

Norman M. Clapp Oral History Interview—7/8/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Clapp, a Wisconsin political figure and Administrator for the Rural Electrification Administration (1961-1969), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) commitment to the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), Clapp's own appointment as REA administrator, and JFK's campaigning in Wisconsin, among other issues.

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Norman M. Clapp

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Oral History Interview

with

NORMAN M. CLAPP

July 8, 1964

By Layne Beaty

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BEATY: We're visiting with Mr. Norman M. Clapp, the Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration [R.E.A.] of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Norman, you were associated with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] in certain ways in the State of Minnesota, I think, several years ago.

CLAPP: That would be Wisconsin, Layne. Yes, I think probably the first time I met Senator Kennedy was when he came to Milwaukee to be the principal speaker at a Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner of the State Democratic Party. I believe that would have been in 1957. I had been a delegate to the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1956 as one of the slate pledged to Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] in his campaign for the presidency. We, of course, heard a great deal about Senator Kennedy because he was a candidate for vice presidential nomination at that Convention. I did not meet him at that time and of course I was in no position to support him because most of us from Wisconsin were elected on the slate pledged to Senator Kefauver. Senator Kefauver was also a candidate for the vice presidential nomination when he failed in his bid for the presidential nomination. Most of our delegation was committed to Senator Kefauver for the presidential nomination, and we stuck with him through the vice presidential balloting.

It was the following year, I think, that Senator Kennedy was the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner speaker in Milwaukee and I met him on that occasion. Then, my next and more personal contact with him came again the following year. I was a candidate for election to Congress from the third congressional district in southwestern Wisconsin. Pat Lucey [Patrick

J. Lucey], who was the State Chairman of the Democratic Party and a very close friend of mine had a special interest, I think, in the third congressional district, since he had come from that district originally himself. He felt very strongly, and I certainly agreed, that Senator Kennedy could be very helpful in my campaign if we could persuade him to come into the district somewhere along the course of the campaign to give me a lift.

By this time, of course, he was attracting a good deal of attention. He was building from the point where he left off at the Democratic Convention in '56 and in this area of Wisconsin which is normally a conservative area—and also an area with heavy Catholic population, at least in certain communities—there was a great interest in his candidacy for the presidency if this was what he should finally decide to do.

I believe it was through direct negotiation between Pat Lucey and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] that it was arranged that Senator Kennedy would stop in La Crosse at the airport on his way to the plowing matches in Iowa. This was to be an evening stop. It was to last no more than a half hour so that the Senator could get to Iowa and arrive there in good season for the plowing matches next day. He was to arrive in La Crosse at 8 o'clock.

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That day I'd had a reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal*, Loren Osman [Loren H. Osman], with me as I was campaigning through the district. We had a very full schedule, and it had all been keyed to arriving at the airport just a little before 8 o'clock. We stopped to eat at Onalaska. The service was slow, and as a result in order to get to the airport by 8 o'clock I had to leave before my steak was ready. I rushed out to the airport, and I arrived there exactly at 8 o'clock only to find that the Senator had already been on the ground for half an hour. Something had gone wrong with the calculation of the time between Boston and La Crosse, and the Kennedy party thought they were arriving half an hour late—actually they were arriving half an hour early. Daylight saving time played a part in this miscalculation—I forgot just which way it worked. In any event he'd been on the ground for half an hour and my committee was rushing around all excited and embarrassed that I had kept the Senator waiting. Everyone was excited except the Senator and he greeted me with a grin and welcomed me to La Crosse. [Laughter]

I was concerned that this had happened this way, particularly in view of the fact that I know it took a lot of persuasion to get him to work this stop into that very tight schedule. But the easy way and the good natured way in which he responded to this emergency certainly made a deep impression on me and put him very high in my book as a human being.

BEATY: Norman, you mentioned that he was out for the Jackson Day Jefferson-Jackson—wait a minute—

CLAPP: Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner.

BEATY: Jefferson-Jackson Day speech in Milwaukee, I've forgotten which year.

CLAPP: Well now I said '57, but it could have been '58. It was prior to his campaign for delegates in Wisconsin.

BEATY: At any rate, did you note anything particularly at that time about his skill in speaking, or the way he was received by people? Did he go over in as big a way then as he might have done a little later? What I'm getting at is did you see any growth in his ability to warm up to a crowd or to warm them up between that time and say the campaign of '60?

CLAPP: I don't think there was any difference in his ability to win the crowd. There certainly was this difference. In 1958 or 1957, whatever the time was, there was considerable suspicion among Democrats and Liberals generally in Wisconsin of Senator Kennedy as a Liberal. There was concern over what his position was with respect to Senator McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy]. The McCarthy issue had been a red hot issue in Wisconsin. It had stirred up some very intense emotions on both sides and there was a feeling that Senator Kennedy had not been as strong in taking a position against what McCarthy stood for

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as Liberals generally and Democrats generally in Wisconsin would have hoped. This was one factor. Another factor was that, after all, Senator Kennedy was a United States senator and had previously been a congressman from Massachusetts—and more particularly, Boston, Massachusetts. There were many people in Wisconsin closely oriented to agriculture who were concerned about his lack of familiarity with agricultural issues and his lack of background on agricultural problems. This was the situation in, as I say, '57 or '58—whatever the year was when he came to that dinner.

By 1960 much had changed with respect to this, and he had overcome a lot of this suspicion. He was showing definitely that in going about the country, particularly in getting acquainted in rural areas, he not only was willing to learn, but was learning a great deal, about agricultural problems and agricultural issues.

BEATY: How did he show this?

CLAPP: Well I remember this in the primary campaign of '60. Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], of course, made this one of the primary issues against Senator Kennedy in the primary battle that spring. Senator Humphrey had been very close to agriculture. He exploited his association with agriculture and his acquaintance with agricultural issues, and contrasted it to Senator Kennedy's background and Senator Kennedy's lack of understanding, so called, of agricultural problems and issues. Senator Kennedy in his swing through Wisconsin in the spring of '60 spoke at Reedsburg, Wisconsin. I remember the talk he gave. I believe this was in the official press release so it can be checked out, but he said in the course of his remarks that day that one of the great compensations of running for president of the United States was that it gave a person a greater insight into the size and scope of this country. He remarked it gave him a rare opportunity to learn all of the different kinds of problems people face, and then went on to speak about the problems of the dairy industry. Here again this, I think, tells a story about

Kennedy the man. He was a man who always was learning and he was not afraid to admit that he was learning.

In between that time—and this may be interesting—in between '57 and early '58 and 1960, as I say, a lot of people in Wisconsin were very conscious of his eastern urban background and eastern urban voting record on some agricultural issues. One of them was Bob Moses who at that time was radio director for the Wisconsin Farmers Union. He had a regular daily radio program in which he discussed rural issues from the standpoint of the Farmers Union legislative programs. He had had some rather sharp correspondence with Senator Kennedy in 1956 and among other things complained about the Senator's voting record on rural electrification as well as price support legislation. Senator Kennedy has responded with both good nature and an open mind and said in effect, "Well if my record is not what you think it ought to be I would appreciate your suggestions as to what it ought to be from here on." So Bob Moses—I know this from my own conversations with—undertook to send him periodic letters on farm issues

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and to offer him all the advice he could as to what the Senator ought to be doing on these issues. And it was on an R.E.A. vote, now I'm not sure whether this was the Humphrey-Price vote but it was one of those votes of rather critical importance to the rural electric cooperatives, the Senator sent Bob Moses a telegram and called attention in no uncertain terms to the favorable vote he had cast on this particular issue even though the citizens of Boston and the citizens of Massachusetts might not have any direct concern. This correspondence between Bob Moses and Senator Kennedy I think was another part of this educational process.

And incidentally, when Senator Kennedy came to La Crosse in the campaign in 1958, Bob Moses was on hand at the airport that evening with a tape recorder. He not only taped the Senator's remarks at the airport but then persuaded the Senator to adjourn to a private room there in the airport where he taped a 15 or 20 minute interview with the Senator, all on farm issues. These, I think, are all straws in the wind as to how the Senator responded to this feeling in the Middle West and Wisconsin in particular. This indicates the progress he made in overcoming some of the hesitancy and some of this suspicion between 1957, '58 and 1960.

BEATY: Mr. Clapp, you were in the newspaper business in Wisconsin, I think.

CLAPP: Yes, I had a weekly newspaper in Lancaster, Wisconsin, a town of 3,500 people in the corner county of southwestern Wisconsin. It borders on Illinois to the south and Iowa and the Mississippi River on the west. This is Grant County. I was in the newspaper business there for about 14 years.

BEATY: Up until then?

CLAPP: Well I sold the paper in '58.

BEATY: What were you doing between '58 and '61?

CLAPP: In '58 I was running for Congress and I decided I couldn't very well run a campaign and a newspaper at the same time. I had an option to sell the paper so I did, effective about the first of March. So from March until December of '58 I was engaged in a political campaign and the aftermath of a political campaign in which I came within 2,400 votes of defeating the incumbent Republican Congressman [Gardner R. Withrow] in a Republican district.

In '59 the State Democratic Party undertook a rather ambitious organizational program to get ready for '60, and two of us defeated congressional candidates were added to the staff of the party as paid organizers in the state. I had the western half—actually geographically it was more than half—of the state. Jim Magellas, who was then a candidate for Congress over in the Sixth District, from Fond du Lac, had the eastern part of the state. So from January of '59

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until, oh, I think April 1st of '60, I was doing active political organization work for the Democratic Party in, oh, I think about 30 or 35 counties of the state. This included the 3rd, 9th, and 10th congressional districts and one or two counties out of the first and second districts.

BEATY: What was your role in the campaign, Norman?

CLAPP: I had the opportunity to work rather closely with the Kennedy organization, as a staff organizer for the party. We, of course, had to be available to both candidates in the presidential primary campaign. We had to be very careful to be sure that we were available to help either candidate in whatever way we could. As it worked out, of course, the Humphrey campaign was tied in much closer with the Democratic organization at the county level than the Kennedy campaign could have been because Senator Humphrey had been in and out of Wisconsin for many years—Wisconsin Democrats had looked to him for many years as almost one of their representatives in the Senate. Consequently the majority of the county chairmen knew him personally and knew the people around him. When the Humphrey people had to organize itineraries and do the other chores that are part of a campaign of that kind they had immediate direct contact with the people who could get the job done without going through any of the state Democratic Party headquarters staff. As a result I got into the actual mechanics of the Humphrey campaign only slightly. I was in on some occasions.

The Kennedy people, on the other hand, were starting from scratch pretty much so far as the rank and file organization of the Democratic Party in Wisconsin was concerned. As a result they turned to Magellas and me for the kind of help which the Humphrey organization turned directly to the county organizations for. This meant that in the third district, for instance, I was working very closely with Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings] who had been a lifelong friend of Jack Kennedy's. Lem had volunteered his services as a friend to help in the campaign. They sent him to Wisconsin and assigned him to the third congressional district of Wisconsin. He was not acquainted there so it fell to my lot to try to

get Lem acquainted so that he could plan itineraries and build mailing lists and that sort of thing. This was a very close and very rewarding experience from a personal standpoint.

BEATY: When Senator Kennedy came to Wisconsin were you in personal contact with him?

CLAPP: Yes, whenever he was in the third district I was always with him. I forget offhand whether I was ever with him outside the third congressional district. In September of 1959 he made a preliminary tour through several of the congressional districts in Wisconsin, including the third. I was with him practically all of the time he spent in the third district in that swing. He came into the third from Madison; he stopped in Darlington where I met him, and then spoke at the State College at Platteville. I picked up again at Lancaster which was my home town. We had arrangements there for a courtyard appearance about, well it was middle afternoon.

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BEATY: A courtyard appearance?

CLAPP: In Lancaster, yes.

BEATY: In the yard of courthouse? Is that what you mean?

CLAPP: Yes. We had a platform on an old truck bed.

BEATY: Yeah.

CLAPP: And he spoke out in the open air. The crowd was rather disappointing to the Kennedy people. I think they expected something considerably larger than it was. We went on to Prairie du Chien that night. There we had about 800 people at an indoor meeting. The meeting went very well. I thought the appearance in Lancaster was a good appearance, but when you scatter three or four hundred people over the outdoors it looks pretty thin in spots, and I think this accounted for some of the unfavorable reaction that the Kennedy campaign people had.

BEATY: Did you get a reaction from the Senator himself?

CLAPP: Oh I think—I had no direct reaction—but I think he probably was somewhat disappointed. At Prairie du Chien the reaction was quite different. Now there we didn't have many more people but it was a full house and it looked better. Everything went smoothly at the meeting, and I think he finished off the day happy.

BEATY: Now, Norman, you're the Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration and have been since the beginning of the Kennedy Administration, and I know that prior to that when you were in the newspaper

business you were a great supporter of rural electrification. I suppose you would say that President Kennedy was a great supporter of R.E.A. I'd like for you to trace back and see and tell us if you can when Mr. Kennedy first showed an interest in REA activity and also if you will how it was that you came to be named Administrator.

CLAPP: I don't know if I can pinpoint exactly when Senator Kennedy showed this interest in rural electrification, as you put it, Layne. I think it goes back to the reaction of rural people I described in '56, '57. I think it goes back to the exchange of correspondence between the Senator and Bob Moses, and I'm sure there must have been similar exchanges with many agricultural leaders all over the country. I do know that from the telegram which Bob Moses got after that one R.E.A. vote that he was very conscious of the importance of rural electrification as an issue and he was interested in learning about it. He was interested in building the right kind of a record on rural electrification.

Now beyond that he was a speaker at the annual meeting of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association [N.R.E.C.A.] here in Washington, D.C., in 1959 I believe. He followed President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] on the program.

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President Eisenhower had, in the words of some of the co-op people who reported the meeting, attempted to lecture the N.R.E.C.A. on living up to its civic obligation to accept a higher rate of interest on R.E.A. loans. Senator Kennedy followed President Eisenhower and gave a ripsnorting pro-R.E.A. speech, which went over one hundred percent with those in attendance. I think this would certainly be one of the overt acts to which you can trace his commitment to rural electrification. Then, of course, there's his Billings speech in the '60 campaign, and contains probably one of the finest statements of the spirit and aims of rural electrification that has ever been made. This was the part pledging to restore R.E.A. to its former role of preeminence, freeing it from political interference and the threat of higher interest rates, so that this remarkable American institution could get on with its work of bringing low cost electric service to rural people. This certainly placed the Senator four-square behind rural electrification and all that it stood for, and certainly in my tenure as Administrator of R.E.A. this has been the basic mandate that I've tried to follow.

Now coming on down to the time when he was actually president of the United States we did go through a critical period so far as the R.E.A. program is concerned. In the summer and fall of 1961 we were trying to get our budget in shape for fiscal year 1963. We had requested a higher figure than the Budget Bureau was inclined to grant us. I felt very strongly that if we were going to do the job which I thought the President expected us to do we weren't going to do it on that basis. Among other things, we were going to have to emphasize the importance of generation and transmission if the rural electric cooperatives were to become a permanent segment of this industry, and if the rural people who had put so much into these cooperatives were not going to be sold out in the long run. I undertook to buck this thing up to the White House as best I could. I discussed it first with Ed Bayley [Edwin R. Bayley], who is a very close friend of mine. He had been with the *Milwaukee Journal*, he had been on Governor Nelson's [Gaylord Nelson] staff as Executive Secretary before coming to

Washington in 1961. He came down here to take a position. I believe originally he came here as Director of Information for the Peace Corps, then he was moved over to the White House on special assignment. I spelled this out to Ed Bayley. I took it up with Pat Lucey who I know was close to the President and had frequent access to him. I took it up with John Bailey [John Moran Bailey], the Chairman of the National Democratic Committee. The point I was trying to make with all of these people was that it was extremely important that the President set a very clear image on this issue because of his background which still plagued him in rural areas—a background of a city congressman and New England Senator from a highly urbanized area. I felt that we could make the R.E.A. program one of the showcase pieces of the Kennedy Administration, but we couldn't do it just by going along with the old stance of business as usual. I had no direct knowledge of this but I was told—I think this came secondhand—I think Ed Bayley told me that Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] had told him, but however it came, I was told that this question backed up by a memo

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which I had prepared for the use of anyone who was interested and willing to read it had actually gone to the President himself for final determination. Whether this is true or not I cannot say personally. I do know, however, that it had reached the point that Secretary Freeman [Orville L. Freeman] and I were invited to come to the White House to discuss the question. I believe Assistant Secretary Robertson [Walter S. Robertson] was with us that day, and I believe Mr. Grant, the budget officer of the department here was with us. I don't recall who else might have been along, but it was not a large meeting. We met with Ted Sorensen and Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] and we went over this question in some detail. Out of this came the decision to go for the higher budget figure, not the full amount we had asked for but enough to make it the highest budget request a President had ever recommended for R.E.A., up to that point. More than that he made it a point—and this was discussed at the meeting with Sorensen and Mike Feldman—he made it a point to mention R.E.A. in his State of the Union message, and mentioned generation and transmission particularly. He also highlighted generation and transmission as a critical part of the program in his Budget Message.

BEATY: Do I understand from this, Norman, that the State of Massachusetts has no rural electrification in it?

CLAPP: They have no R.E.A. program.

BEATY: So Senator Kennedy would have had no contact with R.E.A. in relation to his own state.

CLAPP: That's correct. Massachusetts is one of four states that has no rural electrification financed by R.E.A.

BEATY: So his education about R.E.A. came after he began to look at the national picture.

CLAPP: And this is not hard to understand. You asked, Layne, about the circumstances leading up to my appointment as Administrator. I suppose this is a tangled skein to unravel, but my relationship with the Senator had always been very cordial. I thought a great deal of him as I came to know him, and I can only hope that he had reciprocated this feeling to some extent. I do know that after the election when the Senator was in Palm Beach or Miami, wherever it was that he was spending his time—this was where he had had his meeting with Mr. Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] following the election, and where he was considering the appointment of cabinet people and other key officials—he called Pat Lucey and told Pat—and this is the way that Pat related it to me—that he had a lot of lists submitted to him of people that ought to be included in his Administration, but he said the way this thing is shaping up there aren't many people from Wisconsin. I was one of the persons that he asked Pat about, and he said that he had been considering the possibility of appointing me to some regulatory commission. Pat asked me—we were talking about this very seriously at a party that was held at the Loraine Hotel. I guess it was the night following the inauguration of Governor Nelson.

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It was Governor Nelson's party and it was in the Governor's suite at the Loraine Hotel. Mrs. Clapp [Analoeyce Elkington Clapp] and I were there. Pat Lucey then told me about this call that he had had from the President-elect and he wanted to know what I would think about Federal Communications Commission. Well, I said I appreciated the honor of being thought of in connection with a spot of that kind, but I felt that I had no particular qualifications for this sort of an assignment. I was not a lawyer and although I suppose this is not essential, this certainly is one way you qualify for that type of quasi-judicial function. Well, Pat said, I shouldn't turn this sort of thing down if I had a chance to take it. I told him I appreciated that but in justice not only to the President-elect but also to myself I didn't want to take on something I didn't feel I could do a job at. I said if it is a matter of regulatory commissions the only one in which I would feel any strong motivation would be the Interstate Commerce Commission because as a small town newspaper editor I'd had more than uncommon interest in the dwindling transportation in rural areas. I had some rather strong feelings about the need for coordinated transportation policy in which railroads, air and trucks would play a coordinated role instead of each one trying to spread all over the lot and do everybody else's job as well as their own. But although the interest was there I had the same reservations about whether or not I would fit into that kind of a slot. Furthermore I had some misgivings as to whether I would particularly like this kind of position.

I told Pat that before I gave any answer on this I'd like to talk with my brother, Gordon [Gordon Clapp]. "Well," he said, "you ought to talk with him, in fact I'd suggest you call him right now." I hadn't put quite that degree of urgency on this thing up until that time, but apparently the President wanted an answer. Well, as a result I left the party and I put in a call to my brother. I told him that this was being discussed and asked him what he thought about it. Well he said that he didn't think that I'd be particularly happy on the Interstate Commerce Commission. He cited the fact that it was pretty seriously bogged down with

procedural red tape and was rather a sedentary type of operation so far as the commissions were concerned; he thought it wouldn't appeal to me.

BEATY: What was your brother Gordon's position at that time?

CLAPP: Well, at the time he and Dave Lilienthal [David E. Lilienthal] had a consulting firm in New York in which they dealt in matters of resource development, I think entirely outside of continental limits of the United States. But I called him because he and I were close for many years, and he had been with T.V.A. [Tennessee Valley Authority] for over 21 years and knew the government mill. I'd known some of it from earlier days but from the congressional point of view. I'd been on a Senator's staff up on the Hill. I never had any experiences in the Executive Branch so—

BEATY: This was Senator LaFollette [Robert Marion LaFollette]?

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CLAPP: Yes. So I was anxious to get his judgment on it. I knew that he knew me and he knew the government service. So I went back and told Pat this and he said, "Well, let's see what happens." I said, "I'm going to New York, I'm going to see Gordon about some matters anyway very soon, I'll probably go down to Washington from there.

I did go to New York; I was there a couple of days. Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] called me while I was there, and I guess he was interested in talking—he followed me there, but when he had discovered that I was staying with Gordon, he wanted to talk to Gordon too. His question was had I given any thought to joining the New Frontier. I told him I was coming to Washington and if he was interested in talking about it, I was certainly very interested in talking to him about it. I came to Washington, I saw Ralph, and he suggested that I ought to look into the possibility of an assignment with A.I.D. [Aid for International Development]. I forget whether—no, I think first of all we discussed this regulatory commission possibility, and I told him what I told Pat, that I really didn't feel qualified, and this didn't make sense from my standpoint or the President's. He said—I'm not sure of the chronology—but he was going to be seeing the President and Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], I believe it was that evening. I went to see Bobby myself—all of this is rather unclear now as to just what the chronology was—but I saw Bobby within a day or so of when I saw Ralph Dungan. I think it was Bobby who suggested the possibility of some kind of foreign assignment. He wanted to know how this would strike me. I said I didn't know how it would to me but I was sure it would appeal to my wife. Well, he said, think it over and go back and talk to Ralph. He said he would be seeing Ralph, and the idea was to see what was available. I went back to see Ralph and we discussed it; he made arrangements for me to go over and talk with some people at, I call it A.I.D., but it was I.C.A. [International Cooperation Administration] at that time, and there was some talk about missions to the Upper Volta, or Taiwan, oh what's the—off the coast of India.

BEATY: Oh, Ceylon?

CLAPP: Ceylon. But there was nothing very definite and I couldn't get very excited about any of these things. I thought that probably the best thing to do was to pass it by. I went back to see Ralph and I told him that while all of these things were interesting and I certainly didn't want to say that I wouldn't consider some of them—none of these were very definite, you understand—I certainly wouldn't say that I wouldn't consider some kind of foreign assignment but probably it didn't hold any real attraction for me. We had pretty much decided to leave it on that basis. I was going back to Wisconsin and if something came along—he knew how I felt, and if something came along that he thought would make sense, why I'd probably hear from him. If not, this was probably the end of it. I don't know what day of the week this was but I believe the Democratic National Committee was in town—Pat Lucey was in town—and I believe it was the day before I was planning to go back to Wisconsin.

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I saw Pat Lucey, I bumped into him over at the Carlton Hotel. He asked me what I was doing and whether or not I was getting ready to join the New Frontier. I told him very frankly that we had talked and that Ralph had been very helpful; Bobby had been very cordial and had expressed his willingness and a desire to see that I came with the federal government but I very frankly didn't see anything specific that just made sense. And—this was really an offhand remark, I don't know really what prompted me to say it—I said, “You know in trying to turn this thing over in my mind there's only one spot that I can think of where I would have anything to offer, where I would have some feeling that I could do myself credit and do the President credit, that this would be as Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration,” and I supposed that that was not vacant. My understanding was that Mr. Hamil had some time still to serve in his term. I don't know whether Pat said it at that moment or if it was later in the afternoon that I heard from him, but anyway he said that he had made some inquiries and he had discovered that Mr. Hamil [David A. Hamil] had indicated that he would be willing to resign if it was the President's pleasure. Well, I said, “If there is a vacancy there, I would be interested.”

I forgot now just how it developed from that point, but it was just a matter of a few days when I was told that this had been checked out with the President and the President had agreed that he would appoint me as Administrator of R.E.A., that I should get in touch with Secretary Freeman and arrange the details through Tom Hughes [Thomas L. Hughes]. I left Washington the night before the—no, I left Washington the night people were coming in for the Inauguration—I got out ahead of the big snowstorm. I guess I'd been told of this agreement on the part of the President before I left because I saw Tom Hughes that afternoon. Then over the next couple of weeks I was in touch with Hughes by telephone, and in the course of time the announcement came through that the President intended to appoint me. This was an announcement that was made a little ahead of the actual nomination, in order that I might be able to go to the annual meeting of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in Dallas, which I believe was February 13th or 14th, in some kind of official capacity. Actually, I went down there as Administrator Designate, but I actually

had not been nominated. The nomination came through later, and I was confirmed by the Senate I think on the 3rd or the 6th of March. That was the story.

BEATY: Well, what would you consider maybe would be the influence that President Kennedy might have had over the R.E.A. from the White House? Now, of course, he selected you to be the Administrator and he'd already manifested interest in the R.E.A. even though he had none in his native state of Massachusetts, but he saw in R.E.A. something that was benefiting people across the country. I don't know if you've ever thought of it—maybe you have—here was the head of the government and here was R.E.A. and there was some link there. The R.E.A. was getting strength from the head of the government. Did you ever observe this or could you define it in some way?

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CLAPP: Well, there's no question but what we would never have been able to move the R.E.A. program the way we did if we had not had this commitment of the President himself to the program. You ask as to what ways this manifested itself. First of all I think it became very clear, just this budget decision in itself made it very clear that there was a strong mandate from the President to move ahead with the program. This was the subject of some complaints as far as those who opposed the program and it certainly was the cause of tremendous inspiration and revival on the part of those people out in the country who had been struggling along in rural electrification under what they felt were very adverse circumstances for a number of years. I could feel this in going around and talking to R.E.A. borrower audiences—just a tremendous lift among these people in the feeling that the President of the United States was now on their side. I think it played its part, it certainly played its part in our ability to do well on budget matters, not only for fiscal year '63 but for fiscal year '64 and it, I think, had had a carryover in fiscal '65. Certainly from the standpoint of my own feeling and operation it made a great deal of difference in a feeling of assurance that I had this kind of backup if circumstances required.

BEATY: Did you ever—did the President ever communicate personally with you, or directly with you, I mean perhaps through intermediaries, after you became Administrator, communicate any message to you or ask you for any information about REA other than that which you've described?

CLAPP: I don't recall, and I think I would recall if there had ever been any message from the President himself. I was in contact off and on with Ted Sorensen on R.E.A. matters. I don't recall the specific instances. Oh, I do recall one, this was when the Committee on Federal Credit Programs reported. They had a section in this report that at least the briefing officer interpreted as being critical of the two percent interest rate for R.E.A. loans. I called Ted Sorensen about that and I reminded him that we'd gone to considerable trouble to build a clear and sharp image of the Administration on R.E.A. matters, and this sort of thing coming from the Administration although not coming from R.E.A. or the White House as such, certainly had the effect of knocking the edges off the sharpness of the image. Ted responded by saying that he had been assured that there was

nothing in this report that was inconsistent with the Administration program and it had gone out under that assurance; he would check into it. I sent him a memorandum pointing out specifically why I was concerned about it. I believe that was the last I ever heard on it but normally this is the kind of contact that went on periodically between me and the White House—mostly through Ted Sorensen, occasionally with Mike Feldman.

BEATY: The fact that in some quarters there is outright opposition to R.E.A. and the concept of R.E.A., I suppose mainly with some of the private power companies, to your knowledge did President Kennedy ever involve himself personally in this dispute? Did he ever take any action directly with the private electric companies or speak out on this subject?

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CLAPP: I forget the occasion, but it was either at a press conference or at some meeting with business groups. He was accosted by someone over the R.E.A. issue. This person was complaining that the R.E.A. program was financing competition for tax paying private enterprise. The President replied rather emphatically that to the best of this information the power companies were doing exceedingly well, and he could see no reason for complaint. That would be one occasion. Then of course he made a speech out at the ceremonies dedicating Oahe Dam in South Dakota, in which he spelled out rather emphatically that the job of rural electrification was not done—I forget whether this was a note from Ted Sorensen or if it was a remark in a telephone conversation, but he wanted to know if I had read the President's speech at Oahe, and what did I think of that? I told him that I thought it was great, and certainly was gratified that the President would speak out at that time. It came within a week I believe of a statement—well I guess Senator Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] was out in that area the week following and made a statement on rural electrification in which he said practically the opposite—the job of rural electrification was done. Those are two occasions that I remember. Well there was a third. Some of us were over at the White House for a ceremony in which the President signed the first—signed the contract with the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association to supply some administrative services and survey personnel for the exploration of the possibilities of rural electrification in Latin America. The President made a statement on that occasion which again referred to the tremendous success of rural electrification in this country and the value of these lessons learned here in helping our neighbors to similar jobs in their countries. These would be the occasions that I remember.

BEATY: This discussion with Mr. Clapp will be continued on the other side of the tape.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

BEATY: Continuing with part two of a discussion with Norman M. Clapp, Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration.

CLAPP: Layne, I think before we conclude this tape, if you're interested in stories that

tell something about Senator Kennedy or President Kennedy the man, this story may be of interest.

Senator Kennedy came to La Crosse, Wisconsin, in the latter part of the presidential campaign. I suppose it would have been late October, possibly very early November in 1960. This was a Sunday appearance at the airport again at La Crosse. There were probably about 15,000 people there waiting for him to arrive. He arrived on the plane. A group of us who were on the reception committee met him. We were to escort him to the platform. The crowd was on the other side of the big wire fence that enclosed the field, and he did then what I have seen him to do on other occasions since he was President. He brushed off the reception committee and made a beeline for the fence and went down the fence shaking a few hands and touching as many

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hands and as many people as he could. The Governor and I tagged along some few yards behind. As he circled back to head for the speaking platform which was set back from the fence, oh, I suppose a hundred feet, and as we turned to follow him a group of various people who apparently had infiltrated the area by that time were around him. I didn't see the start of this incident but I came up very shortly after it started. All I saw with my own eyes was a girl who, rather disheveled, wearing a leather jacket, I suppose somewhere in her teens, completely distraught, was at that point being restrained by one or two other people. She had apparently tried to kiss Senator Kennedy. I had not seen this part, but she was practically in tears. Now, I suppose many politicians sensing this kind of scene would have turned and gotten out of there as fast as possible, but as I came up on this little tableau, Senator Kennedy was standing I suppose four or five feet away from the girl. He turned to her and with a grin said, "I think we better not, it might ruin both of us." [Laughter] Well the way he said it—his whole manner and everything—tells the story and certainly told the story to me at that time of a man who in spite of his position and historical role was still a very human individual and a man of kindness with compassion for this poor girl who obviously was doing something that she probably would have thought better of at another time. With that remark he went on very calmly and without any great to do.

BEATY: Yeah.

CLAPP: I thought it was a very illuminating incident and again put him at the head of my list.

BEATY: He seemed to be completely in possession of all his faculties at all times in any situation.

CLAPP: And with a sense of humor and detachment that could allow him to adjust to the situation.

BEATY: Well, that's the most interesting.

CLAPP: A further detail—Some months after the Inauguration a friend of mine sent me a cover piece from the magazine section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He said that he'd recognized somebody in that cover piece. Here was a picture taken of Senator Kennedy speaking from that platform that day at La Crosse. I had introduced the Senator and was seated right next to the podium. It had been a windy day and he was having trouble keeping his papers on the podium, so I'd been trying to hang on to his papers and get them out of his way as he was through with them. The interesting thing about this is that the picture had been used from a book someone—I forget the author—had published. I call him an author but he was a photographer, and the book was in the nature of a photographic history of the campaign. The picture had been taken from the book and put on the magazine cover. In the book it was identified as a shot taken somewhere in Ohio, I believe. But it was not Ohio, it was La Crosse, Wisconsin, and it was the day this episode occurred.

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BEATY: Well, Norman, you've had many interesting experiences and many things to remember about President Kennedy. I want to thank you for sharing some of them with us.

CLAPP: Well, I appreciate the opportunity. He was a great man and he had a faculty of making people feel a very close personal bond with him.

BEATY: We've been visiting with Mr. Norman M. Clapp, the Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, on July 8, 1964.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

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