

Walter L. “Bill” Hart Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/03/1964
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Biographical Note

Hart was the editor of the *Dominion News* of Morgantown, West Virginia. In this interview Hart discusses John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] 1960 presidential campaign in West Virginia [WV]; the fight for the WV Democratic primary between JFK and Hubert H. Humphrey; disappointments in WV with JFK’s Administration once he is elected President and resentment of White House staff members; various aspects of WV’s political background and makeup, including civil rights programs, religious issues, and local industries; and JFK’s campaign in the WV university community, among other issues.

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Walter L. "Bill" Hart – JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

With

WALTER L. "BILL" HART

September 3, 1964
Morgantown, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, would you tell me how you first became interested in Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] as a presidential possibility?

HART: It was in the summer of 1958. A mutual friend in Washington introduced me to Senator Kennedy in the Senate restaurant, and at that time Senator Kennedy said, half in jesting—it later turned out to be quite serious—that he was contemplating running for higher office. We talked about his effort for the vice presidency that had not turned out too well, and after a few more words we left it at that. About a month later he called me in Morgantown and wanted to know if I were going to be in the office. I said I was. And he said he was going around the country getting sentiment on his candidacy, and would I care to discuss it with him. I said, "Yes." So he did come, and he discussed at great length the possibility of him running for the presidency, and how a Catholic in Protestant West Virginia would go.

Having had considerable experience with helping Senator Byrd [Robert C. Byrd] overcome, in reverse, the charges that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and being a Catholic, I knew something about the facets of religious bigotry. We had successfully shown Byrd, we think, how to repent and be forgiven

for his membership in the Klan in earlier days. And I pointed all this out to Senator Kennedy as one of the reasons that I believed that the people of West Virginia would not either encourage or discourage anybody for public office because of their religion or even their lack of religion. That we were sort of a resolute, independent people; our chief liability was that we were quite willing to give a great deal—particularly of our natural resources—and so easily satisfied with so little. This seemed to appeal to Senator Kennedy; he said he wanted to come back. And I said, “Well, I think if you really get serious about it, you should do one thing—I being part Irish and you being all Irish. We have a saying down here and a tradition in Monongalia County at least, that no one on the Democratic side in the modern history of the Democratic Party in West Virginia—beginning with Senator Neely [Matthew M. Neely], who, of course, was the pioneer of the Democratic Party in West Virginia, and who was elected to every office within the gift of the people of the state, in his lifetime—we have a sentiment that you must walk through a volunteer fire hall known as the Star City fire hall, to begin your campaign, and if you do this, it will assure your success.” As ridiculous as this may seem, in politics you never overlook any good luck tokens or anything else, at least being a practical politician—which some of us might be. And the connotation of “politician” does not mean anything bad; it means a student in the science of political government. So, Senator Kennedy was greatly interested in that. And I said, “If you really decide to do this, you must come down and I will walk you through the Star City volunteer fire department hall as part of the program.”

About a month later in the same year, the Democratic women’s group was having a meeting and wanted Senator Kennedy as the speaker, and I had volunteered that he might come. I phoned Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], who was his secretary in all his political lifetime, his confidential secretary. And we arranged a date for that meeting. The day of the meeting, Mrs. Lincoln called and said that there was a very important vote coming up in the Senate, and she did not believe that Senator Kennedy could keep his date. I told her that that wasn’t any good, that excuse had been worn out a long, long time ago. If Senator Kennedy wanted ever to become President of the United States, he mustn’t begin his campaign by—shall we say—disappointing the little people

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of America, because there were just too damn many of us. This convinced her to the point that she had the Senator call me back within ten minutes after we hung up. The Senator, after evaluating the situation, said, “Bill, I’ll come. I’ll rent an airplane and come”—which he did.

The meeting was very successful. After the meeting we did walk him through the Star City fire hall, and very laughingly we said, “Now you can run for the presidency and win.” The day before he announced, he called and said he had decided to do it. And I said, “Fine. West Virginia will be all right. And be sure to call Sid Christie [Sidney L. Christie] in McDowell County.”

I probably shouldn’t bring this up now, because Sid now is in the exalted position of being a federal judge and he might not want to be reminded that once he was political czar of McDowell County, but he was at that time. So Sid Christie was contacted, as well as a number of other people, and the campaign was launched. As soon as it was launched, Senator Kennedy then became involved in all the things that do happen to a candidate. His father, Joe

Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], who at that time had an office in Room 912 in the New York Central Building astride Park Avenue, took up the burden of looking after the job of his son in West Virginia. He never seemed to be completely sold on my assurance or the assurance of Mr. Christie of McDowell County that we were going to win. Jack at the right time would have to bring the religious issue right out in the open and say he was a Catholic, and furthermore say he knew the people of West Virginia were not going to deny him the privilege because he was a Catholic—or they were almost his words in his famous Fairmont speech, where he made his Catholic position very clear.

And now the political historians—if you can be a historian this soon after a man’s passing—believe that this was the turning point in the battle between him and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. Incidentally, Senator Humphrey, of course, never thought enough of West Virginia to come into our state really, himself. He sent his very charming wife [Muriel Fay Buck Humphrey], who did a remarkably fine job for Senator Humphrey, but she was not Senator Humphrey. It was unfortunate that Senator Humphrey didn’t find more time to spend in West Virginia. He might have made a better showing. But we Kennedy people used this very effectively—that here was a man, our candidate, who “knew the road to Mullens”: we meant by that that he had gone all over the state. And this “road to Mullens”

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became a theme, a sort of vocal banner that everybody used, and “Kennedy, the man who knows the road to Mullens.”

YOUNG: The inference is there that Mullens is a rather remote place?

HART: That’s right. It’s a very nice community in southern West Virginia, but it was used—it could have been the road to Wheeling or Morgantown or anyplace else—it said without our saying that here’s our man running up and down the hills and the valleys of West Virginia, trying to meet West Virginians. And his opponent has sent his wife; charming as she is, he doesn’t have time enough to spend with us. This was as much of a factor as Jack Kennedy’s own campaigning, in my personal opinion. I told Mr. Joe Kennedy that on several occasions. Well, I guess the results are history. I mean, in my mind and in Sid Christie’s mind, from the very outset, we never had a bit of doubt about it. As a matter of fact, Mr. Christie was a lot closer in his evaluation of what Kennedy was going to do. I wasn’t that close. I had Kennedy winning by a very handsome margin, but not like that. So I was very happy that my partner of many years on the state road commission advisory committee, Sid Christie, who was first judge of McDowell County and then later was properly elevated to the federal bench, had made it so close. Well, the impact of the Kennedy Administration has been varied. Some of us were frankly disappointed. I guess I was one of them, for the simple reason that I assumed that the presidency requires so many vast and manifold duties, that you have to surround yourself with so many assistants, that you become so involved in worldwide affairs, that it is quite natural that you don’t have the time to devote to problems that we in the mountains might think were important, but which in the whole picture of the world were not.

But those of us who had been in it in the early days felt very keenly that if it had not been for our help in the early days, it was quite possible that Mr. Kennedy would not have had the eyelash victory that he had. So, frankly, some of us felt that while Jack Kennedy himself really wanted to do something for West Virginia, because of the crush of other duties he wasn't able to look after personally.... And I know of no West

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Virginian that was very active in the early days of the campaign who was ever treated even civilly by his so-called palace guard headed by Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], who became so important after he gained the stature of chief brain truster for Mr. Kennedy. He was administrative assistant when he was a senator—and quite a nice guy then—but he became more difficult to see and talk to, impossible for most of us to see. And this applied to all the rest of the gentlemen around Kennedy. They seemed to believe that anyone who wanted to talk to Kennedy was going to complain about them or their shortcomings. At least that's the way it appeared to those of us that I am, and was, associated with in West Virginia.

I never was disappointed with Jack Kennedy when I could get to him personally, which was twice during his Administration. I was treated very cordially and was given “no” answers, but given legitimate reasons for the “no” answers, which I could accept.

YOUNG: Well, could you mention the nature of your mission?

HART: Yes. I wanted some expediting of the so-called interstate highway system. We in West Virginia had been derelict in some of our things, but I thought a presidential decree could probably make up some of the time, some of our shortcomings, which were entirely bipartisan. The blame rests jointly on both Democrats and Republicans. The result is that we are probably next to almost last in our participation in the interstate highway program. And I thought that some help in that direction could have untied some knots that probably we had part in tying ourselves. That, in my opinion, was what the presidency of the United States was for. But he convinced me that he couldn't properly do that, so I accepted that. But we certainly received no help whatsoever from what I called the palace guard, and after two or three futile attempts, I quit. The other problem was one having to do with aviation. It had to do with what I call the aerial street car pattern, which he was very helpful in, and did call in some of his people—not anybody in the White House but people in the Civil Aeronautics Board who I knew. By getting the interest manifested by the President, they took a different look. Which may result in a pattern that still will come about in West Virginia to tie us together with an aerial street car. It will be much

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cheaper and much quicker to achieve than our building highways, which we're trying to do. But because of terrain and lack of funds, lack of planning, lack of engineers—lack *period*, lack with a capital L—we seem to be having a terrible time about it.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, do you have any personal anecdotes about your meetings with the President—any examples of his famous wit, his sense of humor, any stories of your relationship with him?

HART: Oh, I remember very distinctly that we were always in a hurry the few times—I think it was two, three, or four times. The chair right there was his favorite chair, and he would usually slide off his shoes and put his feet up on there. We never ate out anywhere, and we never ate anything except a chicken sandwich and a glass of milk, which we always had brought in from the hotel. And he would laugh about the banquet that some day we might have when we got a little more time. I think probably had he lived, we would someday have had the time.

He called me one day when he was supposed to come down and said he couldn't come because he's having—laughingly—trouble with his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis]. Because he had promised to take her on a Caribbean cruise. He had to take her right away because they were about to have a baby, and he couldn't wait until she was fully pregnant to take her on the weekend, and therefore he couldn't come down to keep a date we did have at that time. But he talked to me personally and laughed about it, and said, "You've probably stood your wife up several times and have to go some place." And I said, "Yeah, I understand that." So we understood that. Frankly, I don't remember too much unusual about him. He was a very earnest young man, in a hell of a hurry to get some place, which is where he got. So I...

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, you mentioned the fact that you felt that West Virginians were sometimes excluded from the White House. In the 1962 election, you may remember when Cleveland Bailey [Cleveland M. Bailey] was running for reelection, Republicans charged that Kennedy had promised West Virginia a great deal and then had not delivered. Other people I've talked to have

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mentioned the North-South Highway, the Food Stamp plan, items like that, as indicating that West Virginians did approve of him. Would you do some evaluating in terms of the things you think he did do? And then, perhaps in addition to the laxity you've already indicated, any places where you might have been disappointed with the Kennedy Administration?

HART: Well, as I say, overall I was disappointed in the Kennedy Administration. I wasn't disappointed with Jack, and I don't think I need to reiterate it. I've given what I think is a very plausible reason for it. The presidency is so terribly large that one man can't do it; no matter how much he may desire to do something, he can't every day turn around and say, "Joe, did you take care of that matter?" He assumes.... And there's a thousand ways to skin a cat, or kill one, besides drowning it. Frankly, somebody in the White House definitely didn't like West Virginia. I never did know for sure who it was, but the proof of the pudding is there—the lack of the proof of the pudding is there. We got an awful lot of sweet talk. We got an awful lot of remembering that this is where I started from.

But frankly, intangibly, we didn't do so well, and most of us resented the fact. Apparently the only guy who had a key to the White House was Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough], who most of us thought, did darn little about it. He jumped on the bandwagon at the very appropriate time and apparently had time to spend that he could run around the caravan. Those of us who had jobs to do did our job and didn't have time to run around. So he was there and that was it. So whether we're right or wrong, future events will determine, because Mr. McDonough is now out on his own as the Democratic National Committeeman, and we shall see what he can do when he's not riding the coattails of the Kennedy family. This is quotable—I said it in my newspaper. I think he definitely received a lot of favors or illegal favors, but he was shown a lot of courtesies that those other people including myself, were denied, simply because he had sold somebody up there the idea that the only person the Kennedys had to see was him.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hart, if the President had lived and been the nominee in this upcoming presidential election, do you think he would have carried the state again?

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HART: Yes, sir, I definitely do.

YOUNG: Do you think the majority would have been larger this time?

HART: No. It would have been closer. He would have carried but not.... And he would have had to work harder and, had he lived, he would have had to do some housecleaning in his so-called favorite sons in West Virginia. I think Jack was realistic enough. I think he would know enough that in the heat of a campaign he would look after some things himself.

YOUNG: Well, you've already indicated the reasons for the closeness then; I don't need to go back over that, do I?

HART: No, you don't.

YOUNG: Just one question about something we haven't even touched. West Virginia is considered by the North to be a southern state and by the South to be a Yankee state. We're kind of in between. In a university city of the northern part of the state, what were your observations of the effect of the Kennedy civil rights program in West Virginia—or West Virginia's reaction to the program, rather?

HART: Well, we West Virginians, of course, have never had a civil rights program, because we think we've been the leaders in the civil rights program. We point to the fact with considerable pride. In the first place, we had accomplished a lot of integration even before there was a twinkling in the eye of any lawyer, white or black, to take the case into the Supreme Court. We also point to the fact that

within hours after the Supreme Court decision that resulted in integration, we, here in Monongalia County—and it spread throughout the other counties—were completely integrated in all phases, particularly the school phases that were involved.

We feel that history will bear us out that we were the first state south of the Mason-Dixon line to be completely integrated without one single disturbing incident. Which, I say, would speak a great deal for the broad viewpoints that

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West Virginians—some of them are not supposed to be very well educated and some of them are supposed to be very, very poor—but it would indicate to me at least—and did.... I'm very proud of the fact that my state accomplished that, and I've never heard that statement successfully challenged. We were the first state south of the Mason-Dixon Line to be completely integrated, and within hours after the Supreme Court decision.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, I want to go back and pick up some loose ends from your early section so this might be identified for any person using this transcript in the future. You mentioned Senator Neely as a pioneer Democrat; do you mean as a pioneer New Deal Democrat or...

HART: No, no, no. I mean him as a pioneer Democrat, period. Senator Neely was—his political history will tell you, with the exceptions to the contrary to prove the rule—Senator Neely was the first Democrat in the history of West Virginia that could get elected to much of anything in the so-called independent counties, from constable up.

YOUNG: This was following the Reconstruction era?

HART: That's right. Our life began with the Reconstruction era, so the life of our state began with Wheeling in 1863, so, of course, I mean the life of that period. Yes, Senator Neely was the pioneer of the Democratic Party in West Virginia any way you want to cut it.

YOUNG: You mention Star City—the Star City firehouse—would you identify the location of Star City?

HART: Yes, Star City, West Virginia, two miles north of the city of Morgantown. and its homes.... You can't tell when you are in Morgantown and when you are in Star City, unless you look at a small sign.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hart, did you play a role as an elected official; were you a delegate to the Convention or anything?

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HART: No, no. I never sought public office. I have covered most of the Democratic Conventions in the last forty years as a member of the working press. I did not go to Atlantic City for the very obvious reason that there was no contest. The rooms were \$32.00 a day for a \$5.00 room, and I didn't go.

YOUNG: Well, you covered the 1960 Democratic Convention [Democratic National Convention], then, as a member of the press?

HART: Yeah, that's right.

YOUNG: Did you have any contacts with the candidate at that time?

HART: A number of them.

YOUNG: Any that might be of interest?

HART: Oh, I had none other than a lot of those who had known him prior to.... Well, he was a senator when I first knew him, as I explained. I wouldn't say that I had any special privileges. I don't remember any special things. I was probably with him five or six times in his suite when there would only be him and a few others there. I certainly wasn't a personal friend of his like George Smathers [George A. Smathers] says he was—and then never voted with him. But, yes, I was—we were around him. Jack was very good with the press; that's why he got a good press.

YOUNG: Would you describe your own role, then, as a member of the working press supporting the Senator and not as a political official?

HART: I was not a political official. I had never held political office. I don't intend to.

YOUNG: I'd like to turn to Monongalia County, which is your home county. Do you think that the President made any special appeal to this county, this section of West Virginia, or were the appeals made here of a statewide nature?

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HART: Oh, no, he made both. He was here twice. He was very specific about Monongalia and its great heritage of education, its being maybe one of the Athens of.... That's a very hackneyed phrase; he said those words. It's very hackneyed to describe probably the mother of advanced education in West Virginia. But the truth of the matter is that there are two places that might well vie for that: that would be Bethany, which, as everybody knows, is the cradle of education in that Wheeling area and the cradle in the whole Alleghenies, as well as the Woodburn Female Seminary from which West Virginia University really sprouted. Yes, he endeared himself to those people here by recognizing our achievements and pointing out what might be done. And I think in '58 he

said this urgent desire for education unquestionably would make West Virginia University in the near future have an enrollment of at least ten thousand. At that time that was a pretty wild statement.

YOUNG: Well, as a journalist in a university town, what was the reaction of the university community, if it can be identified as such, to the Kennedy campaign?

HART: I thought it was pretty good. Normally the University faculty is not very.... We don't do very good in the so-called university precincts, us Democrats don't. But in this particular Kennedy case—and the results showed it—I thought we did very, very well. We didn't carry them all, but we did very well, and we did carry Monongalia for Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, I know you can't do this with any exactitude, but the university reaction to the primary between Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy—do you have any observations on how they might have divided on that?

HART: They were pretty well divided. As a matter of fact, I suspect there were some leaning toward Humphrey, because Humphrey seemed more to represent their liberal ideas on the campus. And the conservative people on the campus weren't greatly concerned because usually they're traditionally Republican anyway. But, I think, as I come back again to this thing.... I told Mrs. Humphrey this one day in the Senate restaurant in the presence of her husband—I said it right after the primary—I said, "You got beaten, you got beaten

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badly, as I told you you would. But you could have cut the margin down; I don't say that you could have won. I think we could have beat you, but the margin would have been a lot closer had the Senator [Humphrey] spent half as much time in West Virginia, Mrs. Humphrey, as you did." He didn't have any comment to that. As a matter of fact, he—for one of the few times that I've ever known him—was quiet. He didn't have a conversation; he's usually quite a talker.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, in some cities in the state, ministers preached from the pulpit both for and against Senator Kennedy because of his religion. What was the reaction from the pulpit in Monongalia County—Morgantown, Star City, this immediate area?

HART: So far as I know, there were no sermons delivered against Mr. Kennedy. There were no sermons delivered for Mr. Kennedy. The nearest anybody came was: in several of the churches people were urged to let their conscience be their guide and not let any race, color, creed, or religion color their vote one

way or another. I don't know of any church that preached against Kennedy, and I know of no church that preached for him.

YOUNG: We might tie education and religion together here and go back to another item. Did any of the members of the university community work actively for Senator Kennedy?

HART: They certainly did; lots of them.

YOUNG: On committees?

HART: Yes. And inversely, many of them.... The campus took a very active part. More active, perhaps, than any time I've ever noticed in forty-five years—in the 1960 campaign, both for Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and for Mr. Kennedy.

YOUNG: How could you explain this?

HART: Well, I think the interest was generated more. They thought there was a choice, more the torch was lighted for a variety of reasons, the torch of interest and activity. I have never seen as much.

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YOUNG: You say this was true for the primary as well as the general election?

HART: I think that's true.

YOUNG: Would I be putting words in your mouth if I suggested that Kennedy's appearance on campuses, and his own youth and that sort of thing had something of an appeal to young people? Was this...

HART: Well, that's one of the things that people attribute it to. When you get on that, you can deliver a lecture of three months. I don't know what caused it, I just know he got it.

YOUNG: And he was on the campus, wasn't he?

HART: Yes, he was. That's true.

YOUNG: You've talked several times about Senator Humphrey. I want to go back to something on him. Could you distinguish between the Democrats in terms of type or class or region or section, those that supported Kennedy as opposed to those that were for Humphrey? In other words, how was the line drawn in the Democratic Party in West Virginia between the two camps?

HART: Well, the line was drawn almost entirely on the ground that one man thought enough of us to be here and the other didn't. There were personalities involved, there were a few issues involved—like Humphrey being a liberal, which would have worked for Humphrey because Humphrey had come up the hard way. Kennedy had the handicap of being rich. He also had the handicap, from some few, of having the religion that he had. He had at that time a funny Boston twang that a lot of mountaineers didn't understand, didn't appreciate too much. But that was all offset by the fact that Senator Humphrey, for some unaccountable reason, could not work West Virginia into his personal schedule, and Senator Kennedy did. There has been great talk, and the night of the election when the returns gave Kennedy the great landslide, there was some very broad inferences made, at least not by

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Senator Humphrey but by some of his very disappointed followers, that the Kennedys had bought West Virginia. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Kennedys did spend some money in West Virginia, but so did the Humphrey people. And the money was collected for the Humphrey people quite legally and honorably, by several volunteer workers who were lawyers from Washington who came in and got some money. But the factor in the campaign was not money, that was not the balance of power at all. The great balance of power was Jack's presence, his enthusiasm, his youth, his sincerity, his willingness to lay it on the line—and the lack of appearances of Senator Humphrey. He or anybody else can cut it any way they want to, but the American people, be they West Virginians, be they anybody.... The man who comes and shakes your hand and looks you in the eye, by all odds will get your vote many more times than the fellow who sends somebody to see you.

YOUNG: Had the money, then, been equal, you think the victory still would have been Kennedy's?

HART: Oh, sure, sure. The lack of Humphrey in the state left most thinking West Virginians with no choice. You asked yourself this, "Well, gee, if this guy doesn't think enough of us to come into the state, what in the hell is he going to do for us if we should elect him?"

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, at that time did you and your paper find that many Democrats were aware of the fact that presumably a vote for Humphrey might also be a vote for Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] if Senator Humphrey didn't make it at the Convention?

HART: No. Johnson never came into the.... No, I never heard of Johnson until after, long after the West Virginia primary was over.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, when I came into your office you pulled down from the wall a framed copy of a Drew Pearson column. I wonder if you would like to

date that column for me and then read it into the record.

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HART: Well, I'll be glad to. This appeared in Drew Pearson's column—which appears in eight hundred newspapers throughout the world—on December 29th, 1960. The headline says, "It All Started Here":

Washington, December 29th. A lot of people played important parts in the political life of John Kennedy, the most important having been his father and Jack Kennedy himself. However, one dynamic newspaper editor, Walter "Bill" Hart of *Morgantown Dominion News* had a lot to do with turning the tide of that crucial Protestant State, West Virginia. It is generally conceded that West Virginia was the high-water mark of Kennedy's primary campaign. Governor David Lawrence [David Leo Lawrence] of Pennsylvania, a seasoned politician and a Catholic, told friends Kennedy could never carry that isolated, Protestant, mountainous state. After he carried it, Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Kennedy's chief rival, dropped out of the Presidential primaries. Two years before, Kennedy was due to speak in Morgantown, West Virginia, but late in the afternoon he called up and cancelled. Members of the Monongalia Democratic club, before whom Kennedy was speaking, went to Editor Hart for advice on getting a substitute. They were heartbroken. Hart grabbed the telephone, and called Kennedy in Washington. "If you want to be elected President," Hart told the Senator, "you'd better not neglect the little people—there are too many of us. You'd better hire a special plane and would be there." He made a big hit. In addition, Editor Hart walked Kennedy through the Star City volunteer fire department hall. "We've got too big a crowd to hold your meeting in this hall," Editor Hart explained, "but any Democrat who wants to get elected always starts his campaign in this hall. It's good luck. The only Democrat who was defeated in recent years was Bob Mollohan [Robert H. Mollohan], who ran for governor without starting his campaign here. You're starting your campaign here and you're going to be elected."

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YOUNG: Thank you, Mr. Hart. I have another question in the realm of journalism that I'd like to ask: How did you observe or what were your reactions to the treatment of the outside press as it came into West Virginia—the AP [Associated Press] wire service people, *Time*, *Life*, and so on—did you have any contact with them in the Kennedy campaign?

HART: Yes, a great deal. I think they were given very good treatment, those who deserved it. Those who came among us and treated us like peons or second-class citizens or nincompoops, or attempted to use our facilities in my office or any other reputable newspaper office in West Virginia without first asking, without showing us courtesy, were usually thrown the hell out of the office. But we newspaper people have bums same as all other working people have. By and large, I didn't hear any complaints from any members of the press.

YOUNG: Well, how do you feel about the image of West Virginia as it was projected in that campaign by the television networks, radio, and press?

HART: Well, of course, our poverty was overemphasized, but so are the slums of the big cities. I don't think we got too bad or unfair treatment. Some of my more touchy colleagues were irritated and annoyed and some of them were downright angry about that, but we do have some poverty areas. I've never made any attempt to conceal it. But we also, by and large, do have now a very good—as a matter of fact, a very excellent—economy, the best we've ever had. It's got a broader base, at least. And we began that broader base, I think, back in the 1960 campaign. I don't think that we were badly treated.

YOUNG: Could you mention something about the broader base of the economy as you relate it to the Kennedy Administration?

HART: Yes, I think we got, for instance, we know more about reforestation. I think forestry is going to be a very, very sustaining industry for West Virginia. I think we're well adapted for it. We are beginning at long last to make some headway in really getting a part of the tourist

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dollar that's growing every year. And we, of course, are hopeful that we can get some good roads so that we really can capitalize on what Mother Nature has put in our state that is so close to many people of the United States. We have looked at ourselves in the mirror, I think, more and clearer and better since 1960 than any other previous time, to my knowledge, at least.

YOUNG: Do you feel that the West Virginia primary had something to do with this soul searching?

HART: Definitely. Yes, I definitely think so. I think that's probably the most important thing that came out of the 1960 primary for all of us West Virginians, when we made a decision to not let so-called bigotry and other things become involved in our thinking. I think when we got our own house in focus by looking at ourselves in the mirror. I think more of us have been seeing ourself in the mirror as we really exist—or really do obtain—since then, than did before. I think we're trying to find better ways to overcome our shortcomings. We're not making as many excuses for our shortcomings. And when we do have one, we're not crying about it or blaming it on some absentee landlord as we did in the past. I think a lot of us are trying to do something about it. And probably the most promising sign of any in West Virginia is that the new generation that's coming on, that's staying in the state—unfortunately a lot of the generation isn't—those that are staying in the state are being a lot more realistic about it and are trying to do something about it. A manifestation of it is forestry, and our better development of our

mineral industries; the coal industry was never in such good hands as it is today. Part of that can be given credit to West Virginia for its enlightening help to this particular thing, its handling of the ever-present labor problem. And, frankly, I think the future of West Virginia—if I might prophesy a little bit—in the next fifty years in this new generation's hands that's coming on, never was so bright. I don't think they're going to make nearly the mistakes or louse it up as bad as the generation I represent.

YOUNG: Well, you feel, then, that while the so-called Appalachian program really didn't emerge until the

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later Kennedy years, that the beginnings of it were perhaps in this campaign?

HART: Oh, sure, definitely. All that's happened here is that our movement that began in the 1960s has now got a name. We are now "Appalachia." As a matter of fact, I had to stop and figure who they were talking about and what they were talking about when somebody threw that "Appalachia" at me, and then I remembered it was a contraction of the Appalachian chain of mountains. We don't think of ourselves as in the Appalachians, we are either in the Blue Ridge or we're in the Alleghenies; we don't say Appalachians, which applies to the broad chain of mountains. So, this is a name that somebody dreamed up that's a very good name, Appalachia. We had it all the time, but now we got a name for it; we had the movement and now we got a banner.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, in this particular county, did a great many people volunteer for the Kennedy campaign—you know: lick envelopes, handle...

HART: In unprecedented numbers. Yes. He struck the imagination and he created the fire of interest among more people in Monongalia than any other candidate, save Senator M.M. Neely.

YOUNG: Well, did these volunteers come from any special class, religious background, age group?

HART: No. That's why it was like shooting fish in a barrel or taking candy from a baby to forecast what Kennedy was going to do in West Virginia, because people from all classes of life were working for him for free.

YOUNG: Well, have you noticed whether any of these volunteers have remained active in politics, any of the young people...

HART: A number of them have, fortunately, yes. And they are making very fine people in.... And as a matter of fact, let me pay a tribute to the Republican Party—they've developed a number of youngsters

that are now doing a very good job, and since we must have a two-party system, it's a good sign.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, this is my oversight and not yours, but I want to go back to something else with respect to this county. You mentioned the Senator's mentioning of education, his appeal there. I believe that if I remember correctly, some of your local industries are coal mining, glass; what others have I not mentioned?

HART: Well, the basic industry here is the coal industry. We have some of the largest mines in the world. The largest one is just a few miles from here, but it's not in Monongalia County. We have coal, we have gas. We have an abundance of gas, which means that we have some of the very finest glass factories, which contribute to our economy. We have a very large enterprise known as the faucet factory, under the banner of Sterling Faucet, which centers here and includes the entire United States. It is probably the largest single individual employer of people now outside the University, in this whole area. It employs a number in the thousands. We have a growing tourist business, and we are a convention city that probably ranks number one in the state now. From the number of people attracted, at least, if you use that formula, we are the number one convention city. There are a number of formulas to be used, about how conventions are. Some conventions represent twenty dollars a day, some represent thirty; that's a debatable figure. But our count of the number of people who come here each year—and we readily admit that our attraction is the new medical school.... We are the medical center of West Virginia, and the whole ball of wax and all West Virginia's money is wrapped up in this beautiful medical and dental college.

YOUNG: Well, did the Senator, then, make any special appeal, for instance, to the glass industry—specifics about tariffs, that sort of thing?

HART: Well, quite naturally, being one of those Yankee traders, he watched that pretty close. He had a problem to skirt around, which was the importation of residual oil in his beloved New England, and which was in

direct opposition to the best interests of West Virginia coal. He was very clever with that and did quite a lot of nice talking about it, and said nothing and committed himself to nothing. And after he became President, each time the quotas were to be, shall we say, reviewed, they always ended up by being higher, so New England would get more residual oil and we got less coal business.

YOUNG: Was there a noticeable amount of resentment in West Virginia over this?

HART: There wasn't as much as there should have been, because it was sort of an indirect way to shut off your bread and butter. Only the people that were directly involved got greatly agitated about it, because the rank and file people vaguely understood that coal was their basic economy. But if they weren't directly in it, they couldn't get very excited until they were laid off at the gas station—because the people that weren't working at the coal mine.... Or until something else happened that their job was indirectly affected.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hart, now would you evaluate the role of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., in the campaign? Did he come to Morgantown?

HART: I don't remember. He might have. He was a nonentity as far as I could tell.

YOUNG: In other words, in this particular section of the state he wasn't important.

HART: No, sir.

YOUNG: Mr. Hart, what questions have I not asked that you would like to cover?

HART: I think you've done very well. Really, I wouldn't want to set myself up pontificating on any political matters, because after you are in the business forty-five years, the thing that stands out the most in your mind is the many things you don't know, rather than the things you do know.

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YOUNG: Well, I know that I don't know some things that perhaps you might like to put in the record.

HART: Well, no, I think I've said.... I think I've given my analysis of the thing. Personally, I liked Jack Kennedy. I think he fully intended to do everything he said he would do. I think, in spite of his palace guard some things were done. But, above all, I think he gave us that spark, that fire, a lot of us who may not have had it before. To look at ourselves in the mirror and see what we saw, and not make excuses for our shortcomings but try to correct them. I think that is the lasting effect that Jack Kennedy had upon West Virginia, and I think it will live long after the Kennedy family is in the limbo of the past.

YOUNG: Well, you've already answered the next question, but I'd like to give you one more shot at it. If there is anything you'd like to say to evaluate the Kennedy years with respect to West Virginia, and then evaluate...

HART: Well, I think the Kennedy years were the most important years West Virginia has had in its modern history—not because of anything directly

that the Kennedys did. Although, let me insist that Jack Kennedy, when he could do something about it, did it and was very appreciative. But as I say—and I can't emphasize it too much—the fire that was created in this enthusiasm, this young man who got us to look ourselves in the face and lifted us above any taint of bigotry we may have had, started us on the road that I think will make West Virginia in the next fifty years certainly one of the leading states in the middle Atlantic States, and not at the bottom of the totem pole as we had been so long in the past. I think that will be a very definite lasting contribution. I think that made all the work that those of us did who may have been disappointed at the moment for some of the detail things that were not done—I think that will be far more important than anything else.

YOUNG: Well, as a working journalist did you notice much interest among your readers in the other aspects of the Kennedy Administration? I'm thinking, for

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instance, of the Peace Corps, the Bay of Pigs, foreign policy, nuclear test ban.

HART: Well, most of them took it in stride in this case. They evaluated each one on its merits. They blamed the Bay of Pigs on Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], whether it's true or not; they didn't blame it on Kennedy. Most West Virginians, including myself, probably—liking the man personally—may have looked for too many excuses to excuse him.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. Walter L. Hart, in Morgantown, West Virginia. Mr. Hart is the Editor of the *Dominion News* in Morgantown—he writes under the penname of Bill Hart in his paper. The interview was made on September 3, 1964, by William L. Young.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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Walter L. "Bill" Hart Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
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