

William P. Thaw Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/31/64
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County chairman, Kennedy for President campaign, Tyler County, West Virginia (1960); Mayor of Sistersville (1960-1969). In this interview, Thaw discusses working for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and his take on the early years of his administration, among other issues.

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William P. Thaw – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM P. THAW

July 31, 1964
Sisterville, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Mayor Thaw, will you tell me when you were first contacted or when you first became interested in the possibilities of Senator Kennedy as a presidential candidate in the West Virginia primary.

THAW: Well, in 1958 he spoke at a fundraising meeting in Parkersburg at the hotel. And at that time there was a feeling that he was probably the man who was — at least as far as I was concerned — who I was hoping would be a candidate in 1960.

YOUNG: Well, when did you first, then, get active in the campaign itself?

THAW: Well, I was contacted by [Robert P.] Bob McDonough of Parkersburg in 1960, I think soon after the holidays. And I think in the early part of January I was called down to a meeting at a hotel in Parkersburg, where [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen had flown in for the meeting. And there were a number of people from throughout this section of the state who were there. At that time the whole campaign, the whole primary, was laid out. And those of us present agreed to service in any capacity.

YOUNG: Was this before President Kennedy had announced his intention to file in the primary?

THAW: Yes. As I said before, I think the meeting might have been in the early spring of '59. I really can't remember exactly.

YOUNG: Well, did you feel at that time that it was wise for

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him to enter the West Virginia primary in view of the possibility of religion becoming an issue?

THAW: Well, yes. Of course, at that time all the polls indicated that he would be a very easy winner in the West Virginia primary. And of course, all of us at the start, I think, had a feeling of optimism. And then by the end of April it got to the point where we had our backs to the wall.

YOUNG: Well, when were you contacted then and when did you officially become the county chairman for the Kennedy forces in Tyler County?

THAW: Early in 1960. Very early in 1960.

YOUNG: Well, in that position did you do anything unique or unusual in your approach or did you work with the regular county organization?

THAW: I had absolutely no support at all from the county organization. They were all for [Hubert H.] Humphrey — actually not so much for Humphrey as against Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, how, then, did you build your organization?

THAW: On the outside. I was given a complete outline which had been written by Mr. [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien, and, quite frankly, the Kennedy organization outlined everything very clearly and very well.

YOUNG: Did you get a great many volunteers?

THAW: I didn't get a great number, but those who I contacted were very happy to help.

YOUNG: Well, did you notice whether the volunteers came from any special class or any special religious group, or were they a cross section of the public?

THAW: They were a cross-section. But in all honesty, the Catholics got to the point at the end where they were very sympathetic, if not helpful.

YOUNG: Did you find support from Republican Catholics that might otherwise have supported candidate [Richard M.] Nixon?

THAW: No, I did not.

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YOUNG: Well, I think it might be well to say just a word about the economic nature of Tyler County, since much of the appeal in West Virginia was based on Appalachia in West Virginia as a depressed area. Could you give an economic profile of your own county?

THAW: Well, the county itself is predominantly a rural county. However, it could not be classed as a depressed area. And Sistersville itself is a small town of 2,331 people, a number of whom are very wealthy.

YOUNG: Was this old oil wealth that came out of the area?

THAW: Yes. All.

YOUNG: What's the total population of the county?

THAW: About ten thousand.

YOUNG: Mr. Mayor, how do these ten thousand divide, then, politically?

THAW: In Tyler County we have six thousand registered voters. About four thousand are Republican, of those six thousand.

YOUNG: So you were working against the usual Democratic majority that exists in many West Virginia counties?

THAW: Oh, yes. This is hardly a typical West Virginia county.

YOUNG: Well, would you, then, say a few words about your first contacts with the Kennedy family?

THAW: Well, of course, Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] came by here. He was the only man of the Kennedy family who was in Tyler County. Most of my connections or associations with the Kennedys were out of town, in Parkersburg or in Wheeling or in Huntington.

YOUNG: Did you have an opportunity to meet Senator Kenedy himself, during the campaign?

THAW: Yes, I did.

YOUNG: Could you describe those meetings? Did anything special happen?

THAW: Well, they were just ordinary meetings where a party worker meets the candidate. I was very much impressed

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with the man and I think the further I got into this the more impressed I became.

YOUNG: Do you have any special anecdotes or any special stories of the President's wit or his ability to remember names — anything like that that might be of interest?

THAW: Unfortunately, I never had the intimate personal association with the President that other people here in this state had. I do remember that the man was always able to remember who you were. It was fabulous. Even as late as 1963, when he spoke at Wheeling Island Stadium, he was able to pick me out. I don't know if he remembered everything, but he certainly carried on a good conversation.

YOUNG: That was when Congressman [Cleveland M.] Bailey was running.

THAW: That's right, when Congressman Bailey was running against [Arch A, Jr.] Archie Moore.

YOUNG: Let's go back then to some special items with respect to Tyler County itself. Since Tyler County is not considered to be a depressed area, since you do have a number of new industries that predated the 1960 election, what special appeal, do you think, or what were the most effective appeals in this county on the part of the Kennedy candidacy?

THAW: Well, I think it was the President himself. As you know, they supplied us with a great deal of printed matter. I remember specifically a brochure, it was the kind of thing like you would put in a newspaper. It was quite big, tabloid almost, and it was very effective. I got those out all over Tyler County, and they were very effective. And then of course, his campaign was excellently handled in the state, and it certainly helped all of the small organizational people.

YOUNG: Especially those where you were in a minority, and in a small county.

THAW: That's right. Sure.

YOUNG: Did religion become an issue in the campaign in Tyler County?

THAW: Yes, we had a very bad situation here where, I would say, those people who were strong church people of the Protestant faith were very opposed to the

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President's candidacy on a religious basis. And I ran into a great deal of religious bigotry.

YOUNG: Well, do you remember any of the exact details of what they feared from the possibility of a Catholic president?

THAW: The old, old story, you know; the pope's going to run the White House — this, that, and the other, I am a member of the Masonic lodge and I am a Shriner. I had a member of the Masonic lodge come to me and ask me how I could support Kennedy and be a good Mason. Now, that's how bad it got.

YOUNG: Mayor Thaw, did you find that the objection on religious grounds was limited to any particular denomination? Were some denominations more tolerant and others less tolerant?

THAW: No, I think it was a general thing. I think the more fundamental the religion, the more vigorous the opposition. Of course, I still think, that after the votes had been counted here in the primary — I really believe, in fact, not only in the primary but in the general — I think when the final analysis those people who were using religion against Kennedy were against him anyway.

YOUNG: Well, just speaking of the Democratic primary, do you remember the approximate results between the two senators that were running in that election?

THAW: Yes, he beat Humphrey about two to one here.

YOUNG: So this would indicate.... And what is the size of your Catholic population?

THAW: Oh, thirty or forty people.

YOUNG: So that a great many Protestants did have to vote for him; there's no

question about that.

THAW: Yes. And also in the last few days there was a great feeling that Humphrey could not be nominated even if he won the primary. That helped us a great deal.

YOUNG: Well, do you think that the people that were supporting Senator Humphrey in your own particular county were supporting at the same time Senator [Lyndon B.] Johnson with the knowledge that perhaps Senator

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Humphrey couldn't win?

THAW: Yes, there was some of that. Of course, some of those people actually liked Humphrey. I mean, we had some people here who actually thought Humphrey was going to be the nominee or did have an opportunity to be the nominee.

YOUNG: Well, did there seem to be any difference that you could see between the issues between the two candidates, or was it pretty much a matter of personality in organization?

THAW: This was a personality contest from beginning to end. I don't know of any clear issue that was really drawn in this primary.

YOUNG: In other words, one was not to the left or to the right of the other in terms of ideology?

THAW: No. And I don't think we had any foreign policy discussions or anything. It was a personality contest.

YOUNG: Let's go back to something I touched on just a minute ago, but I didn't ask the question in detail. Would you say, then, that because of the fairly prosperous nature of your community were there any special appeals made to this county, or was the electioneering rather general?

THAW: No. As far as I know, I conducted the same sort of campaign that every county did. I did exactly what they told me to do, because they obviously knew a great deal more about it than I did. I followed their suggestions to the final degree.

YOUNG: But you have no glass workers interested in higher tariff? You have no special economic group that wanted special answers to special questions?

THAW: No, absolutely not.

YOUNG: With the victory of the Senator in the primary and of course the subsequent nomination at the Democratic National Convention, did you find in Tyler County, at least, that the Democrats were willing to close ranks for the general election in November?

THAW: Oh, I'd say 90% close ranks. There were a

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few of the more vigorous religious bigots who never did get back into the party.

YOUNG: These would be Democrat bigots?

THAW: Yes, of course, Democrat bigots. Because I don't think we ever ever got a substantial number of Republican Catholic votes.

YOUNG: Well, in your observation of the general West Virginia scene, do you think that the state candidates and senatorial candidate and others were afraid even in the general election to be associated with the national ticket? Was there still a feeling that the president's religion might...?

THAW: You mean in the general?

YOUNG: Yes, in November.

THAW: Oh, no. I thought everybody got pretty active. No. I noticed we had a big rally down in the capital and they were.... No, I think everybody had closed behind him after the convention.

YOUNG: Could you say anything about the members of the Kennedy family in your contacts with them? I notice some pictures on your wall here in the office with various members of the Kennedy family.

THAW: Well, I've met the Attorney General several times and I'm very much impressed with him. And this morning as we talk I am very chagrined that the President has eliminated him from his consideration as a vice presidential candidate.

YOUNG: Was the Attorney General in Tyler County?

THAW: No, he's never been in Tyler County, but he and I met several times at

Parkersburg and Charleston and Wheeling.

YOUNG: Well, did any of the Kennedy entourage come to Sistersville?

THAW: Brother Ted.

YOUNG: Could you say a word about his appearance and how it was handled?

THAW: Well, he just appeared here informally on a Thursday

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afternoon. And he made quite an impression on the people. He's a very forceful person.

YOUNG: Well, Mayor, Sistersville might be considered to be on the fringe of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, and certainly we know that the national press gave a great deal of attention to this campaign. What were the feelings, as you observed them, of the native West Virginians with respect to the way the national press treated the state during the Kennedy campaign?

THAW: Well, we still got some people who are very much upset about the way we were handled: that they gave us an inferiority complex, and they billed us as a mountaineer and a depressed area and all this. I really don't think that it was so bad. I never saw anything in *Time* or the papers that I didn't personally know to be the facts.

YOUNG: Well, what were the results of the November election as you remember them in this county, then, in the presidential race between Kennedy and Nixon?

THAW: Well, as I said before, he ran just about how any Democratic candidate would run, except perhaps slightly better; but it was strictly marginal, I mean he didn't run much better or much worse.

YOUNG: In other words, it was pretty much a party vote based on registration as you expected.

THAW: Yes. Sure.

YOUNG: Well, let's move on then to some of the programs and policies of the Kennedy administration. You've already indicated that no special appeal

was made to this particular county or section. Did any part of the New Frontier meet with approval or with resentment, as you observed it over the last two or three years since 1960?

THAW: Well, of course, the biggest thing for Sisterville — speaking for the Mayor — has been the accelerated public works project. That was passed as a prime policy of the Kennedy administration, and by that we have been able to build a fine public library here costing a hundred twenty five thousand dollars, the city putting up half and the government putting up half. And we've been able to build a storm sewer system. And I think it's met with approval. The people here, the old guard Republicans, are violently against any federal aid; but I think the average Republican, the average person, has been very pleasantly surprised.

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YOUNG: Well, is there any feeling of sympathy or empathy with the more depressed parts of West Virginia and the Kennedy policies? I think of the food stamp plan, for instance, and the north-south highway: Do you get any reaction to this?

THAW: No, the people here are violently opposed to the food stamp.

YOUNG: Other policies, domestic policies such as the Peace Corps — would there be a reaction?

THAW: Yes, the Peace Corps was very well received. But actually the people here do not associate themselves with the depressed coalfields of West Virginia. Our ties are more with the industrial panhandle and with eastern Ohio, northeastern Ohio — that's where our ties are. Our ties are not with McDowell and Logan County.

YOUNG: Well, had President Kennedy lived to be the candidate and this particular election year, could you suggest what the election results in this county might have been as opposed to 1960?

THAW: He would have run much better.

YOUNG: Why do you think so?

THAW: Because I think there has been a general feeling here that he did a good job and that he was a good man. And there are people here who cannot and will not support the reactionary policies of the Republican party so finally articulated by their spokesman, Mr. Barry Goldwater.

YOUNG: You've already answered one of my usual questions, I think, in suggesting that the people here were violently opposed to the food stamp plan. Could you suggest why?

THAW: Well, as I say, there is no tie here with the depressed areas. These people, unfortunately — I do, but these people — a large amount of them don't seem to have any compassion for a person on relief, because they've seen so many bad examples of it: the mother with three and four and five illegitimate babies who is on relief.

YOUNG: Can you think of any other Kennedy policies that didn't meet with the same approval as the Peace Corps did?

THAW: I really haven't. It's just more or less an average

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thing. I mean, you know, the Democrats like everything you did and the Republicans don't like anything. But now with the president we were starting to get a group in the middle who were ordinarily Republicans or Independents who were becoming very, very favorable toward him, personality-wise. He was a personality.

YOUNG: Mr. Thaw, you had mentioned that in the primary — I'd like to go back to this just a minute — you followed instructions as they were sent to you from state and national headquarters. Which of these instructions appeared to you to be the most significant, the most unique, and the most acceptable — what techniques?

THAW: Well, of course, they detailed how to set up an independent organization outside of the party organization. And that's what I had to do, because I'd had no organizational support at all. So, I followed their outline for setting up telephone committees, for setting up pamphlet distribution committees. I contacted people who ordinarily helped me in my own campaigns, and then these people set up other committees, and it was very effective.

YOUNG: We talked a minute ago about the volunteers. You suggested that you used people that had worked for you; did you find many people in the county that came and pounded on your door that you hadn't anticipated getting help from?

THAW: I got some, yes. A few. I didn't get a great many, but I got a few. More than I ordinarily get, I might add.

YOUNG: Since you've already said that the Catholic population of the county is

relatively nil, one would assume, then, that many of these were Protestants.

THAW: Oh, yes, these people were not Catholics. I really think that the Catholic issue has always been.... I don't think that the Catholics as a group were either for or against him. I think, I bet that the Catholic vote broke pretty close to the party line.

YOUNG: But you did feel that in this particular county area there were some anti-Catholic sentiment?

THAW: Yes, sir, among the fundamentalists.

YOUNG: Mr. Mayor, do you have any concluding remarks about your Kennedy years? I think that we might summarize

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with maybe this kind of a question: Looking back over with some perspective now over the period of 4 years, what do you feel was the most significant or the most important contribution to West Virginia by the primary battle which took place in our state?

THAW: Well, of course, it projected us onto the national scene. It helped put a great man in the White House. I have thought many, many times about those experiences and I would not have missed these experiences for anything. I wouldn't give you fifty thousand dollars and not been able to help that man, but I cannot tell you the mixed emotions that you feel. You wonder, if you hadn't helped him, what.... Maybe he'd still be alive today and this, that, and the other. But I was just thankful that I could help in a small way. And I remember the night they assassinated the President, I felt — as probably most of the Kennedy supporters felt — a great sense of personal loss, which I still feel

I called Bob McDonough in Parkersburg because I really didn't know who else to call that night. The hour was getting pretty late and I couldn't go to bed, and I called Bob. I thought he summed it up better than I could. Bob said, "Well, at least we were able to help this man." And really, that's what we did, and I just hope we did the right thing for him. I know we did it for the country, but what a terrible sacrifice that man made for his country! I'm just happy I could have helped, if that's what he wanted, and apparently that's what he did want.

YOUNG: Mr. Thaw, did you notice that people who had not been active in politics before, in their volunteering to help President Kennedy then stayed active in politics?

THAW: No, not so much. They're back out again. They'll be back, but they're out.

I'll tell you, politics is a.... The politician is active four years and you get the volunteers about three months.

YOUNG: So there wasn't too much carry-over, at least in your county?

THAW: No, except perhaps among the younger people. I've got some young people who stayed in.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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