

**Carl Lauri Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/15/1966**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Carl Lauri (1924-1990) was a Wisconsin State Senator and a Kennedy Presidential Campaign worker in Wisconsin. This interview focuses on the 1960 Democratic primary in Wisconsin.

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## Oral History Interview

Of

Carl Lauri

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Carl Lauri– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

CARL LAURI

January 15, 1966  
Madison, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let's start by talking about what you were doing within the Democratic party back in the late fifties when the Kennedy-Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] primary campaign began to shape up.

LAURI: Well, at that time I was the Tenth District Chairman, which covers about, oh, I'd say a fifth of the state all the way across northern Wisconsin. It's changed now since reapportionment, but it was basically about from above Eau Claire all the way across; if you draw a straight line, this would be about the size of the Tenth District at the time. I was a member of the state senate at the time--a Democratic senator from Ashland, Bayfield and Douglas counties, which are the northern lakeshore counties on the shores of Lake Superior--very active in organizing the party. We were just coming into our own up there. The counties were gradually turning back to the Democratic fold. Since the days of the Democratic organizing committee--you've heard this mentioned, I assume--we went back and reorganized after the Progressives fell by the wayside and joined the Republicans. And we're just starting to come into our own up there in electing county courthouses and things such as that.

When the Kennedy-Humphrey fight started, I always recall that originally, Ivan Nestingen, who is mayor and was in the assembly, called me and asked if I would join him on the Kennedy side. And I did quite a soul-searching at the time and then decided that this was not the place I wanted to go. And learning that Humphrey was also on the ticket--matter of fact, I talked to Gaylord Nelson at the time, among others, who was our governor--I decided to join the Humphrey forces. I worked quite closely with Jerry Heaney [Gerald Heaney]--I don't know if you know Jerry Heaney--and began to organize a campaign in northern Wisconsin for him.

MORRISSEY: Had you ever met Kennedy?

LAURI: I had not at that time met Kennedy. I had met Humphrey a number of times. He spoke at our Democratic state conventions and other functions that we've had. Matter of fact, in Superior when we had that Democratic [convention], he was our keynote speaker there. Living in close proximity to Minnesota, of course, I had an opportunity to observe this man much more than a lot of the others would in his campaigning and everything else. The TV stations both came out of Duluth.

MORRISSEY: Is that what persuaded you to cast with him?

LAURI: No, I think it's basically that Humphrey is my type of liberal. I happen to be a very liberal Democrat, and it's my feeling that his philosophies and my philosophies were closer together. He's still my candidate for President, if he is electable--I don't know; I hope he is. As a matter of fact, if you note, just the other day Andrew Borg, who is the national commander of VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] comes from my home town, met with the Vice President. I sent him a note, "Are you still my candidate?" I may have a chance to go to work again some one of these days. This is the basic reason. The basic reason is philosophy. At that time I did not feel that Kennedy--and I'm not so sure I still do--was the type of liberal that I am. This was the reason. However, I have been a practical politician. I recall Assemblyman Baribee [Robert Baribee] being quite upset when I told him, "In Ashland County you better get on the Kennedy side." This is a heavy Polish Catholic county, and consequently I told him, "As far as I can see, I think this is the side you ought to be on in Ashland County." And he did. I realized this. You want me to just go right on?

MORRISSEY: Yes, you just keep going.

LAURI: It was quite a spirited race up there. People ask about religious bigotry. I get on. We did organize in every county, Humphrey organizations in every county. Being district chairman, I had somewhat of an advantage in that I had contacts with the local county chairmen, and I was able to persuade a goodly number of them to join the Humphrey forces. As a matter of fact, Douglas County, which at that time voted the heaviest in any given primary on the Democratic side, which is Superior, Wisconsin and surrounding area, for all practical purposes captured the local party organization, most of the people in it, into the Humphrey fold--and these are people with experience -- and did somewhat the same in Bayfield County and Iron County and Ashland County, not to as great a degree although we did have the chairman of Iron County, Mr. Swante Hill at that time, and his wife working very hard for the Humphrey cause. Some of the other counties were a little bit more difficult. We had St. Croix and Burnette counties--Harvey Dueholm is the assemblyman from there and very much a Humphrey supporter in there. So we were fortunate in this part to do this.

I did encounter a lot of bigotry. People say that. . . . Well, it's something they don't like to talk about, but they would come into the headquarters office and you could catch these overtones--or not overtones, undertones, I guess you'd call them. There is some religious bigotry here. Although this really was the only district that turned right around after the

Humphrey election and went for Kennedy in the general election. And there was some work done in this area. Generally, I discovered that our district which is the Protestant group, predominantly Scandinavians--excepting for areas in and above Lincoln County which is in the Merrill area, right in the middle, and somewhat of a Bible belt, and this is the area of the German Protestants and the German Catholics, the Bavarian or the Prussian German, if you may. . . . In this area you noticed it more than any place else, this religious animosity, and I suppose this comes from the old country. I don't know what it is but generally you found less of it in the general election--once you made your decision who you were going to vote for--in these areas. As I mentioned about Minnesota, Minnesota did the same thing; it did go for Kennedy in the general election. I generalize when I say this, but generally this is true. And I don't mean that there weren't religious bigots.

MORRISSEY: When you say religious bigotry, do you mean Protestants who wouldn't vote for Kennedy because he was Catholic?

LAURI: Because he was Catholic. And in reverse. Catholics who would absolutely vote for Kennedy. One of the most interesting things, I have a friend of mine, a hotelkeeper up here, who right after the general election stopped in. He's a good friend of my father-in-law's and was visiting, and he was giving me a little bit of a bad time. "Oh, you Democrat" and so on and so on. I told him, "Bill, you were the master of ceremonies at the January 17<sup>th</sup> festivities that you have at the cathedral." "Oh, yes. I'm very proud of it." I looked him in the eye. "Tell me, Bill," I says, "you're a Republican, but when you got behind those curtains, you couldn't let a good Irish boy like Jack Kennedy down." He left the room for about ten minutes and came back and said, "You struck a nerve." I don't blame the Catholics, and I don't blame the Irish, as a matter of fact, for this because it's ethnic pride and religious pride, and they should have their chance. But generally, there was quite a bit of bigotry that did come in. I tried to chase them out of the headquarters when you did get this type, but they came.

MORRISSEY: Did this bother Humphrey?

LAURI: I don't know. How do you evaluate whether. . . . Did it bother Humphrey that there was religious bigotry or did it bother Humphrey as far as votes?

MORRISSEY: Well, do you recall him ever commenting on the fact that he was receiving votes for reasons of religious prejudice?

LAURI: I don't recall him commenting. I think it went both ways. It works in both directions. The Catholics, I think generally--not all of them, but pretty much so--were in the primary, at least, with Kennedy. I'm not saying they all stuck with him in the general election; it was in the primary. A very interesting thing that happened was that--for instance, in Douglas County, and maybe because I captured the organization, but I think this was true in most counties--he developed an organization of his own, Kennedy did. And amongst these people, as far as we were concerned, were known Republicans. And in political campaigns, especially in general

elections, you call your area of strength. In other words, you get a telephone campaign: you're not going to call everybody in the ward that's a 70 per cent Republican ward. This is a lot of foolishness. In the primary, of course, these people were around there and were doing this sort of thing, and they'd get every vote that they can. Then came the general election and then the hard time convincing these people that they ought to stay on the telephones and only work your areas of strength, and quit monkeying around in any of the other wards, because we can get votes there. And my only answer was, unless you have a very select list, you better not, and you're not going to allow it, when we nailed it together and started working together. Indeed, they were very hard to convince at the time. I think Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey], to some degree here, has inherited this organization, Pat has. There are still some repercussions from the organizations from without--not in the regular party organization. We still have fights and internal fights because of this. Personally, I'm a Democrat first, and it doesn't make any difference to me.

We did win the primary in the Tenth District--Humphrey won it. I think this is a different type of Humphrey group than you had in the Dane County area, for instance. I've often times said that these were not really Humphrey people down here; these were Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] people in disguise. And they could care less although they'd maybe be for Humphrey, but this was Jim Doyle's organization [James E. Doyle], and he was trying to build an organization which would support Stevenson. And there was considerable pressure put on us after Humphrey had lost in West Virginia. I still have the letter that he wrote to me saying, "Well, I've lost here. Go look for your second choice. I hope we'll stick together to formulate some platform language at the National Convention, but I think you ought to choose your second choice, and you're free to go where you wish." People don't know this, but we all have letters of this sort up there in the Tenth District. He knew that he had lost at that point to Kennedy. Consequently, we were called together--Pete Dugal [Peter Dugal] brought this meeting together, incidentally--in Eau Claire, both the Ninth and Tenth District people, to persuade us to now support Kennedy rather than some other candidate. I'll always remember this part. Looking back in retrospect, I suppose all candidates do this, but I asked at that time a direct question of then Senator and later President Kennedy, "What about Lyndon Baines Johnson?" And his immediate reaction was, "Well, we don't care for any Southerners on our ticket." And as a matter of fact, "To hell with him." As I recall, the words were quite strong.

MORRISSEY: When was that?

LAURI: This was sometime after the West Virginia primary when he was courting other Democratic votes in Wisconsin. He was trying to persuade us to join him. And to some degree on that basis, I made up my mind. Not necessarily on what I thought of Johnson's policies. I had studied them, and I think nationally he had been fairly liberal outside of some provincialism in the \_\_\_\_\_. No more provincial than we are on milk or Humphrey would be, I suppose, on iron ore. But, anyway, it was quite good. But Bill Proxmire [William Proxmire] had been running up and down our state at that time just damning the bejesus out of Lyndon Johnson, that he was a dictator and this sort of thing. Generally, that was one of the things that helped make up my mind to



support Kennedy--early. We announced early that we were. The people in the Tenth District did, I should say, that summer--that spring, rather. We announced early, before we got to the Convention, that we were now throwing our votes to Senator Kennedy for president. I say it's upset me a little bit sometime, but I find out now that every candidate lies to everybody; and everybody is a vice presidential candidate, and then everybody gets into line. This is part of the game at any convention. But I just think that's what disturbed me somewhat. Bill Proxmire disturbed me a great deal at the National Convention. He did a lot of lobbying in the Wisconsin delegation for Lyndon Baines Johnson for vice president. After he had been running up and down our state telling us what a bum he was, now all of a sudden, he's busy telling us what a terrific guy he is. I think that he was trying to treat all of us as juveniles. I was pretty disgusted about this. Incidentally, we voted against our caucus for Lyndon Baines Johnson for vice president at the time on the theory that he was not popular in Wisconsin. So, whatever good that did me, I shouldn't have done that. One of my friends, Hanford Olson, who was also a delegate at that time. . . . He's another one, incidentally, you ought to talk to. He works for the Economic Development Authority [Economic Development Authority Administration] right now. He gets into Washington quite a bit. He's in the Federal Building in Superior, Wisconsin. Hanford, H-a-n-f-o-r-d, Olson.

MORRISSEY: O-l-s-o-n?

LAURI: s-o-n. He was also a Humphrey delegate at that one. He asked me, "What good did that do you?" at the time. I know that after the primary election, we had to get out then and reverse the field again and talk to a lot of people that "We're not voting religion here. We're voting our political beliefs." And evidently, as I said, were successful because this district did go into the Democratic fold in the general election by a lot of people doing this. I'm not just talking about myself. People like Elizabeth Hawkes, all of us, were busy going to different areas supporting the Democratic ticket.

MORRISSEY: I've heard people criticize the Humphrey campaign during the primary because it wasn't sufficiently organized.

LAURI: I think it was organized well enough. Incidentally, I was quite irritated, and I still am, at the prima donnas in the national press. The Time reporters, the Life reporters, who are important to you, would organize a bus to leave from Wausau to go up to Ashland with intermitten stops. Well, you don't get many people at noon, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon--not too many as you're going up. And they kept dropping off, anxious to get back to the cocktail lounges in Milwaukee rather than staying there and really getting the story. And we ended up in Ashland, and the people were hanging from the rafters up there in the city of Ashland. It was one of the finest speeches I have heard Humphrey make in this state, and I traveled with him many places. It was packed up there. But I think his treatment there by the press was not good--for what reason, I don't know. They liked to consider themselves very sophisticated, but they don't like to get up into the boondocks and find out what the score really is.

You say "organized"; I think it was a lack of money. The Kennedy people did have money to put and did have a lot of paid people. I worked for the Humphrey campaign not for money, primarily for expenses at the time. I got my gasoline and my food bill: that's about all I had. And I guess I was the only one in that whole area who. . . . Well, maybe there was one other boy who was supposed to be working for him. That's about all that he had up north. Most of it was voluntary help. On the other hand, the Kennedy people did have money to hire people to run an office, and they were paid help. I'm not saying that he was doling out millions as some people assume, but it was a little bit more free and loose. We were in constant contact with the Minnesota people, and insofar as materials and getting things out--no problem. We organized the type of thing they do in Minnesota where we go out in a bus--friends of Hubert sort of thing--even though he wasn't here; you hit a town and everybody gets out; and you distribute the buttons and you distribute all the literature. We did very well with this type of an approach there. I would not say that it was not well organized. I would say that it might have lacked funds at times in order to buy some of the materials that you might get. We got our press coverage, local press coverage, every place we went. Very well done in my hometown of Superior where he went around from plant to plant and everything else, and this is when he had the Life, Look reporters in there at that time, too. And I guess this is very important to a national candidate. You can't buy this sort of thing. I don't know, maybe the Kennedys just had more appeal to the press sometime than the others. I don't know what the answer is--better and more public relations people. I recall Muriel Humphrey being very bitter at the time--particularly about the money part of it, that he didn't have quite the funds to run his campaign that he should have had in Wisconsin. What he spent in other states, I haven't the slightest idea.

MORRISSEY: Some people have argued also that, at that time, it looked unlikely that Humphrey could go all the way--first to get the nomination and then secondly to defeat Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]--whereas Kennedy could. And perhaps this fact by itself was the reason why a lot of people voted for Kennedy, the old instinct that they wanted to be with the winner. Do you think that had any bearing?

LAURI: Not on me. Not on me.

MORRISSEY: How about the people in the Tenth District?

LAURI: You mean the actual voters?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

LAURI: No. I don't know that the actual voter. . . . Either they like a person or they don't. You must remember Humphrey had considerable exposure in that area in the past because of the TV exposure that cuts across practically the whole area. It's oftentimes been said he was our third senator and maybe the liberal senator at the time we didn't have any. We had a McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] and Wylie [Alexander Wylie] at that time. So, no, I don't think so. Maybe some of your intellectuals in your party might rationalize in this way, but I don't think the average voter

would ever rationalize this way. Issues were much more simple to them than this. And a lot of it was religious. A hell of a lot of it. I don't care what anybody says. It's something you don't like to talk about, but it was there. You could feel it.

MORRISSEY: I'm surprised that Kennedy campaigned up there as much as he did. I would have almost written that territory off as Humphrey territory.

LAURI: I think at that time he was trying to prove that he could carry every district in the state of Wisconsin. And from a religious viewpoint, it's a very Polish area and a heavy Irish area up there. I don't know if a lot of people know it. You think of it as Scandinavian, too, but you also have the other group, and a large group, of this type up there. No, he had appeal up there. And he did campaign very, very hard up there, and I think the main reason was that he wanted to carry every single district in the state. Well, he didn't do this. He didn't carry this district down here, and he didn't carry ours up there.

MORRISSEY: Was Humphrey disappointed that he didn't carry more than four districts?

LAURI: Very much so. Very much so.

MORRISSEY: Did he think beforehand that he would carry more than four?

LAURI: Oh, yes. Quite. He felt he would carry much more than he did for the reason that he had had the exposure; on one side of the state, particularly, he had had a lot of exposure. I don't think he ever thought that he would carry the two Milwaukee. . . . At least one of the Milwaukee districts he absolutely knew was lost, which would be the South Side of Milwaukee. And I don't think he ever thought he would carry the North Side of Milwaukee--the Fourth and Fifth districts. I do think that he felt that he would carry the other areas, particularly predominantly rural areas where he had appeal with the farmer and at that time was known as the friend of agriculture--still is. And I think he felt he would do well in these areas. He felt he would carry, I recall, the West Virginia thing. He felt he was going to do very well in West Virginia. He bragged about it a number of times. Well, as it turned out, this is not what happened in West Virginia. He got clobbered.

MORRISSEY: When was he bragging about that? When the. . .

LAURI: After Wisconsin, and he'd say, "Wait till West Virginia." This sort of thing. "We'll show you what will happen there." So, actually, I'm sure this was his greatest disappointment--the loss of West Virginia. Which was a predominantly Protestant state. And based on this type of analysis, he felt that he would carry it.

MORRISSEY: After West Virginia, as I understand it, a lot of emissaries from the Kennedy camp tried to persuade Humphrey delegates like yourself to support Kennedy, but other Humphrey delegates decided to stay with Senator Humphrey even though he was no longer a serious candidate.

LAURI: I think I touched on this a little earlier. These were not Humphrey delegates.

MORRISSEY: They weren't.

LAURI: I keep saying to many people that the only real Humphrey delegates were those that were up in northern Wisconsin and on the western side of the state. And people like Jim Doyle and Frank Nikolay, who I assume you've talked to, were Stevenson people in disguise. And all they were really worried about was getting the vote for Stevenson, not getting the vote for Humphrey, and this was a handy handle to have. They would never have wooed these people over into the Kennedy camp at all. On the other hand, the group that we had up north, these were originally Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] type of people. And it was Kefauver territory, too. He did well up there; he appealed to these people. And we were truly Humphrey people, just as I said. We still believe in him. Every one of us thinks that his would make the finest President. The other organization ran on this label because this is where the fight was. But you couldn't have wooed them away on that basis. I believe only one. . . . Was it Harold Ristow that moved over, as I recall, into the Kennedy camp? The rest of them didn't. You might look that up.

MORRISSEY: How does he spell his last name?

LAURI: R-i-s-t-o-w. The address I don't know. I think probably you can get it from my Democratic party headquarters here if you like. I don't recall all of them. I'd have to look at the list, and the names would come back as to who the delegates were and which ones went over into the Kennedy camp. I made my selection, really and truly, as I mentioned, one of the things he said that he didn't want anything to do with Johnson--that was really the basic reason. I looked around and I asked myself, "Do I want Stuart Symington?" And obviously my answer was no. This was not my candidate for president. Did I want to see Lyndon Baines Johnson as our president at that time? The answer is obviously no. So what choice do I have at this point? Either Humphrey or Kennedy, and Kennedy looks like my second choice, and this is the one that I fell behind. I held it and made the announcement early. As a matter of fact, I think we brought a few others into the Kennedy side when we made this announcement that we were pledging our votes to Kennedy in the National Convention.

MORRISSEY: Anything else that we ought to put on the tape?

LAURI: I don't recall of any. I hope I've been honest enough as I remember things. I don't remember all of them, but it was a lot of fun. I do know that. I can't think of anything else unless you have some questions.

MORRISSEY: Well, I think I've run out of questions, but if any come up I can ask them by mail.

LAURI: Right.

MORRISSEY: And if you think of anything, you can add it onto the transcript.

LAURI: Fine. Fine.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.