

Carl B. “Happy” Vickers Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 7/27/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Carl B. “Happy” Vickers
Interviewer: William L. Young
Date of Interview: July 27, 1965
Place of Interview: Fayetteville, West Virginia
Length: 39 pp.

Biographical Note

Vickers, Carl B. “Happy”; Democratic Executive Committee chairman, Fayette County, West Virginia (1960). Vickers discusses John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] presidential campaign in Fayette County, West Virginia, compares it to Hubert Humphrey’s campaign, and discusses the religious, political, and economic dynamics of the county and their effect on JFK’s campaign, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

No restrictions.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed December 29, 1969, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Carl B. "Happy" Vickers, recorded interview by William L. Young, July 27, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By CARL B. VICKERS

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, CARL B. VICKERS hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, the tape(s) and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

Signed

Carl B. Vickers

Date

DECEMBER 22, 1969

Accepted

ACTING

Herbert R. Ames
Archivist of the United States

Date

12-29-69

Carl B. “Happy” Vickers

Table of Contents

| <u>Page</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|--------------|--|
| 1 | Vickers’ interests in John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] presidential candidacy |
| 3, 6, 39 | The Vickers family’s political background |
| 4, 9, 32, 37 | Vickers’ role in JFK’s campaign |
| 6, 23, 36 | Fayette County and religion |
| 10, 21, 30 | Political parties and voters of Fayette County |
| 11, 33 | Hubert Humphrey’s presidential campaign versus JFK’s |
| 20 | JFK’s campaigning in Fayette County |
| 29 | Fayette County’s economy |
| 33 | Fayette County’s perceptions of JFK as president |

Oral History Interview

with

CARL B. VICKERS

July 27, 1965
Fayetteville, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with Mr. Carl B. Vickers of Fayetteville, West Virginia. The interview is taking place in Mr. Vickers' office in Fayetteville on July 27, 1965. Mr. Vickers, let's just begin at the beginning. Would you tell me how you first became interested in Senator Kennedy's candidacy?

VICKERS: Well, it probably goes back a number of years. I've been interested in politics my entire adult life -- I have spent twenty-eight years in public office. Naturally, anything political is of considerable importance to me. I would say that probably the first local interest that was engendered here among our local people, that is, the Fayette County people who work in politics, was when Ted

[-1-]

Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] came in advance of his brother. He came into Fayette County, and a number of us had a luncheon meeting at the Legion Hall with him. He spent a good part of the afternoon with us on just an informal basis. There was no big pitch or big sell, but I think, primarily, he was selling the Kennedy name more than somebody to run for President. But anyway, most of the leaders were at that meeting. It was the first time any of us had met him; we were very much impressed with his human qualities, his apparent

honesty, integrity, and fairness in every respect. He sold himself pretty well. I think, really, that was the germ -- or whatever you might want to call it -- that gradually built up into a lot of local respect for the Kennedy candidacy. I don't mean that we were not aware -- we then called him Jack and a bit later John F. -- we were all aware of Kennedy and the fine record he had made, but it was the first time here, in a little local area, that the Kennedy

[-2-]

family themselves, we might say, or a Kennedy, had come into our midst. We were just very impressed.

YOUNG: Mr. Vickers, do you remember approximately when Ted Kennedy came into the County?

VICKERS: It was several months before the primary. I'm not sure of the exact date, but I'd say probably at least three or four months before the primary election.

YOUNG: In building the basis for a Kennedy organization in Fayette County, I wonder if you would saw a word about your own political activity and the political activity of your family, and then come up to the Kennedy contacts.

VICKERS: I imagine it's largely because there are four boys in my family and all of us are lawyers, practicing here in the County. We've all been rather interested in politics. As I say, I spent twenty-eight years in public office -- sixteen years as prosecuting attorney and twelve years as a member (part of that time as president) of the County Court. I've also

[-3-]

served as Democratic Executive Committee Chairman in the County and was active in that role about the time this election came up. My older brother, two years older than I am, was president of the State Senate, a member of the legislature for a number of years. My younger brother was a member of the House of Delegates and is presently serving as majority floor leader of the House of Delegates. So we have somewhat of a political background, and anything that has a political flavor naturally appeals to us. One way or another we are interested in it. We are interested in good government. I imagine it was because of this activity that a little bit later I became very interested, very actively interested, in the Kennedy campaign and managed it here in Fayette County. At that time we had a rather forceful organization here in the County. We had no difficulty whatever; it wasn't a matter of selling the Kennedy name. I think it just developed, and we went along

[-4-]

very well and put on a very successful campaign. It was not overly easy because we are primarily a labor state and at that time labor, particularly in this area, was leaning very heavily toward Humphrey. In the early part of the campaign it looked like labor might easily go along as it had in the past and swing this southern coal field for Humphrey. With our overall efforts we managed to do a very good job, and whereas I think they would have been tickled to death with a thousand majority in Fayette County, Kennedy ended up with between five or six thousand majority, which was a pretty good job, I think, on the part of all the folks.

Kennedy was in Fayette County. I think the next thing to his brother's coming here was Kennedy himself coming here. Leading the movement here in the County, I had the personal privilege of introducing him in front of the courthouse when he spoke as his caravan was going through. I had the pleasure later of

[-5-]

meeting him another time or two. We were very happy about the entire situation.

Of course, you had the religious angle. Fayette County is predominantly Protestant; Kennedy knew that, his leaders know that, and that is one reason they were hoping very much in West Virginia, and in this area, to test out their strength. It never became really a problem. We approached it on a positive basis rather than negative. That is, we didn't start out campaigning trying to explain to people that Kennedy would make a good President even though he was a Catholic or a Protestant or whatever he may have been. We approached it on the theory that here is a man who will make a good president.

YOUNG: Mr. Vickers, you have raised a number of points that I would like to ask you some questions about in our discussion so far. You didn't identify your brothers by name. Would you do that for the record?

VICKERS: Arnold M. Vickers is the brother who was

[-6-]

formerly president of the State Senate. He is now president of the West Virginia Coal Association. My younger brother, who is in the House of Delegates and at the present time is the majority floor leader, is Earl M. Vickers. Another younger brother, George Vickers, is presently practicing with me here in Fayetteville.

YOUNG: Has your brother George been active in politics to the extent that the rest of the family has?

VICKERS: Not from the standpoint of serving in public office. He has been active and interested, but he has not served in county or state office.

YOUNG: I'd like to go, then, to another point that you raised. You mentioned that this is

a predominantly Protestant area. What Protestant denominations are most prominent in Fayette County and the are in which you were campaigning for the Senator?

VICKERS: I would say primarily Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian, although we now have and then

[-7-]

had a great host of other denominations of a Protestant lineage.

YOUNG: Is there a relatively small Roman Catholic population? Could you give an estimate on that?

VICKERS: I think we have a fairly sizeable Catholic population, and it is pretty well diversified over the County. There is quite a heavy Catholic population in the lower end of the County. I'd say a few miles from here in Scarbro area and in the Meadow Bridge area. It's pretty well scattered. The County is predominantly Protestant.

YOUNG: Does the Catholic population represent any particular national group -- any group of recent immigrants, or are they more likely to be old settlers?

VICKERS: I'd say they are predominantly old settlers -- families that hae been here for years.

YOUNG: Would there be any way of analyzing them in terms of Irish ancestry, Italian ancestry, or any particular background in Europe?

[-8-]

VICKERS: I would say that probably our greatest proportion are of Italian background. We have a fairly good-sized group of Irish background.

YOUNG: You and I were talking earlier about the way in which you may have been contacted by the Kennedy people -- the way in which Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough] decided to get in touch with you. Would you mind going over that for the record?

VICKERS: As I say, having been in public office for so long, and being in public office at that time, I was naturally interested in politics. I was then managing the campaign here in the County for one of the factions in the County. Incidentally, it was the faction which prevailed in that election. I think because of that and because of the fact that my brother, who was more active in state politics, was very friendly

with some friends of Bob McDonough and people who were vitally interested in the Kennedy race. That is probably why I

[-9-]

was contacted with the thought in mind of heading the Kennedy campaign here in the County. I discussed it with several people in the County whose judgment I respected. We all came to the conclusion that we felt that that's the way we wanted to see the election go, and that's the way we were going; so we did.

YOUNG: Would you give a brief political analysis of Fayette County in terms of the number of registered Democrats and registered Republicans as of 1960?

VICKERS: I would judge that at the time it was probably very close to three-to-one Democrats over Republicans in Fayette County. I think there were around twenty-eight thousand registered voters and probably seven or eight thousand Republicans.

YOUNG: Would you give a brief analysis of the registered Democrats in terms of labor vote, farm vote, simply hereditary Democrats -- any analysis of the Democratic party within the

[-10-]

County in terms of its makeup? Would it be considered New Deal liberal; is there a relatively conservative Democratic faction; is it possible to analyze the group in this way?

VICKERS: Our people are made up largely of laboring people. There weren't as many then as there were ten or fifteen years prior to that. We've been predominantly labor; that is, chemical industry and principally mining industry. I would say that our people tend toward the liberal Roosevelt philosophy. They are not radically liberal; they are not ultra-conservative.

YOUNG: With that in mind, would you say a word then about the Humphrey organization in Fayette County and its successes and failures?

VICKERS: I would say offhand that the Humphrey organization started out better than it ended up, if I could put it that way, because Humphrey was pretty well known in Fayette County. He had been here; he had a number of friends here.

[-11-]

In the beginning it seemed that he had rather heavy labor support. Of course, in a county of this kind that is something definitely to be reckoned with. I believe at that time he did have,

but I believe as the campaign went on, the type of people you had who were leaning to the Kennedy name, the utter magnetism of the man, captivated a large part of that audience.

YOUNG: As the primary campaign developed, was there any discernible difference between the two candidates in terms of political theory, platform, or appeal to the voters?

VICKERS: I don't really believe so from the standpoint of affecting the vote. I think it largely boiled down into a weighing of personalities, background, characters, and I think the people generally, as I mentioned a moment ago, and as they apparently were nation-wide, were captivated with the apparent possibilities of Kennedy. That's the best I can explain it. I think they just felt that here was a

[-12-]

man who they felt would make a good president. They wanted him for President. It was sort of like a ground swell. The thing just went along.

YOUNG: In terms of this particular county, what was the difference, in a sense, between the Kennedy political leadership and the Humphrey political leadership? Could you draw any distinction between the kinds of people that were on one side or the other?

VICKERS: That's a little bit difficult to say. As in all counties, we have factional politics. We had it here at that time. There were a number of us lined up in one faction, all of which went with Kennedy. There was a fairly sizeable group of responsible, substantial people, on the other hand, who were very active for Humphrey. I think that labor, in the beginning, leaned very heavily in his direction. I'd say the County's elected officials of the organization were split about 50/50. There were very good, substantial

[-13-]

people and very active and knowledgeable politicians on both sides.

YOUNG: Would there be any difference in the traditional liberalism and conservatism in terms of the support of the two candidates?

VICKERS: I don't believe that there was. I think that actually -- I may be wrong in this -- the people generally looked on both candidates as being liberal.

YOUNG: The question has been raised that Senator Humphrey might not have been a serious candidate for the Presidency himself but that he represented a "Stop Kennedy" coalition. Was there any feeling in Fayette County before the primary that perhaps behind the vote for Senator Humphrey, or for the delegate to the

convention pledged to Humphrey, might really be a vote for Senator Johnson or Senator Symington or someone else?

VICKERS: There was some feeling in that regard. There was some air of uncertainty in the very beginning here. I would guess that there was

[-14-]

a good bit of that nationwide. People weren't exactly sure in the beginning what they were voting for, or who they were voting for because some felt that it was sort of a "Stop Kennedy" movement; a lot of others thought that because Kennedy was a Catholic, it was going to be a shoo-in the other way, and that Humphrey was just in to enjoy the fruits of that victory with no discredit to him at all. But it just didn't turn out that way. Two things; I think it speaks well for the judgment of the American people to be able to overcome minor prejudices, and then I just think, as I said before, that the personality of the man was captivating. That was, of course, shown later; it is evident now even after his death. I think it was the type of thing that took roots and grew.

YOUNG: How did you neutralize, or overcome, the strong labor sympathy for Humphrey in the beginning? What were the most effective campaign techniques, in your judgment, that Senator Kennedy used?

[-15-]

VICKERS: There were two things. One, labor had passed its golden era in Fayette County, if I may put it that way. There was a time when labor could have endorsed Humphrey or anybody and it would have been really a tough proposition to do anything about it. But laboring forces had become scattered, or mines were somewhat depleted, a lot of people had left, and the point is is that they weren't as strong as they were. And in the last ten or fifteen years laboring people started doing a lot of thinking for themselves; they didn't vote just the way somebody else wanted them to. They do a very good job, a very substantial job, of analyzing any given situation. It was because of that and because of the fact that they felt Kennedy offered more political substance. I think they felt he was a more substantial individual and that's what they were looking for. I believe they felt that Humphrey was more of a pawn, a tool of different respective groups, and that Kennedy was really

[-16-]

more of a choice for President of the United States.

YOUNG: Would you comment on any of the people who came into the campaign for Senator Kennedy? I have in mind Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. or Mrs. Roosevelt or anyone else who may have come to Fayette County.

VICKERS: I think they had a tremendous influence here in the County. The Roosevelt name has been very, very strong in Fayette County. It still is and will be for a number of years. Back in that day labor was stronger, and they thought a lot of the Roosevelt name. When Franklin D., Jr. came into the County, he did an excellent job; he made a very fine impression. When Mrs. Roosevelt visited the County, she was captivating in her own right as Kennedy himself. She made an expensive tour of the County. I've never seen more enthusiasm for any individual than there was accorded Mrs. Roosevelt. I don't think that Kennedy, if he had had his own choice,

[-17-]

could have sent a more potent ambassador to Fayette County than Mrs. Roosevelt. She did a wonderful job.

YOUNG: This leads to another topic that frequently comes up. Did the people of Fayette County in any way think of any of the Kennedy entourage as carpet baggers? Was there any feeling about this Harvard man with the broad Harvard accent? Did this work for him or against him?

VICKERS: I would say that element was present. You can't eliminate it when you're evaluating an individual. We all ran into it. I evaluated it in my own mind. But I still go back to my original premise that I think Kennedy was big enough to overcome those things. You could see that working. People knew he was from Harvard; people knew he came from money; people knew he had probably never seen a coal field and very few coal miners. But he was able to sell himself as being one who could stand above all that and still be

[-18-]

quite a human being. I think that is the reason he was elected President.

YOUNG: This leads to two more questions. Was civil rights much of an issue? Is there much antagonism between the races here, or did this not figure in the primary?

VICKERS: Yes, it figured in the primary to an extent. There was some degree here in this county as there has been everywhere. But we've had absolutely no trouble with civil rights. It may be a product of the ages. Our people worked together for years and years side by side in the mine. They've gone in and out of the company store together. They've lived in communities together. The mining camps, although segregated to a degree, have created a few problems. We have no large cities; we have no large towns. All of our places are small, and our people have been close together. There has never been too much of a Negro problem in Fayette County.

YOUNG: Did the President, while campaigning, make

[-19-]

any special “belly” appeals, economic appeals that might have been important in this area? Were there references to the residual oil, or attempts to do something about counties that were depressed?

VICKERS: In a number of his appearances he made references to not only West Virginia but to areas like West Virginia. He indicated a considerable knowledge of the problems. Whether that was gained personally or from study and observation, I don't know. He indicated a deep-seated desire to approach a lot of the problems that exist in these areas, and he carried it out, as time proved. He not only said he would do it, he did honestly try to help relieve a lot of the conditions that were here. He was greatly appreciative of our natural beauty and our surroundings here in this state. He indicated on every occasion I was around him how greatly impressed he was with the work the Almighty apparently had done in designing this area. I think it all goes back to the fact that he

[-20-]

was a man who was big enough within to appreciate conditions and to carry out those promises he made.

YOUNG: After the primary results, how effectively did the Democratic factions in the County close ranks for the general election?

VICKERS: As in all elections in all places, there was probably a little dragging of feet. I would say, on the whole, the group congealed and went along pretty well. It's very seldom in Fayette County -- in West Virginia -- that we have too much difficulty after even a bitter primary. It was my observation that they finally came to tow, and everybody went along. They didn't all come in immediately. There was a little bit of foot-dragging, but I think that in the end everybody put his shoulder to the wheel and went along.

YOUNG: What contacts did you have with the national press covering the primary and what would be your evaluation of the effect, the honesty, the accuracy of the national press in reporting West Virginia and the primary?

[-21-]

VICKERS: My direct contact with the national press was rather limited. We are a small county. I had some contact with them here, some in my various visits to Charleston. My overall observation was that they did a pretty reasonable job of handling it.

YOUNG: Did you do better in the County in the primary than you expected?

VICKERS: I would say that we did twice as well as we expected six weeks before the primary election. As I said in the beginning, we started out from scratch; nobody in Fayette County knew Kennedy well. It was all a matter of building rather than going with what you have. It was one of those things we just had to build, and it seemed that every day it took on more color and gained more strength. I think that he did a creditable job of handling his own approach to the situation and his approach to religion. He just sold himself to the people, and every day we had new people who were not just voters but enthusiastic

[-22-]

workers. I think that people were active in that campaign who were probably never active in a campaign before and may never be in another one.

YOUNG: Were these people active because of religious attachment? Could you evaluate the reasons for their activity?

VICKERS: It was probably twofold. We had a good bit of activity by people who normally did not do much. I think that was primarily because of the religious angle. Yet it was amazing how many others became equally as active who were not even Catholics. I honestly believe, looking back on my experience, that there were more non-political workers active in that election than I have ever seen before.

YOUNG: How many of these people who had not been active in politics remained active? Have any new political figures emerged in the County out of the Kennedy primary?

VICKERS: I don't believe so. I think they were small people -- average workers and parents -- who

[-23-]

had never taken an active part. They voted and had gone to meetings. But they just became enthusiastically interested in the race and interested in him. I think the religious angle tended to backfire a little bit in our area. Not purposely, but the American people have a way of favoring the underdog. In view of the way he handled the situation, an awful lot of people who normally would have been somewhat prejudiced, leaned over the other way, feeling that if he could handle it that way, then more power to him.

YOUNG: How much activity did the volunteers in Fayette County enter into? Evaluate the relative weight carried by the volunteers in comparison to regular

campaigners.

VICKERS: Proportionately, it would be a little hard to say. As I said, there was more of it than I have ever seen before, and, I think, more of it than I'll ever see again. We had all the volunteer workers that we had any use for. People offered free services; people

[-24-]

offered free cars; people offered to check voters; people offered to do anything. A lot of people who ordinarily you have to beg or pay to do anything, were interested in doing whatever they could to help. We had a good twenty to twenty-five per cent more effort.

YOUNG: This is a county, then, in which getting the voters to the polls because of transportation facilities is important.

VICKERS: It is. I sometimes think maybe we overdo it, but we have to put forth quite an effort in Fayette County because our people live so far from the polls. A lot of them have no way of getting there.

YOUNG: I'd like to go back to something you mentioned a minute ago, in the area of religion which keeps turning up. Were there sermons by reputable ministers that were anti-Catholic? What about the underground whispering that never reaches print or never reaches the pulpit?

[-25-]

VICKERS: There were both in that election. We had the normal quiet whispering, rumoring campaign that went along. It never seemed to gain any momentum. If it could have, they would have accelerated it, but it never took root. We had some very prominent members of the clergy in some of our very prominent churches who made open maneuvers to impress upon their people that they ought to proceed with caution.

YOUNG: Could you analyse in general terms the substance of the rumors and the substance of the sermons? What were the particular objections, and what were the whispered objections?

VICKERS: That's a little bit hard to catalogue. It was mostly along the line that, because he was a Catholic and of Catholic background, he would be controlled by the church -- make no bones about it -- he would be and he had to be or he couldn't stay in the church. A lot of people would comment on the fact that, if he were President, he'd be dictated to by

[-26-]

people high in the church and would not really rule as he wanted to. Of course, that was general over the nation; we read it in the press and heard it over TV. There were a lot of rumors circulated around by various lodges that, even though he was a fine man, he just couldn't do what he wanted to because of his religion, and he couldn't be trusted. That type of thing. Some of the churches put out hints that the people should be very careful of what they were doing. I think those things all backfired. I don't know of a single thing that took any momentum along that line. I believe the more of it we had, the stronger the battle became.

YOUNG: Were the sort of things you heard concerning such topics as federal aid to education, the Catholic attitude to birth control -- at a fairly sophisticated level -- and the old stories about Al Smith and the tunnel to the White House?

[-27-]

VICKERS: Yes, you heard a little bit about everything. It was quite general, but most of it was along the basic thinking that apparently has existed through the years that the Catholic church, because of its organization, pretty well dictates to its members what they have to do. That may or may not be a fallacy; I know nothing about the Catholic Church. That's the type of thing they tried to put out. They said, in effect, "You're going to elect a man for President who will be dictated to by Rome, or some Cardinal." It all goes back to that, I think.

YOUNG: Was there any difference among the denominations in the degree of anti-Catholicism?

VICKERS: There was some differentiation. In some churches you heard nothing; some of the churches were a little bit more active than some of them. I'm a Methodist and have been very active in it for years. Our church was rather open in expressing its feelings on the matter; but, as I said a moment ago, I think it tended to drive people

[-28-]

a little bit further in the other direction.

YOUNG: I was impressed this morning when I drove up here with the fact that you go along the Kanawha River Valley where there are a great number of industries, and then all at once you seem to go straight up into the tops of the mountains. Could you give an economic profile of Fayette County?

VICKERS: Fayette County through the years has been predominantly coal. It's been developed primarily by Eastern monies. The great bulk of our people have

been engaged in coal mining. A number of years ago chemistry came into the County, and we have a rather large alloy production plant down in the lower end of the County in the village of Alloy. We have a number of mining machine factories in the County. We have large timber reserves in Fayette County. There is some farming but not to any great extent. They are small farms because the mountain terrain doesn't permit large farming enterprises. Although coal

[-29-]

mining is limited now, it is still our biggest product. Ferroalloys also play a part; there's a pretty heavy chemical industry down in the Kanawha valley on to Charleston and to the Ohio River.

YOUNG: Would you comment on the local political situation in terms of the political party in the County as a social organization, and its direct or indirect control over the voters?

VICKERS: It has been my experience through the years that being a small county with no large cities, most of our leaders are in close contact with each other, partly because of the small size of the County. We see each other about every day or two or three times a week. Maybe, because of that, we haven't gone into the pattern of socializing politically by having large annual gatherings or gatherings of different groups where we can get together and socialize. Not that there is anything wrong with it. We've just never done it. Ours is more a matter of daily contact. In each

[-30-]

election we always have one big party which we refer to as a fish fry. There will sometimes be two or three thousand people. All of our workers will attend that. They look forward to it. A lot of our national and state leaders come in. That helps a lot. Of course, our executive committee meets regularly, as do smaller groups. We don't however, go into the social angle -- having dances and skating parties and so forth -- as many of the counties have. They may work fine, but we've just never done it here. Ours is more of a day-to-day contact proposition.

YOUNG: Would you say something about the custom of slating candidates in the state and your ability or inability to guarantee results, so to speak?

VICKERS: Being able to slate a candidate, of necessity, calls for a pretty tight rein on your local politics. If you get into a place where one man, or two or three men, run the show, it's pretty easy to slate a candidate. Our people, both the politicians and those who are interested

[-31-]

in politics, are more independent-thinking people. You have more of a job selling them on your individual; you can't slate a candidate as easily in Fayette County as you can in others. When labor was strong, they would slate them. They wore a pretty forceful organization, but they have weakened in numbers and aren't as strong as they used to be. Their people are more independent thinkers than they used to be. To make up a slate in Fayette County is not as easy to do, I'm sure, as it is in a lot of counties.

YOUNG: We might move beyond the primary unless you have some other comments on it.

VICKERS: No, I believe that's about all I have to say.

YOUNG: In the time between the primary and general elections, what was the nature of your activities and responsibilities in any way that they might be unique?

VICKERS: I don't know of anything I can point out in particular. Of course, our activity between the primary and the general was largely a

[-32-]

matter of trying to consolidate our forces and patch up any sore spots that might exist here or there. There was quite a sizeable Humphrey following, as I said. In Fayette County labor was for him as were a lot of our very active leaders. We had to spend a good bit of time trying to patch all those things up. By the time it was over, I believe they came into line. I still give Kennedy, his personality and force of character, more credit for that than I do anything we did. He helped mold a group of people into a cohesive organization.

YOUNG: I'd like to discuss the Kennedy presidency with respect to West Virginia and Fayette County in particular -- satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the President's program. We aren't limited to West Virginia, but this might be an area in which you might make some special comment. Were the local voters pleased? Had the President been the candidate in 1964, would his majority have been larger? What aspects of the New Frontier appealed to

[-33-]

the local voters? What aspects of it had less appeal?

VICKERS: Our people, very generally, were impressed with his program -- that which he accomplished, and that which he stood for and tried to accomplish. I might say that our people here felt that he had come into our midst: he had promised us help if he were able to give it, and most of our people think that he conscientiously applied

himself in that direction. He, of course, did a lot of things for other areas, but the thing that impressed our people most was that here was a man who said he was going to try to do something and he actually tried, and in a lot of instances, as we both know, he actually did a lot. He's helped our state.

YOUNG: Could you be a little more specific in respect to Fayette County? What did the voters feel most pleased with? What material evidence was there of satisfaction with the Kennedy program?

VICKERS: Of course, it varies with individuals; everybody has different interests. He immediately,

[-34-]

upon assuming office, helped our people with their surplus food; he increased the amount of surplus food. To a lot of people that may sound like a very minor accomplishment, but at that time we had a great number of people -- maybe one fourth of our population -- out in these mining areas -- that weren't working and had no income. To them surplus food was a means of livelihood. It was so bad that, when you were giving food, people had no way to come here to get it. We had to go to a lot of trouble to even get it to them. He immediately got into that program and increased their livelihood. He had taken a number of steps toward helping our industry and our state parks and highway systems. He made programs available to us. He really made it possible for us to try to help ourselves. That is generalizing, but his programs were calculated to help the depressed areas. Because we are in a depressed area, it was of major importance to us. As I said, our people were helped morally and

[-35-]

spiritually by the very thought that somebody was up there interested in them.

YOUNG: What criticisms were there, if any?

VICKERS: As far as West Virginia is concerned, there was very little criticism that I know of. He did a lot for us, and our people were very happy. There was some feeling in the early part of his administration that he was proceeding at too rapid a pace with the civil rights program. That, however, affected us very little in Fayette County because we've had no trouble whatever with civil rights. We've gotten along fine, and I'm sure we'll continue to get along well. This is about the only criticism I heard, that he was just going too fast. Of course it was something that was inevitable and time itself will tell who was right. We have no way of knowing.

[END OF SIDE I]

YOUNG: Would you comment for the tape, as you did privately, on the matter of religion at the beginning of the campaign with respect to Fayette County?

[-36-]

VICKERS: Here in Fayette County there are quite a number of Protestants. I'm sure, from what I know now and what I knew during the campaign, that the Kennedy forces were somewhat pushed to find someone in Fayette County, particularly a Protestant. I think they wanted a Protestant, if possible, who was active in politics and would sincerely lead their cause. I know they spent a considerable amount of time at it. After evaluating the matter, after talking to Bob McDonough and some other leaders, and our own leaders here, we came to the conclusion that it was the right course to take. Although I am a Protestant, this is not the kind of thing that bothers me. It didn't before, and it didn't during the campaign. We evaluated on the strength of character of the man and decided to go ahead with it. I accepted the responsibility of leading the campaign here in the County. I don't think there was any question from that point on. He ended up, as I said, not taking any credit myself, giving

[-37-]

Kennedy most of it, we did a three or four times better job than any of us anticipated. We were very happy about the result. I know he was because he said so on a number of occasions. I got a personal letter from him, as did others, thanking us for our efforts in his behalf.

YOUNG: Did you notice any reluctance on the part of any local candidates to be associated with the Kennedy organization, feeling that religion might cost local candidates votes?

VICKERS: Yes, I think there was at the beginning. There was that element of caution that I suppose experience would lead you to. In the beginning it was the type of situation that everyone wanted to evaluate to be sure that, before he got on the band wagon, it was the right one, or that he could justify himself getting on. The picture developed very well, however; it developed very forcefully; and as far as I know, it took no selling. I don't know of any selling we tried to do. The only thing

[-38-]

we tried to do here was to sell John F. Kennedy as a candidate for President, and he did a better job of selling himself than we did. It just materialized into a winding combination. .

YOUNG: When I started out to find you, there was some confusion in my own because Bob McDonough had just given me the name "Happy" Vickers. I had to sort

out the Vickers brothers. Where did the nickname come from?

VICKERS: I've had that name ever since I was about two years old. I carried it all the way through school and all the way through college. Every time I've run for office over a period of twenty-eight years, I've run under the name of "Happy" Vickers.

YOUNG: It wasn't related specifically to the Kennedy campaign?

VICKERS: No, not at all.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-39-]