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Dick Wright
DICK WRIGHT

March 14-1973
DATE

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Dick Wright

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Oral History Interview

with

DICK WRIGHT

February 8, 1965
Chester, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with Mr. Dick Wright of Chester, West Virginia, recorded in Mr. Wright's office in his motel on February 8, 1965. Mr. Wright, did Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. come into Weirton to campaign for Senator Kennedy?

WRIGHT: FRD, Jr. was here in Weirton for one day when we had a small luncheon for him. Then we worked at the mill gate greeting people at the mill gate.

YOUNG: Do you think that he had the same pronounced effect here that he had in the coal fields of southern West Virginia?

WRIGHT: Anybody with the name of Roosevelt has a good effect in Hancock County.

YOUNG: So it didn't matter otherwise. What about any other special people that came in with the Kennedys other than the Senator's brother and Franklin Roosevelt? Were there any other outsiders who came in to help campaign?

WRIGHT: Offhand I can't remember any. Those three had the biggest effect in Hancock County.

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YOUNG: Did the clergymen in Hancock County take any stand on the president's religion in the primary?

WRIGHT: I'm not positive on that.

YOUNG: But as far as you can remember, religion wasn't a great issue?

WRIGHT: Never heard it mentioned here.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, was there any feeling then in the general election? The point I'm getting to is this: Did the Democratic party, then, in Hancock County close ranks in the fall election against Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], or was there still any feeling that the President's Catholicism might be harmful to the party?

WRIGHT: In Hancock County we closed ranks after the primary. I believe that with Jack Kennedy on the ticket it helped our Democratic ticket.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, would you say a few words, then, about the political complexion of Hancock County? What kind of county is it in terms of Republicans and Democrats? And how well did the President do then in the fall general election with this registration background in mind?

WRIGHT: He did substantially as good as could be expected in Hancock County. We're a Democratic county, and we normally go Democratic. We have one candidate on the Republican ticket. Normally, Arch Moore [Alfred J. Moore] takes the first district.

YOUNG: But, otherwise, the county is generally Democratic anyhow?

WRIGHT: Yes sir. Mostly Democratic.

YOUNG: Let's go, then, to the Kennedy years, Mr. Wright. Would you make any comment on the viewpoint of local people with respect to President Kennedy's conduct of the presidency -- his years in office?

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WRIGHT: I, being an older person, felt that a younger person had a good effect on this country and the other countries, too. For that reason, I felt that he made a good president and had a good effect on the country.

YOUNG: Was Hancock County generally prosperous during this period?

WRIGHT: We generally are up in here. We're a little bit above the average in the state of West Virginia on account of Weirton Steel and the potteries here. Even in bad times Weirton Steel runs real good.

YOUNG: Did the President make any special appeal, when he was here as a candidate, to either steelworkers or pottery workers in terms of specific suggestions?

WRIGHT: As I remember it, no. He just went out to sell himself, and I guess he did that.

YOUNG: Well, I think we would say that Hancock County is not part of Appalachia -- the part of West Virginia that we hear about being depressed. With this in mind, can you think of any Kennedy legislation or any Kennedy programs that local people were interested in?

WRIGHT: The older people were interested in Medicare.

YOUNG: Was there any particular reaction locally to such programs as the Peace Corps -- that sort of thing?

WRIGHT: Well, the feeling among the people in the county was it was good.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, you served as the Kennedy campaign chairman. Then right after that, you were elected county chairman. Is that correct?

WRIGHT: That's right, sire.

YOUNG: Did you ever pick up any criticism of the President? In other words, among your fellow Democrats were there any disappointments with the Kennedy Administration that you can remember?

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WRIGHT: No, I can't remember of any criticism at all.

YOUNG: It was the assumption of the Democratic party, of course, that the incumbent would receive the nomination as is normal. Do you think that President Kennedy, had he lived to be the candidate in '64, would have carried the county by a smaller or a larger majority?

WRIGHT: I think he would have carried the county about the same as he did before maybe a little better.

YOUNG: Well, could you suggest any particular reason for his improving, realizing, of

course, that how he carried it would have depended on who was running against him?

WRIGHT: That's probably true, but I don't think it would have made any difference who was running against him; he would have carried the county, I'm sure. Probably about the same majority as before, maybe a little better in general.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, you talked about volunteers and financing; I'd like to go back to this again. How many precincts are there in this particular county, or how many precincts were there in 1960?

WRIGHT: Thirty-nine precincts in Hancock County.

YOUNG: Well, you had workers, then, spotted in every precinct in the county in the Kennedy primary?

WRIGHT: We averaged four and five workers to every precinct. Volunteer workers.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, one of the books about the West Virginia primary made a great point of the fact that in a hilly country, where people live in remote areas, it's necessary to supply cars to get the voters to the polls. Is this a problem in Hancock County, or does Weirton make this unnecessary?

WRIGHT: No. That is a problem in the country here in

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Hancock County. We overcome that by these donations we received, and what the Democratic party gave us in the general election. In the primary I received nothing.

YOUNG: YOU had care, then, in each one of the county precincts for this purpose?

WRIGHT: That's right, sir.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, do you have anything more, then, about the Kennedy years that you would like to add to the interview?

WRIGHT: I was out at Los Angeles at the Democratic National Convention as an alternate delegate. We were impressed with Jack Kennedy out there. I heard his speech at the ball park. I also heard his acceptance speech at the auditorium.

YOUNG: Would you say anything about the confusion of the split within the WEST

Virginia delegation with respect to whether or not Kennedy should get the votes of the members of the delegation any of the infighting that might be interesting?

WRIGHT: There wasn't much. The ones that went out there to vote for Kennedy voted for Kennedy; the ones that was going to vote for Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] voted for Humphrey. There wasn't much talking back and forth. They just went out there with that, and they didn't quarrel about it or nothing.

YOUNG: I have heard, and I am sure at the time the rumor was circulated throughout the state, that a vote for Humphrey was really a vote for Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson.] Do you think the voters in Hancock County were aware of this before the primary election? Was there any issue at all?

WRIGHT: I don't believe that was any issue at all here. There wasn't too much of it. It was carried quite a bit in the papers, but sometimes they don't pay too much attention to the papers.

YOUNG: We think Mr. Wright, of the Kennedy years as

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being important in terms of civil rights. Is race prejudice and are civil rights an issue in this particular part of West Virginia?

WRIGHT: In here, our schools have been integrated for a number of years. It isn't exactly a hundred percent, but we haven't got too many problems on it.

YOUNG: But as far as hatreds and that sort of thing existing, if these exist, they're not very open?

WRIGHT: That is right.

YOUNG: So that the Johnson candidacy wouldn't be relevant on this issue?

WRIGHT: No, sir. I feel that in the 1964 candidate, as far as our colored vote here, that President Johnson carried it between 90 to 98 per cent.

YOUNG: And you are saying this just to indicate that back in 1960 race prejudice as such wasn't really an issue in the campaign in any way; that civil rights was not an issue?

WRIGHT: That's right sir.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, did you make any special attempt to appeal to the many nationality groups that exist in the Weirton area? In fact, would you list a few of them for me? Workers that have come from all over Europe and all over the world, so to speak.

WRIGHT: Well, we didn't make no issue of any one group. We just tried to get the whole group to vote for Jack Kennedy. We didn't make special for any group.

YOUNG: In other words, there wasn't speeches in Italian or speeches in any special language or anything like that? YOU just invited them to the general meetings?

WRIGHT: That's right, sir.

YOUNG: What follows now is the first part of the interview. I am going to re-ask the questions that

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were asked and did not record. Mr. Wright, I'm sorry we have to do this over again because of the mechanical failure. Would you begin again by telling me how you first became interested in Senator Kennedy as a presidential candidate in the primary?

WRIGHT: I was invited by Ralph Pryor, who is now the judge of the Circuit Court of the First District, to his home with fourteen or sixteen other men. I met Jack Kennedy at that place, talked to him about two or three minutes, and was convinced that he would make a good president. Later on that same day, we had a dinner at the Elks Club. I met him there and talked to him a little bit longer there. Then, later on, we had him into Weirton at the Weirtonian Club where he spoke to one of the largest dinners in the community center there. At that time I was convinced to work for Jack Kennedy and did.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, do you remember anything about your brief conversation with the Senator? Any of the subjects you talked about or anything like that that might be of interest?

WRIGHT: At this time no, I don't.

YOUNG: Was his speech in Weirton, when you had him in here, just a general speech? Did he touch on anything specific?

WRIGHT: At his speech in Weirton he was so hoarse that Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] made the speech for him.

YOUNG: Do you remember anything about the speech at all?

WRIGHT: No, I don't. At this time, no.

YOUNG: Rather a general political speech.

WRIGHT: That is right. Yes, sir.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, you were not the county chairman then; you were later elected county chairman. Is that correct?

WRIGHT: That is right.

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YOUNG: Your official position was really simply that of being the Kennedy manager for the county in the primary. Is that correct?

WRIGHT: I was the campaign manager for Hancock County.

YOUNG: I think in the part of this that we didn't get earlier we talked about the volunteers and the financing of the campaign. Would you repeat that again for me, please?

WRIGHT: I was able to help to get at least 130 volunteers. We used to talk on the telephones. We used to pass the literature. We covered the county with two different pamphlets which they issued to us, sent it from Washington. We covered the county twice with those.

YOUNG: Did you notice any predominance of men or women among the volunteers? How did it split according to sex?

WRIGHT: It'd be, I'd say, 65 per cent women and 35 per cent men.

YOUNG: Did you notice any preponderance of members of the Catholic faith, or did they tend to represent all religious groups?

WRIGHT: We picked people from all groups in the county.

YOUNG: By all groups you would indicate religious groups. Did you try to pick them in any other way?

WRIGHT: We picked from all religious groups; from the mill workers and the office workers anywhere we could get a volunteer, that's who we took.

YOUNG: You'd mentioned, too, that you didn't receive any Kennedy money in terms of the primary. Could you say a word about raising money locally?

WRIGHT: We received at least as campaign manager no money from Kennedy in the primary for the election. We didn't ask for anything, and we didn't receive nothing. We raised it by five and ten

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and one dollar contributions from volunteers. The state gave us some money for the campaign.

YOUNG: I think, too, Mr. WRight, we talked on the part that didn't record very well about the Humphrey campaign in the county the size of it and the nature of it. Would you say a few words about that again, please?

WRIGHT: He had a pretty good campaign going for him, Mr. Humphrey did. But I think we had a better selling point with Jack Kennedy being young and so forth. So we were able to do a pretty good job.

YOUNG: Were there any particular matters at issue between the two candidates? Did they seem to be running against each other in terms of possible platforms?

WRIGHT: What we tried to have our volunteers do just go out and do a selling job on Jack Kennedy. We never mentioned opposition.

YOUNG: In the opposition did there seem to be any difference between Kennedy and Humphrey in terms of what kind of program they might follow if elected president?

WRIGHT: We felt that at this time we'd rather go for a younger man and would have more of the ideas of the country than before.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, I think we'd also talked earlier about primary results. Would you say a word about the primary results in the county?

WRIGHT: Jack Kennedy took the county by two-and-a-half to one vote.

YOUNG: Then what were the results in the general election again, if you don't mind sir?

WRIGHT: I haven't got the exact figures here, but we run just as good as any of the other Democratic candidates, maybe a little better than some of them.

YOUNG: There was no fear on the part of the other candidate that the President's religion might hurt them or rub off on them in the general election?

WRIGHT: I heard none. In this country it didn't have no effect.

YOUNG: We'd already indicated earlier that you don't think that religion was a major issue here?

WRIGHT: In this county, no.

YOUNG: I don't have any idea whether you know these figures or not I certainly wouldn't have them on the top of my head but what is the size of the Roman Catholic population in Hancock County? Do you have any idea at all?

WRIGHT: No. I have no idea on that. Our county is in the northern district. Ohio, Brooke and Hancock would have more than some of the other counties would.

YOUNG: Yes, this is an industrial area in which the Catholic population tends to be concentrated.

WRIGHT: Yes, sir. We have a lot of population in Weirton especially that came from Europe. Then their children's there now.

YOUNG: Many of them, of course, from southern Europe rather than northern Europe. Is this correct?

WRIGHT: Southern, and a lot of them from Poland and Serbia in there.

YOUNG: Yes. Mr. Wright, you had the Kennedy primary chairman, and then you became the county chairman. Would you say a word about this in terms of what it meant in terms of the county? Then, I think, you had some observation with respect to other counties in the state.

WRIGHT: As far as Hancock County, I was the campaign manager before, and I became the chairman right after the May election. Therefore, there was no difference of opinion here. In some of the southern counties the chairman was a little bit of a

difference of opinion because they thought, probably, Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough], who was the state chairman, was going to move in on that. But that was all smoothed out by talking it over and getting things straightened out.

YOUNG: Mr. Wright, do you have any final statement you'd like to make, then, with respect to the Kennedy years and your involvement in this campaign?

WRIGHT: No, I don't think so.

YOUNG: Well, thank you very much.

This is the conclusion of an interview with Mr. Dick Wright of Chester, West Virginia, who served as the Kennedy primary chairman in West Virginia in his county in 1960 and then later served as Democratic county chairman. The interview was made in Mr. Wright's office on February 8, 1965, by William L. Young.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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