

Robert B. Docking Oral History Interview – 7/5/1967
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Biographical Note

Docking, Banker, Kansas political figure, and Chairman of Small Business Advisory Board, discusses his relationship with John F. Kennedy, the state of the Kansas Democrats, and the 1960 Democratic National Convention, among other issues.

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Robert B. Docking

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Oral History Interview

With

ROBERT B. DOCKING

July 5, 1967
Topeka, Kansas

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Governor Docking, to what extent were you involved with your father's [George Docking] political career, let's say, in years 1957 to '60?

DOCKING: Well, I was quite active in my father's campaigns. I was the treasurer of all of his campaigns. I was the Democratic County Chairman in his home county of Douglas County, Kansas. As his oldest son, I handled most of the details of his personal business affairs during the time he was Governor.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what his feelings were and how they developed toward the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party in this period, say between '56 and '60, toward the various candidates for the nomination?

DOCKING: Well, I don't know exactly when Dad first became acquainted with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], but it was sometime prior to the 1956 Democratic campaign when President Kennedy unsuccessfully sought, or his friends unsuccessfully sought, the vice presidential nomination. My father was always very impressed by President Kennedy. He had an increasing conviction, I would say, from 19...Or in the 1956 era, perhaps

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before, that he was the proper man to lead this country.

HACKMAN: Do you recall any specific reasons? Was it more a personal attraction or any political positions that Senator Kennedy was taking?

DOCKING: Oh, I would say basically it was the philosophy of Senator Kennedy, the dedication that he showed toward the welfare of this country and, of course, the attitude that he had toward moving this country ahead on a sound basis.

HACKMAN: Do you recall any trips of the then Senator Kennedy to Kansas to talk with your father?

DOCKING: Yes. I don't recall the exact dates, but they had a continuing dialogue. I know that Senator Kennedy was, particularly when my father assumed the governorship in 1957, that he was in Kansas on several occasions. As far as I know, on most occasions he didn't stay at a hotel suite but stayed at the executive mansion with my folks. I believe my mother still has in the home that she owns now the board that they put under Senator Kennedy's bed because of his difficulties with his back at that time. I know that Dad did not go to Washington much during the time he was Governor, but I know on at least one occasion that Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy and then Senator Kennedy had a dinner party at their home in Georgetown for the folks when they were back there. And I know that on most trips that Dad was in Washington that he contacted either in person or by phone the Senator, when the Senator was there.

HACKMAN: What do you know about the attitudes of other Democratic leaders in Kansas during that period? Your father was never, in some ways, tied closely to the Democratic organization. Were the other party leaders...

DOCKING: Well, I wouldn't say that my father wasn't tied to the Democratic organization. He was elected governor on the Democratic ticket. He, oh, in 1952 was the state finance manager for Governor Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]. He had a very tough primary against Bill Salome [William C. Salome], who was the mayor of Wichita in 1954, and he was the Democratic nominee

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for governor at that time. He had another very tough primary against former governor and Secretary of War Harry Woodring in 1956, and was the Democratic nominee. And, of course, he was elected at that time. I would say that the Democratic Party in Kansas somewhat is like the national party, that it is a coalition party and that certainly he had difficulties with certain members of his own party. But I don't know, in the Democratic Party, that this is entirely unusual in any place. But I think there's very little doubt that he was a leader of the party in

all, you know, in all administrative matters. If you're referring to the Kansas delegation at the Democratic National Convention—is this correct?

HACKMAN: Yes. We can go on to that.

DOCKING: Oh, well, that this was another different situation with different, many different crosscurrents. It was not purely a party matter.

HACKMAN: In 1960, your father was frequently mentioned as a vice presidential possibility. Do you recall what his feelings were toward that possibility?

DOCKING: Oh, I think Dad assumed this was just newspaper talk. I am certain that my father entertained no personal thoughts along this line, certainly no commitments. I think that some of his enthusiastic supporters thought that he would fit very well with President Kennedy. But I know that my father felt that this was entirely the President's choice that he should have, and I don't believe my father at any time considered himself a serious choice for that. And, of course, at that time my father was not in as good a health as he had been a few years before. He had quit smoking and was having a great deal of problems with emphysema. And I don't know that even if offered that he physically would have been able to undergo the rigors of a national campaign. And I think this was basically people thinking that he would be a good fit from the Midwest, and, knowing of his fondness for President Kennedy, they kind of added two and two. But I don't think my father ever took it very seriously, and when I talked with him I'm sure he expressed to his family that he didn't take it seriously at all.

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HACKMAN: Do you know if Senator Kennedy or any of the other Kennedy people had discussed that with him?

DOCKING: Not to my knowledge. I think there was some discussion, but all of it was conversation with Frank Theis who was the State Chairman and National Committeeman and now a federal judge. But as far as I know this was just pure conversation and Frank though—and Frank was at that time the Chairman of the Midwest Conference, a good friend of my father's and my family. As a matter of fact, our bank in Arkansas City, Frank is one of our bank attorneys. He was almost like a third son, in many respects, to my father. And I think Frank though, quite logically, it would fit. But I'm sure that Frank also recognized, as Dad's family did, the growing problem with emphysema which, of course, in those days they couldn't control as well as they do now. They've learned a great deal about the bad effect.

HACKMAN: What was Frank Theis's attitude toward Kennedy as a presidential candidate?

DOCKING: Well, I would say that Frank--- at the Convention in 1960, Frank followed my father in his vote and in his efforts. I think it was Frank's basic position that

Kansas should be represented in all camps. From a local political standpoint, he felt that Kennedy would not do well in Kansas and would hurt all of the local ticket or all of the state ticket and local ticket, and that, you know, as differentiated from my father, that where Dad thought that Kennedy was the man, we should go with him, you simply go forth. I think Frank was taking perhaps a political view with Kansas first, which as State Chairman and National Committeeman that this was entirely, you know, I don't think you could say that this was entirely wrong. On the other hand, when my Dad did visit with him, why, Frank went all out for Kennedy in deference to my father's opinion.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what objections as far as Kennedy's relation to the Democratic Party in Kansas might have come up? What issues did people like Frank think would be important?

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DOCKING: Well, of course, once again, Frank did, when it came to counting noses, support the President. Many others did not. I would say one of the basic issues was the heavy Protestantism of the state of Kansas and Senator Kennedy belonged to the Catholic Church as we all know. And frankly, the campaign here was quite bitter. Senator Kennedy, as I understand, percentage-wise lost Kansas by a percentage only exceeded by Nebraska. I think this is an issue that President Kennedy broke trail. I don't think that there will ever in the future be the problems with the religious angle that there were in the election of 1960; I would certainly hope not. Although, unquestionably, it was a big issue at that time. I know many people feel that my father's outspoken and enthusiastic support for President Kennedy prior to the nomination and during the campaign--- I think it's been quite obvious that while it wasn't successful in Kansas at all that Dad campaigned far more for the President than he did for himself for a third term. Our polls showed that prior to Dad's taking such a strong stand that he would have won a third term. And, of course, there was considerable bitterness about the fact that Dad did go so far out on the national campaign and did not confine himself to the state because, as you know, he ran, I believe, over a hundred thousand votes ahead of the President in Kansas. And even with that... But many people even still today believe that he would have been elected to a third term had he gone into a shell and not so strongly supported the President. But I think Dad thought that the country was at a very crucial stage and that President Kennedy was the man to lead.

HACKMAN: Was religion the overriding issue, almost to the exclusion of others? I had wondered if agricultural...

DOCKING: Well, I was going to mention that certainly some of Senator Kennedy's votes on agriculture did not get him a great deal of agricultural support here. However, that was not the emotional issue that the other was.

Frankly, I think in tabulating during that campaign, I made seventy-odd speeches. Incidentally, my younger brother Dick Docking was one of the original what they called Committee of Five which was involved in the organization of the Kennedy campaign in Kansas. And two of the other members of that committee

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were my campaigning manager and present Kansas state chairman, Norbert Dreiling and the other is Tom Corcoran, who is our Kansas National Committeeman. And my brother was another member of that Committee of Five.

HACKMAN: When did that get started?

DOCKING: Prior to the 1960 Convention during Senator Kennedy's efforts to seek the nomination, very early in the campaign and very closely after he announced that he would seek the presidency, prior to West Virginia.

HACKMAN: What do you recall about your father's feeling or his position as favorite son candidate?

DOCKING: Well, he opposed this. This was the argument, this was the façade with which the delegates that were either pledged to Senator Symington [W. Stuart Symington] or then Senator Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] were involved. They wanted to pledge to Dad to a favorite son role, sort of with the idea of holding Kansas so they could go any way when they saw that the nomination was going that way. This, he though, this was the big argument. He did not want to be a favorite son, and I think the press of that time would illustrate this. He saw through it as a façade, and I think if you'll recall that immediately after he was nominated why he stepped to the platform and withdrew. As you recall, during the caucus of the Kansas delegation we split our votes here; if I recall correctly there were forty-two delegates and they were tied twenty-one to twenty-one as to whether to support Senator Kennedy or Dad. Some of them, a few, I think, with a good, I mean with genuine conscience figured that they were elected delegates from their district, that their district had pledged them to vote for Dad for the favorite son on the first ballot, but would have followed Dad on the second ballot, but figured they could not break faith with those that had nominated them to the Convention.

HACKMAN: Do you recall who made up the leadership of the part of the delegation which was most active in wanting your father to continue as a favorite son?

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DOCKING: Yes, and for various personal reasons they did this. As you recall, it was rather Dad and his group against the field, against the nominees, the delegates for every other candidate. There were a good many of them. Georgia Neese Gray, who was National Committeewoman at that time, was pledged to Senator Symington, she voted for Dad for a favorite son. Paul Aylward from Ellsworth was also with Symington. Floyd Breeding, who was a Congressman, did not, you know, go. And these were basically—they, and those in some of the various groups. There were two or three which said that their conscience would not permit them to cast their ballot for a Catholic for President. I got into

quite a heated argument with this group, told them what I thought they were. And frankly, some of the bitterness from that Convention still exists in Kansas toward me, and I'm perfectly willing to accept the flak. And if some of those people would reassess their position and if they hold the same position they did in 1960, if they would join our administrative efforts here in Kansas, I might wonder whether we're doing wrong.

HACKMAN: What were you primarily involved in yourself at the Convention, outside of that?

DOCKING: Oh, basically there to assist my father and mother. My family and I drove out. My wife has a sister that lives in California. We were there. I stayed downtown at the hotel and lived in the caucus room where the delegates and other people that were there caucused, oh, more or less to assist, help in any way I could. My younger brother, Dick, was there. He spent most of his time working in the Kennedy headquarters.

HACKMAN: Specifically between the Kennedy headquarters and the Kansas delegation? Or was he involved in that?

DOCKING: Well, he was involved quite generally. Frankly, I think Whizzer White [Byron White], who was over this Midwest area, more or less depended upon Dick to contact delegates of this delegation. I also had quite a few visits. I had some friends in our surrounding states and some other places, in Indiana and Missouri and Oklahoma, where my wife's from, Nebraska and Colorado. I visited and contacted some delegates in those states. I don't know how successful I was, not

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nearly as successful as I would like to have been.

HACKMAN: Was your father working with other delegations at this time?

DOCKING: Oh yes. There was a parade of various delegations that went through... It was a very upsetting period. Another strong support of President Kennedy at that time was John Montgomery, who is presently our state highway director, newspaper publisher, banker, and man of great stature in the state of Kansas, a close friend of my father's, and he later succeeded Frank Theis as the State Chairman. And Frank moved to National Committeeman, a post which he held until he received the federal judgeship.

HACKMAN: Skipping back a minute to the period before the Convention, had any of the other candidates made concerted efforts in the state to a degree comparable to what the Kennedy people were doing, like this Committee of Five, for instance?

DOCKING: Oh, yes. They were all very active: Vice President Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was quite active; Senator Johnson was very active; Symington, being from our neighboring state of Missouri, was certainly very active. Could we turn that off? [Interruption]

HACKMAN: What do you recall about any conversations your father might have had with the Kennedys at the Convention? I know he did talk with Senator Kennedy a couple of times. Can you give anything specific on that?

DOCKING: No. I think basically it was simply to bring him up to date on the Kansas situation. I know that, well, my brother, principally, and I was there; we visited with Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] on several occasions and also talked briefly a time or two with Sarge Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.] whom the family had known for some time. I think...

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HACKMAN: You had talked before about some of the bitterness created at this time and still existing. Could you go on and recall how this affected the campaign here in Kansas in '60 and what problems it created?

DOCKING: In '60?

HACKMAN: Right, as far as working for the national ticket.

DOCKING: Oh, well, I think, well, it was a pretty upsetting thing. My mother at that time had had another attack of high blood pressure when she was in, and her nose bled; she spent, I think a week or so in the hospital in Los Angeles. At that time it was a very exciting, upsetting thing. Of course, when Dad came home why people were bitter about the nomination. I mean those that were opposed were still opposed, didn't raise a hand. And I think rather than oppose, say, the President, why they'd rather oppose Dad because he tried to take the delegation for President Kennedy. Dad quite obviously in my opinion--I think history's proven that he couldn't have been more right. But, of course, at this time I'd say that a lot of people were privately editorializing too close to the news.

HACKMAN: Now Frank Theis, I believe, headed the Kennedy for President effort here during the campaign or, at least, an organization called Kennedy for President.

DOCKING: Yes.

HACKMAN: Did this present any problems since he had earlier seen Kennedy as maybe a handicap as far as the state went?

DOCKING: Well this, I think, basically was an effort by my father to try and bring unity behind the Kennedy campaign. And, once again, Frank did—when the votes were counted, Frank stayed with my father.

HACKMAN: Do you recall if anyone specifically was assigned to the state during the campaign from outside of the state? Any of the Kennedy...

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DOCKING: Oh, I know there was, but... Could we turn that off for a second?
[Interruption]

HACKMAN: Governor Docking, do you recall what the response of your father and other people in the Kansas delegation was to the nomination of Senator Johnson for the vice presidency?

DOCKING: Oh, I think that they were very enthusiastic about it or, at least I know my father was. It was rather the feeling that this would give good balance to the ticket, you know; that President Johnson would help with the Southern organizations, which I think it was quite obvious that he did do during the election; that it gave good balance; that it made, in his opinion, one of the strongest possible tickets that the Democratic Party could have at that time. I don't know at that time the feelings of President Johnson towards Kansas or toward my father, because he actively sought the Kansas delegation and Dad went with President Kennedy at that time. But I know in prior years why Johnson, when he was a Senator, when Dad was named the Eagle of the year, why he put that in the Senate record and sent us a copy for our family files as a Senator from, you know, even though he was a Senator from Texas. And Dad was quite well acquainted with President Johnson, although I think that during the heat of the Presidential nomination, why, he certainly was not happy with Kansas as he might have been. I think this may well have been true as far as my father was concerned and Senator Symington, also, because both Texas and particularly Missouri being very close geographically to Kansas and having a great deal of interchange of information and people and so on, I think perhaps that they felt that Kansas should have gone with Missouri or with Texas. And, of course, once again, my father believed very deeply that Senator Kennedy was the man, and I think it's been pretty well demonstrated that it was not without creating a good deal of personal animosities that were not present before. But, on the other hand, I think that, particularly in Kansas and certain states around here, that the Kennedy people were for President Kennedy and that they were people who had guts and more or less threw things to the wind and went forth. Well, I think this has been pretty typical of the admirers of the President, that there was a high degree of personal loyalty.

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HACKMAN: Do you have any recollections of his visits into the state and then how effective he was in relation to Kansas, the speeches that he gave?

DOCKING: Well, of course, I was personally very fond of him and was an admirer of him. He impressed me from a personal standpoint very greatly. I remember having a visit with him in the old Blue Note Auditorium there in Wichita, prior to the speech he made in Wichita, where he and I sat back in a room for about twenty minutes and visited with him. Dad was going to introduce him, and then rather than him being at the table at that time, why they threw the spotlight on him. I was terribly impressed with him. However, there were so many crosscurrents and reasons in that time that we talked about before that quite obviously the sum total of the voting public in Kansas obviously didn't buy him at that time or vote for him at that time. And frankly, I think many of them did so for the wrong reasons.

HACKMAN: As far as the religious issue, do you know if religious groups in Kansas were in contact with your father attempting to influence his stand?

DOCKING: Well, there's no question about it. I even had them come see me in the bank in Ark [Arkansas] City, different groups, different power structures, people who were mistakenly but genuinely afraid that the capital would be transferred from Washington to Rome and believed it. It was not insincere on their part.

HACKMAN: Do you want to go into any specifics on that?

DOCKING: No, I would prefer not to. That's water under the dam, but I'm sure that anyone who was in Kansas in those days is well acquainted with the situation.

HACKMAN: Moving on from the election then...

DOCKING: And I'll tell you quite frankly, in certain areas we had several people close their bank accounts with our bank and so on. I mean it was a tough

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situation out here. I think it's generally a situation unless the person is in it at that time they don't fully appreciate the toughness and the emotion that was involved. Once again, I think this bridge to a very, very great extent has been crossed and that never again will we have to fight that type of battle on those terms in history. In this way, President Kennedy broke much trail.

HACKMAN: Moving on then, after the election, was your father ever considered for any other positions other than as Director of the Import-Export Bank?

DOCKING: Well, at the time he was ill it was my understanding that he was under consideration as one of the Directors of the Federal Reserve. Now whether or not that would ever come about I do not know. Of course, President Kennedy

was assassinated in November and my father himself passed away in January of the following year. And, of course, Dad was suffering quite badly from emphysema at that time. And in connection with his activities with the Export-Import Bank, he made the trip to Europe and to South America and picked up some type of bug while he was down in South America which tore him down further. I do think it's a matter of note that they did not fill the vacancy on the Federal Reserve Board until after my father's death. Now whether or not, had he lived, he would have been in the running, I don't know if he would know.

HACKMAN: At the time he was appointed Director of the Bank was he happy with this position, or were there any other specific positions that he had specifically wanted?

DOCKING: Not to my knowledge.

HACKMAN: Well there had been some discussion of him as a possible Secretary of Agriculture, and I had heard that he discussed this at one with President Kennedy.

DOCKING: Well, if this was discussed, I didn't know about it.

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HACKMAN: Did you have any personal connections with Kennedy Administration during those years?

DOCKING: The President appointed me as chairman of the Small Business Administration Advisory Board, or he appointed me to the Board and I was selected chairman. Now whether he recommended this or whether John Horne, who was Director at that time, recommended it, I do not know; except I was selected as chairman and did serve in this capacity until I was elected Governor, and I resigned in either November or December of 1966.

HACKMAN: Did you feel in the Kennedy period that this group was very constructive, or how did it operate?

DOCKING: In what? You mean the Small Business Administration in Kansas?

HACKMAN: Right.

DOCKING: Oh, yes. I think our statistics will show—I may be a little bit off on a few of these speaking from memory—but we had about 1.2 per cent of the national population; we make over 3 per cent of the total dollar volume of loans, over 5 per cent of the number of loans, we had one of the best collection percentages in the country. I think the state of Kansas, at least during that time, of course, it just wasn't due necessarily

to the Advisory Board, but to the good people that operated it. But I'm very proud of the Small Business Administration's efforts in Kansas, and I think we did a good job.

HACKMAN: That's about all I have unless you have any conclusions you want to draw.

DOCKING: No, not one, except you've brought back a lot of memories and I'm glad you asked the questions that I remember pretty vividly.

HACKMAN: Okay, thank you very much.

DOCKING: Sure.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

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