]

STERN: The accounts that I've seen of the muckers incident, it's very hard for me to really assess exactly why people were so upset. It doesn't seem to really have amounted to too much.

TINKER: Well, it did matter a great deal. The house master who had his dormitory,

which was made up of the mucker group....

STERN: Was it bigger than Just Billings, Horton and Kennedy, were there more boys involved?

TINKER: I would say the group compromised about six boys. The house master was a former star athlete from Harvard, bright as a dollar, knew all the ropes, prided himself that he knew what was going on, nobody could put anything over on him and ran a tight corridor. Tried to run a tight corridor. But they decided that they could outsmart him. And they were devious

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and they ran him ragged. He could.... he found it very difficult to pin anything down on them. So that he was on the defensive all the time and finally he decided that it's either they or I, that they should be fired or.... this was just Jack's.... Jack enjoyed that.

STERN: Do you think he just, there was a sense in him of just the fun involved in putting it over on somebody.

TINKER: Yes, putting it over. It was a mob reaction. He wouldn't have done it on his own. I doubt if any one of the boys would have done it on his own. It was a nice camaraderie between the whole group which turned it into a mob reaction rather than an individual reaction. I doubt if any one of them would have done it on his own. It was just that thing. They became a strong group. I learned years later of a bull session that they had up on that corridor about the time that this was going on. [The conversation was several boys in the room, got around to politics, they all had strong opinions and when Kennedy gave his this was a time when Choate probably, the clientele of Choate was primarily Republican and here was a Protestant and here was a Catholic and a Democrat expressing strong opinions and one of the boys from a conservative family turned on Jack after he expressed an opinion and he said, "What after all do you know about politics." And Kennedy said to him, "Well, I know enough about politics to know that I'm going to be President of the United States." I got this from the sister of this man and said, "My brother could never stand Jack. He thought he was conceited because...." Then she told me what he had said. This was in an argument. Jack did know more about politics, he had been brought up around the table when all the conversation was about politics. He had met all the, some of the foremost political figures of his time through his parents. He did know more about politics and if they were hoping that Joe would make it why not assume that he could make it too. The Roosevelts all did. There hasn't been a dynasty that got started up that didn't begin to figure well if he can, that will help me too, and they would go.

STERN: When Joe Kennedy Sr. came up, I believe he did have to come up and see the headmaster after this whole thing, you didn't have any contact with him at that point?

TINKER: I know what happened and I know what was said. All that remained was, as I said in the other, he didn't attempt to in any way apologize for his son or anything. He just walked all over Jack and said you're letting us down. He called him names which emphasized it and it was really a confrontation between father and son. Painful to both I'm sure.

STERN: Do you know how Jack reacted to this?

TINKER: What?

STERN: Do you know how Jack reacted to his father's criticism?

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TINKER: Yes I do. Inferentially, because from then on the mucker business was out. He was alright. He buckled down to work and so did the others. This all rubbed off on them. Mr. Kennedy was so irate because it was getting in the way of his plans.

STERN: Did Mrs. Kennedy come too or just Mr. Kennedy?

TINKER: No she did not. Mrs. Kennedy came when we dedicated the bust of Jack Kennedy with great misgivings because it was painful. In her letter to me reflects that. She was marvelous all the time they were there. She kept track of everything about all of her children, checked on the diseases, was on the phone whenever anything happens, medically she was alert and carried it all. So that most of the relationship between the school and the family was with Mrs. Kennedy rather than Joseph who was in Hollywood part of the time getting the scotch together.

STERN: In her biography, the one she published in 1974, she tells a lot of stories about Jack's time at Choate including one incident in which he filled a room with pillows. Do you know anything about that? Threw oranges out a window?

TINKER: I never knew about that until I read it.

STERN: I see. Or about taking a trunk out of a room and being told by the master that he was making too much noise, do it in the morning. So they did it at six A.M. and woke everyone up.

TINKER: That was characteristic of him. Joe wouldn't have approved of it and Junior wouldn't have done that, Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] might and Ted [Edward

M. Kennedy] might but that was just the imagination working there. I don't think that I knew of anything that Jack ever said or did that showed spite or anything like that. If there is a difference of opinion well let's have it out. That's in the game of life.

STERN: Describe his relationship to other boys at the school.

TINKER: He was generally popular. He had a radiance about him as you know from all the pictures of him. Everything he did had a sort of grace. This style business I think in athletics. When he came into a room he had a manner about him. Not a mannerism....

STERN: This is something you detected even when he was young?

TINKER: He had an aura about him that you became aware of, call it personality if you will. Personal appeal. And most boys reacted to that. Where there was no outward admiration of Jack it was probably a matter of personality of

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something like that. Well liked, full of fun. He was on the side of the boys not the side of the faculty as he should be. That's a normal thing for school and college. That was in the group thing but he was I think he liked most of his masters too. I can think of only a couple he just didn't like.

STERN: There is a story, I believe it appears in Rose Kennedy's book although I'm not sure, that he traded votes in order to be elected most likely to succeed by his class. Early political maneuvering.

TINKER: I think that's a fabrication.

STERN: You do?

TINKER: I don't believe that for one moment. I don't think he would even do it in fun. His getting ahead politically if you will, if he was thinking to himself politically meant too much to him to play games as obvious as that because that would open him up to criticism and he'd be too shrewd to see that. I have read that about that but that's.... I've read things that were said laughingly, maybe so, then again maybe not.

STERN: There is I think, especially in the last few years a very clear conflict in what people are writing about Jack Kennedy between I guess I would call them on the one hand they were the muckrakers, and on the other hand those who are essentially trying to preserve him from all criticisms and perhaps the truth is somewhere in between?

TINKER: I don't subscribe to the idea that the truth is half way between admiration or muckraking. The truth lies always in the estimate of many men of what the man is. Closer to what he thinks of himself. If you don't try to understand what a man is reaching for, you're nowhere near knowing him and maybe he has a foot of clay, all right. What's the rest of him? If the rest of him is marvelous, you can forget the foot of clay. But you cannot arrive at an estimate of any man's character or the caliber of him without coming close to what he thinks of himself. The caliber of a man is just the same as the caliber of a gun. It's the inside measurement, not the great outside size. The big shots sometimes look like big shots. It's the inside measurement, the bore that is... tells a man and you don't know a man, any man in the street unless you know where he thinks he's going and that's why a lot of this stuff that has come out about Kennedy doesn't take into consideration, they consider this as a contradiction unfortunately. Well, contradiction is what paradox is. It was a paradox running through everything in life. You have any difference of opinion you've got two sides of the coin and the people... the closer you come to the center of it the more completely each one believes that he is right and that if they go one step more the reductio ad absurdum thing in debate, if you pursue it to it's logical conclusion then you end up by saying no you were right and you have to go back. I think that if you err

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on the side of understanding a man for what he's trying to be, not necessarily saying that, but is trying, you can tell, that is closer to an appraisal of what he really is than the things you can... specks on the apple and a lot of apples serve their purpose regardless of small blemishes. I think anybody who gives thought to this man arrives at the conclusion he was a great and good man. Regardless of what people say.

STERN: I gather you were not impressed by Blair's book then?

TINKER: I have not been impressed by a lot of the stuff that came out about him. That's the reason I would not write anything about it. When they asked me to come down and give the address about Kennedy when we dedicated this bust at Choate, I said I would do it only if they would let me tell the truth. The headmaster said, "What do you mean by the truth?" I said, "We did not solve Kennedy's problem at Choate. His father came and solved it for him, for us, and if you let me say that, I will do it. But I will not do it otherwise." So I did it. You should see the attempt they made even after I sent the thing in they found out I was going to publish it. They started to hash it up on it. They took... I can recognize the headmaster's handwriting which cut out a whole paragraph in which I said an awful lot had been said about him above the water line but not much had been said about below the water line. There were two or three things that he....

STERN: I gather you were one of the first people to recognize his talent as a writer. I seem to remember seeing a letter in which you...

TINKER: He did, he had... and the thing that I quoted in the letter he wrote to the

headmaster as a fourth former shows a mind and a style too. Yes, I remember telling him this. He had a gift for a phrase. I considered him an ideal student because he might be looking out the window seeming not to think but when something came up that he wanted to use that is what he did, he was selecting always selecting.

STERN: That's an interesting point.

TINKER: He was a better student in that respect than Joe. Joe learned everything that he was supposed to learn and you'd give him a high A and so forth. That isn't the way intelligence is built. That's the way grades are made. Jack reacted to the poetry of Robert Frost for instance, I remember his reaction. His face lit up one time when I quoted a line from Frost in class on "Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length." Which is the opposite of Hardy [Thomas Hardy]. I used to as a foil to Thomas Hardy's when he says "Happiness is but the occasional episode in the general drama of pain." Well here is Frost who says, "Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length." What are you going to believe. The optimist who says good morning God or the pessimist who says good God morning.

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STERN: So you feel he had a selective but very serious attitude.

TINKER: You can see the pictures of when he was in the presence of Robert Frost as the President or when he was meeting the celebrated cellist that came he met at the White House.

STERN: Casals? [Pablo Casals]

TINKER: That appreciation, here is a man I could never do what he can do but he's a great man. It was in his face. There's more to be found in a picture of this man. There's one in here that's a very rare, with Adlai Stevenson I would never have believed if this fellow hadn't caught this and seeing it and something has been said by Sihanouk [Prince Norodom Sihanouk] and Adlai Stevenson has a self conscious smile on his face, Kennedy is sitting like this, the most tense thing that you can imagine. Do you know it?

STERN: No, I don't. I'm not familiar with it.

TINKER: Honest I can't really work with this thing.

STERN: You mean the machine?

TINKER: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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