

Robert L. Lee Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 05/19/1964
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Biographical Note

Robert L. Lee (1918-1992) was a campaign worker on John F. Kennedy's [JFK] 1946 Congressional campaign and his 1952 Senate campaign. This interview focuses on JFK's Congressional and Senate campaigns, among other topics.

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Robert L. Lee– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT L. LEE

May 19, 1964

Boston, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Bob, back in 1946 you were a state senator, and at that time I think you had plans to seek another office. Could you tell us about that?

LEE: Yes, Mr. Martin, I was finishing my sixth year in the Massachusetts Senate, and at that time many people thought I would be a candidate for Congress, and I was being urged to run.

MARTIN: Well, at that time, too, you met John Kennedy. Wasn't that at just about the time?

LEE: Well, Mr. Martin, my next door neighbor, Bill Sutton, brought Jack Kennedy to my home for a quick visit on the subject of politics. Jack was very shy and almost afraid to talk. My first impression was that he was a very sick boy. After I stated I could not afford to aspire for Congress, he perked up, and instead of visiting for fifteen minutes, he stayed for four hours. We enjoyed tea and cake.

MARTIN: That was at your house, Bob?

LEE: Yes, yes, Mr. Martin.

MARTIN: Then did he discuss with you the type of campaign he was going to run over there or . . .

- LEE: Well, he wanted to mostly have house parties, and I cooperated and set up a series of house parties throughout the entire senatorial district which was part of the congressional district.
- MARTIN: Bob, tell us a little bit about these house parties. How did you arrange them? What type of people were invited, to these?
- LEE: Well, he attempted to have a neighborhood activity. You would get a popular person on a given street, and they would invite in twenty-five or thirty or forty people, and it would end up like a coffee break.
- MARTIN: The invitations weren't formal or mailed out. What did you do, get on the telephone and call them?
- LEE: No, I would assume that most of them were by telephone and trying to get key people who were inclined to be political minded.
- MARTIN: Mostly Democrats, of course.
- LEE: Oh, yes, they had to be Democrats.
- MARTIN: In fact, at that time, I don't think there was a Republican over there.
- LEE: No, I don't believe a Republican would get too far. The final vote, if any of them was on the ballot, would be about 30 to 1. So it is a hopeless cause for a Republican.
- MARTIN: Well, Bob, when you started out then, apparently you'd planned to participate with him in his campaign. You were then state senator. Did you become openly identified with Jack Kennedy?
- LEE: Yes, I tried, at one point, to do it in a quiet manner, but after you are associated with all the house parties and he running for one office and I running for another one, you'd be closely identified with each other.

MARTIN: The reason I ask that is that, well, Mike Neville was a close friend of yours and he was competing in that Senate fight too. You had lots of loyalties.

LEE: Well, there was a man in East Boston, Joseph Kane, who incidentally, I believe is a relative of the Kennedy's, who I had known for a great many years. He was secretary to Congressman [Peter] Tague. He followed me very closely, and his object was to keep me out of the congressional fight. And as time went on I took a great liking to young Jack Kennedy although I had a tremendous respect for Mike Neville and Georgia Leary.

MARTIN: Bob, at that time a young man, a veteran, coming into a district that he was virtually unknown in, wasn't this some sort of a new departure for politics in your district? Wasn't it pretty hard to sell somebody totally new to an area like that, at that time?

LEE: Well, I'm frank to state I don't believe he ever voted in our district, I doubt very much if he lived in our district. He was a resident, at that time, of his grandfather, the great former mayor, John F. Fitzgerald, at the Hotel Bellevue, and there was a great feeling against young Jack Kennedy. It was very obvious after they got started in their organization and they really knew how to organize, and they brought in all these college boys from outside and they did a tremendous job.

MARTIN: What would you say the biggest criticism against his candidacy at the time would be?

LEE: Well, no experience. And he was starting half-way up the ladder, instead of from the bottom, and that he wasn't known in the community.

MARTIN: When you mentioned, Bob, about bringing young college students and World War II veterans into an organization in a place like Charlestown, how about enlisting the support of the old-time professional politicians?

LEE: No, Mr. Martin, they wanted nothing to do with the old-line politicians or those who were playing politics. They wanted to do it their way, and I assume it could

have been the friendship on the part of Joe Kane and myself, which enhanced somewhat my prestige, that they had some trust in me.

MARTIN: Well, now, at that particular time there were quite a few veterans coming back from the war. And, if I recall right, the primary was in June that year. Did they pitch the campaign towards the returning veteran or did they go after the elderly, what was there?

LEE: No, in those days in Charlestown, one of my own sons, Tommy, was very close to Dave Powers. And it was a new regime and they were very enthusiastic. And they formed their own committees and like everything else, a new broom sweeps clean.

MARTIN: Well, then, apparently the strategy was to shake hands or expose the candidate to as many people in the district as he can?

LEE: In all my life, I watched him as a boy come up. He was great for shaking hands, moving fast, and you never could find out too much from him. He was just kindly, a very gracious young man, likeable. And that was his object, always keep moving.

MARTIN: Well, did he show any signs then or was it evident then that he would, that he could capture the enthusiasm of large crowds, or when he moved around back in 1946, was he just another candidate?

LEE: No, in my opinion he was still shy, and he didn't have the confidence that a man should have who was going to follow politics. But as time went on, he did develop the urge to serve the public.

MARTIN: Well, as a campaign progressed over there, there were many high points of it, and I would imagine one of them would be the traditional Bunker Hill Day parade. Did he march in that first parade as a candidate?

LEE: Yes, in June 1946 he marched in the Bunker Hill Day parade. The reviewing stand was opposite my home. It was a very very hot day, and Jack was exhausted

and collapsed at the very end. He was brought to my home. His fatigue was due to a war physical condition. I called his father and I was instructed to wait until a doctor came, and after several hours they moved him from my residence. My grandchildren are always asking me now where the President slept.

MARTIN: Bob, where did they move him to that day, do you know?

LEE: I don't know, I never found out.

MARTIN: But when you say he collapsed, he fell down on the street?

LEE: No, he turned very yellow and blue. He appeared to me as a man who probably had a heart attack. Later on I found out it was a condition which he picked up, probably malaria or yellow fever.

MARTIN: Well, then, he was assisted up to your apartment and . . .

LEE: Yes, well, we have a one family home, and we brought him up to the second floor and we took off his underwear and we sponged him over, and he had some pills in his pocket that he took. That was one of the questions his father asked, did he have his pills with him.

MARTIN: Moving along, Bob, at that time he took up residence at 122 Bowdoin Street. Do you recall going over there to visit with him?

LEE: Yes, after Jack engaged an apartment at 122 Bowdoin Street, Boston, we would meet privately to answer questions of happenings in our district during his absence in Washington on official business. After several months of calling at 122 Bowdoin Street, Superintendent Murphy suggested to Mr. Kennedy to give me a key. This was granted, but never abused by me. Saturday was his favorite day for Boston. I would arrive at about 9 a.m. If he was still asleep, I would read my paper, rustling it a little with the thought of a polite alarm clock. He usually slept in his underwear. After morning shower, then clean underwear for the present day. A typical bachelor, shoes, stockings, shirt and tie dropped mostly any place in the living room.

- MARTIN: Bob, at that time when you used to go up and visit him, can you remember some of the people that would drop by that apartment? Do you remember their names and who they were?
- LEE: Well, in the early days we would have Frank Morrissey and Dave Powers and later on Jack Fulham, later after that came Howard Fitzpatrick.
- MARTIN: Actually, then when he got on that campaign trail, they say he was quite vigorous and hit many many stops. In that era too would he shake hands at places like the main gate of the Navy Yard or the various factory visits and so forth?
- LEE: Well, speeches at the Navy Yard and at the docks to the longshoremen, the speeches were very short and brief and he always believed in mixing in the crowd and shaking their hands. But always moving.
- MARTIN: The primary was in June then and the victory in the primary, of course, was John F. Kennedy. That meant in those days victory in the election because you had very little Republican opposition.
- LEE: No, the primary fight was equivalent to election.
- MARTIN: Do you recall the day that he won the primary fight? Do you recall any incidents about that day?
- LEE: No, we didn't see too much of him. He drove around to all the precincts. They had cars from probably every state in the union, and I'm quite sure that the students from the colleges turned out in masses. His workers in the polls throughout the senatorial district, I could speak for Charlestown anyway, not too many Charlestown people. They were mostly out-of-towners.
- MARTIN: You don't think that this could have generated some resentment in the district, the fact that there were so-called out-of-towners?

LEE: There's no question that there would be resentment from the so-called politicians. The stay-at-home people just had a tremendous respect. He campaigned probably the way I did in my first winning fight for the lower branch of the Legislature. I kept away from the politicians, and I brought my fight and campaign directly to the mothers and fathers in their homes, and it paid off. And I'm quite sure that they campaigned in a similar manner.

MARTIN: Bob, I don't understand it. I'm not sure about this, but I think he didn't win in the North End, but, he won substantially in Charlestown, which enabled him to come out of that race.

LEE: Yes, he did extremely well in Charlestown. It was one of his biggest areas as far as his margin was concerned. You want to remember that his grandfather was an old North Ender, and we have a lot of people who moved to Charlestown from the North End. In fact, I was born in the North End, and I moved to Charlestown at the age of two. And it was very very much one of the strongest Irish areas in probably the entire State of Massachusetts.

MARTIN: Of course, when you say he was a newcomer in this district, he had roots both on his mother's and his father's side in that district. Of course, his father was born and reared over in East Boston which was part of that district too, Bob.

LEE: Well, that is true, but his father was serving, he was appointed by Governor Tobin to serve on a committee in the Legislature for the state on commerce. And all those who served on the committee had a tremendous respect for Mr. Joseph Kennedy. At the meetings and the luncheons he always paid the check. He never would allow the members to charge anything to the Commonwealth if he was present at these meetings. And he developed a tremendous respect among the members of the Massachusetts Legislators.

MARTIN: Bob, how well do you remember John F. Fitzgerald? Did you ever work with him?

LEE: Well, former Mayor John F. Fitzgerald would come to visit me in the State House, and he was always mixing among we legislators from Boston, trying to give us wisdom about the good old days of Boston. But I could go back to when I was quite young, when he was running for Congress against Peter F. Tague. And it was shortly after the first World War and he defeated Mr. Tague, and Tague, although he lost the primary, ran on stickers and he brought the fight to Congress. And Congress allowed Congressman Fitzgerald to complete his term, but the last month they impeached him, and Tague was allowed to take his seat and he was reimbursed for the two years. But anyone who knew the honorable former mayor, John F. Fitzgerald, had to admire him because he was colorful. He wanted to talk about the good things about Boston and what he did for Boston, and he was most willing at all times, if he could get into the right spot, to sing "Sweet Adeline."

MARTIN: Bob, did you remember him taking any active role in his grandson's first congressional fight? He was living, I think, at the Bellevue.

LEE: Yes, he was living at the Bellevue and naturally you... School Street, Boston, and Pi Alley and around Purcell's and so forth, you were getting most of the political leaders and he would rub elbows with him, and I would frankly believe that he was a great help to the young Jack Kennedy because there was a still tremendous respect for old Fitzgerald.

MARTIN: I believe he was a member then of the Port Authority at that time?

LEE: I don't know. I just don't recall.

MARTIN: Bob, after the election of John F. Kennedy to his first term of Congress, did you have occasion to have any dealings with him when he went to Washington that first term?

LEE: Yes, he . . .

MARTIN: Would he keep in contact with you?

LEE: He always kept in contact with me, and to my embarrassment and his embarrassment, my efforts were to try to get him to dress like a statesman. He still wanted to act like a college boy. I don't think it's right to go into the House chambers with a sweater or sneakers on. After several months he started to become a little more alert to become a statesman.

MARTIN: I don't think you ever succeeded in getting him to wear a hat.

LEE: No, no. He never had a hat to my knowledge until he arrived at the White House.

MARTIN: Well, when in your dealings with him right back at the beginning did he ever give you any indication that he would go far in political life?

LEE: Well, when he decided to go for the United States Senate, I was convinced that he has his eye for the future on the White House. I made several visits in and out of Washington. He would ask me for my advice occasionally, which I was most happy to give to him. He was blessed with some very very wonderful men in his office. He had a man from our own district here, [Timothy J., Jr.] Ted Reardon, that I can recall. Myer Feldman, whom he eventually brought to the White House and who is still there. And there was another young man whom I just don't recall, but he has just been recognized again by President [Lyndon B.] Johnson. He still is in the White House. But he was very fortunate in having people around him who were dedicated to doing the right thing.

MARTIN: What would you say was the biggest single quality of character that he possessed that set him apart from others?

LEE: Well, he had a strong opinion and he didn't shift. He just stuck by what he believed was the right thing to do. He would listen to somebody, and he could walk away very rapidly if he thought you were wrong. I can give you one isolated case. I have been a member of the Democratic National Club that is housed in the Sheraton-Carlton Hotel. And

most of the Democratic members of Congress are members, and Jack Kennedy was a member but made very few visits. And when it got close to his Presidential fight, I tried to convince him to make a visit and he passed it off by saying, "Why don't you take some of my office help down and make a visit with them?" In those days, Senator Humphrey was a guest in and out all the time, and he was one of his main opponents. And he apparently thought there was too much Humphrey sentiment, so he kept out.

MARTIN: Well, apparently, when you'd go down to Washington and Jack was a Congressman, did you stay at his house?

LEE: No, no. In those days we would visit together and have lunch or dinner. He was one that always had something to do, and I must confess he wasn't in Washington as much as he should have been.

MARTIN: Bob, would you explain that a little bit more?

LEE: Well, when he was in Congress, he was accepting too many invitations outside the congressional district. Probably he was anticipating he was to run statewide, and he was trying to make acquaintances. And then after he went to the Senate, the same criticism prevailed that he was then going to all the other states trying to broaden out his acquaintance-ship. In fact, he was always running for something higher.

MARTIN: Well, did you feel, Bob, that his leanings were more national and international than they were in his own home district?

LEE: Well, there's no question about that.

MARTIN: And yet, however, did he manage to satisfy the needs and the requests of the people in his district?

LEE: Well, he, his office like most all congressmen, they have able staffs and they do an excellent job. He wasn't chased too much when he was a member of the lower branch of Congress. When he went to the Senate, he really expanded his local office and his office in Washington. In fact, he had twice as many employees as any other senator. His

mail was exceedingly high. And they funneled the various requests to various individuals who carried out their assignments most efficiently.

MARTIN: Bob, tell us about his first Senate fight. And as an experienced politician, did you feel as though he was tackling insurmountable odds when he challenged amman like Henry Cabot Lodge?

LEE: Well, I had my doubts at the start because Henry Cabot Lodge was managing the campaign of Mr. Eisenhower, and he had the press very much with him, and it was sort of an uphill battle. And I think the turning point was the last week. It so happened that I was asked by the former governor, the late Maurice Tobin, to accompany him to an apartment up on Beacon Street. And when we arrived, Mr. Joseph Kennedy was there. And fifteen or twenty minutes later a telephone call came through, and he had to leave the apartment to make a visit with Mr. Fox, who was then the owner of the Boston Post. The rumors were that the Post was with Lodge. About an hour afterwards, when Mr. Kennedy returned, he stated that the Post within two days would openly endorse Congressman Kennedy for United States Senator. And I think that was the turning point in the campaign because Lodge had neglected the campaign because of managing Eisenhower's fight for the presidency and he really neglected the fight. He thought that if the Post was with him the last eight or ten days, that would have been sufficient to put him back in the running. But it just didn't work out that way.

MARTIN: Bob, that Senate fight, was it pretty much of a repetition of his first congressional fight in that they had all the enthusiasm, the organization, and the campaign style only this time it was transferred over on a state level? Then the famous Kennedy teas and Kennedy coffees were part of that. Did he also make visits around the plants and factories?

LEE: Yes, the pattern was about the same on a broader scale. In his Senate fight against Lodge I was in somewhat of an embarrassing position by the fact that I served with Lodge in the lower branch of the Massachusetts Legislature in 1933 and '34. In March of 1952 Lodge asked me if it was

possible to make a visitation through the Hancock building. I answered, "Yes." Then in September Congressman Kennedy asked for the same privilege, and a tour of the building was arranged. The day he visited John Hancock he met president Paul F. Clark and executive vice president Byron K. Elliott, and they extended every courtesy possible to Congressman Kennedy. Kennedy visited most all departments and was a big hit particularly with the young girls. Just before lunch, in the junior executive dining room, Kennedy suggested he would like to meet the kitchen help. This was gladly arranged.

MARTIN: Bob, also in that campaign did you participate in fund raising activities for the Kennedy organization?

LEE: Yes, Senator Kennedy's contest for reelection was my first experience in raising funds.

MARTIN: That was in 1958? When he ran against Vincent Celeste.

LEE: Yes. My good Republican friends in the insurance industry were most kind and generous. Percentage wise I did very well.

MARTIN: Was there any other fund raising activities?

LEE: Yes, in his presidential campaign, Kennedy had two fund raising breakfasts for his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States. At the second breakfast Senator Kennedy stated this would be the last fund raising drive if nominated, stating, "I will get all the money I want." However, after the nomination Kennedy was back twice again for funds. I am quite sure money is very important in a political campaign.

MARTIN: Now, Bob, after his, during his career as a Senator, you mentioned going down to Washington while he was a Congressman. But during his career as a Senator, did you have occasion to go down there for contacts with him and social visits and the like?

LEE: Well, I have to be quite careful because we all work for a living and what one might say could be misconstrued as conflict of interest. My friendship was one

of trust on the part of both. Although I represented the insurance industry, there were many important bills that in the best interest as we feel of the general public. If Mr. Kennedy would ask me a question, I always answered him honestly, even though it would hurt our ideas. There are many bills that have been enacted in Congress that I can truthfully say that I helped him. And I frankly say that if one would go back and look the laws over, they would know that we had complete trust in each other.

MARTIN: In other words, Bob, he would call you on the telephone and invite you down to Washington to discuss legislation involving the insurance industry, that might affect them in one way or the other?

LEE: Yes, we had a close relationship. Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln, his secretary, he would alert, and I would know exactly what time to meet with him. And she knew of our close acquaintanceship, which was never violated on the part of either one of us.

MARTIN: Bob, during his campaign for the presidency, you mentioned fund raising. Did you ever have any other associations with him in connection with that particular campaign? Did you go out to the Convention?

LEE: No, I did not. No, I did not go to the Convention. I just did my homework, and where I was a vice president of a large insurance company, I didn't want to have the tinge that there was a conflict of interest. I, at all times, tried to protect him.

MARTIN: Well, did you get down to the Inaugural?

LEE: Yes, I went to the Inaugural and I marched with the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Boston. I had the pleasure of meeting the President at the Sheraton-Carlton that afternoon with two lady senators from the Massachusetts Senate, Mrs. Fonseca and Mrs. Stanton. And then I met him later at the Sheraton Park when he was with the governors of all the various states and then against the ball at the Armory in Washington. Whoever was in Washington during those hectic hours will tell you of the snow and the hazards, but it all

ended up with very, very tremendous happiness. I can recall Jack visiting very late back at the ball at the Sheraton Park with Jacqueline beside him. She had had it, and she was going home, but he went to one more even after he left there.

MARTIN: Did you also visit him in the White House at all?

LEE: Yes, I was down there, knowing my way around so much. I went down on a business problem, and I was waiting to see Myer Feldman and Lee White, and he learned of my being in the lobby waiting to visit with these two gentlemen. And Dave Powers said, "You have to come in for a minute." And I was very happy that he squeezed me in. At that time the President was joyful. In fact, he pointed out all the holes in the floor that were put there by President Eisenhower. It so happened that President Eisenhower would change his shoes at his desk and then walk out to the green for a little putting and as he walked from the desk to the glass door which was probably 20 feet away, there was just a track of holes in the floor. He'd get quite a little happiness, and he was kidding about the holes and so forth, and playing jokes on Mr. Eisenhower.

MARTIN: How much of the Kennedy family did you see during these campaigns and your association with President Kennedy?

LEE: Well, they are a tremendous family. They're one for all and all for one. They are very clannish. They stick together. They're hard workers. And when the job is over, they just pack up and go home.

MARTIN: Well, Bob, he remained close even as president to some of the people over in Charlestown. My understanding is that whenever they went down to Washington, they were treated almost like one of the family.

LEE: Well, we went down to Washington with a group from the Knights of Columbus. Some flew down, but there were about one hundred in all, and we had a special visit to the White House. We were all brought out into the garden, and he came out and mixed and shook hands and renewed old acquaintances. And what made most everybody happy, how he could remember each and every one by their first name.

MARTIN: You know he had a strong love for Irish music and also for any Irish affair. Do you recall some of the events in your association with him?

LEE: Yes, the first St. Patrick's party under his Administration was run by Congressman Michael Kirwan of Youngstown, Ohio. And they usually have about 350 members of Congress from the House and the Senate and members of the Supreme Court. And I was one of the fortunate outsiders who was at the St. Patrick's Day affair, and when the President came in, we were all instructed to not push or shove and let him walk around as he would like to do and mix his way. So he put on his paper Irish silk hat and his carnation and he moved around. And I was very much surprised as he went down through the aisle I was in, he spotted me and he came right over and he said, "How are all my friends in Charlestown?" And he named a few he wanted to be remembered to. And he asked me when I came to town, how long I was going to stay around. And some of my friends from the Congress, hearing these remarks, said, "How did you become so close?" And I said, "Well, I'm just from the old hometown."

MARTIN: Well, Bob, you had sort of a dual career, one as a politician and later as a business leader in the Boston area. How ^{do} you feel about his impact upon the businessman? Was he impressing businessmen with his . . .

LEE: Well, I have my own ideas, and like everything else, you can see your side of the picture and you can't see the other fellow's. If you sent a letter to Kennedy, you have to realize that it wouldn't get through. It would be by-passed. But I do recall--and I have this letter which I will mention briefly that I sent to Ken O'Donnell. And I said to him after about a year that Kennedy was in office that I thought it would be wise if he would have a group of seventy-five or eighty businessmen that I had in mind to the White House for a business conference. I was trying to create a better image between him and the businessmen, which I don't think ever became successful. I had a letter back from Ken O'Donnell who told me my idea was excellent, but they were committed to other programs the next few months and they would contact me at a later date, which never did take place. Now to prove my point

that my thinking wasn't too far off, shortly after President Johnson took over, I was in Speaker McCormack's office. And he asked me if I thought the business climate would change with Johnson and I told him that I was positive that he would see a closer relationship between Johnson and the business fraternity than existed under Kennedy. Why it didn't happen under Kennedy, I don't know. I think he held himself too much in reserve. Now it could be and I apologize for saying it, but it could be that things date back to his father.

MARTIN: Well, the business people that you were in contact with, more specifically those around Massachusetts, what was their attitude towards the President? Was it one of, what?

LEE: Well, I would assume it's the old adage, "Many are called and few are chosen." And when a man is holding such a high position, you should be invited to participate and not be volunteering because, the old saying again, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." But I always believed that the business world wanted to cooperate, but for some reason or other it wasn't successfully brought about the way I would like to have had it.

MARTIN: Well, Bob, as a long-time friend of the President, what would you say you will cherish as the best memory of him?

LEE: Well, I went down to the last St. Patrick's Day party last year. And it was held in the Statler Hotel. And there were three or four entrances, and it just happened that I was at the door where he entered. And he walked right over to me, and all he wanted to talk about was young Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy]. And he said, "Bob, I want you to keep in close touch with Teddy. He's a good boy. He's the politician of the family, and he's going to go places."

MARTIN: This has been an interview with Robert L. Lee of Charlestown and Boston, a Vice President of the John Hancock Insurance Company. The interviewer is Ed Martin. The place was Boston. The date was May 19, 1964.