

Clarence E. Martin, Jr. Oral History Interview, 2/27/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Clarence E. Martin, Jr.
Interviewer: William L. Young
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Biographical Note

Martin was a member of West Virginia state senate 16th District (1951-70), and delegate to Democratic National Convention from West Virginia (1956). In this interview, he discusses the role of religion in the 1960 West Virginia Democratic primary, John F. Kennedy's decisions while in office and how they affected West Virginians, and the difference in support for Hubert H. Humphrey and John F. Kennedy in Martinsburg, West Virginia, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Clarence E. Martin Jr.

February 27, 1966
Martinsburg, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with State Senator Clarence Martin. The interview for the Kennedy Library is taking place in the Senator's office in Martinsburg, West Virginia, on February the 27th, 1965.

Senator Martin, since we're using emergency equipment here, equipment that I am not very familiar with, I wonder if you would go ahead and identify yourself more fully and then go ahead and indicate your first interest in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] campaign,

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the Kennedy primary in West Virginia.

MARTIN: My name is Clarence E. Martin, Jr. I live in Martinsburg, West Virginia. My first contact with the Kennedy campaign arose over a telephone call I received from John F. Kennedy several months before the actual primary election. He asked me to cooperate with him in securing his nomination in West Virginia and I told him I would. From then on I had many contacts with emissaries of his, but I was particularly struck by a large public-speaking engagement which took place in Jefferson County at the Charles Town Race Track. This was the first time that I had ever seen a crowd as large as this particular crowd assembled for the purpose of listening to a young man who was seeking office in West Virginia, whether it be a national or a state office. At least this was the

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largest gathering in this Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. It not only was a large but a very enthusiastic one. Thereafter, I had many contacts with his emissaries who were working on his behalf in this part of West Virginia, and I was asked to organize some six counties in the sixteenth senatorial district of West Virginia which I represent now and was representing at that time and have since 1951. I did so and was very happy and eager to do so because I felt that this man had a plan for the United States and felt that he could bring a new fresh wind into what I considered then to be a stale situation in the United States and get this country moving forward again.

YOUNG: Senator, had you had any contact with the Senator earlier? Did he just call you out of a blue sky? Was there any initial meeting or anything?

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MARTIN: He just called me out of a blue sky one Sunday evening when I was sitting in my home, just sitting there with my family.

YOUNG: Senator, I live in one panhandle of West Virginia, and you live in the other. I wonder if you would give an economic description of the area which you represent and then indicate the special nature of the President's appeal in the primary to this particular section of West Virginia.

MARTIN: Well, this part of West Virginia is very old and historical. It lies at the northern end of the great Shenandoah Valley. Many of the families and people who live here are of substantial Anglo-Saxon stock, and the families have been here for many, many generations. They look upon things in a far different manner than people in other parts of West Virginia because we are separated geographically by a mountain

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range from the balance of the state of West Virginia. The people in this area are a conservative, sound, stable kind of people. There are very few immigrants in the area. There has not been any great infusion of blood from outside. I can't say that Kennedy offered anything new to the people of the area. However, they are mostly Democrats, and they were struck, I think, with the youthful vigor of the man and, also, wanted to go along on a program which they thought would be beneficial.

Now, the economical situation in this area has always been very stable and very good with some exceptions. Right after the war there was some letdown. However, this area has not had any help from the state of West Virginia in any development program. It has not had any federal help. It has carried on by itself. It picked itself

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up by its bootstraps and has a pretty substantial economy. For instance, at the present time it is not a part of the program known as Area Redevelopment because it does not have enough unemployed. It is not in any sense a poverty stricken area. It is an open wide area topographically with rolling land, no mountains, pretty sound economy and is not beset with the problems of feast or famine which occur in many parts of the state of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Senator, would you describe the economy of the area as being principally agricultural?

MARTIN: Well, I wouldn't say so. It is agricultural and horticultural, but also, there is a great deal of industry in the area. And I should say that certainly it's about, well, no less than 50-50. If anything, it now borders on the industrial.

YOUNG: Could you mention some of the industries

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that have located here?

MARTIN: Well, the DuPont Company has a plant here in Berkeley County, the Corning Glass Works has a plant here, the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company has an installation here. The Interwoven Stocking Company which is a part of Kayser-Roth has an installation here. There are dress factories of nationally known organizations, that is, that have known national brands. The Three-M Company has a plant within six miles of Martinsburg. The Pet Milk Company has a very large installation here. The National Fruit Products Company has a very substantial operation here. There are, of course, a number of smaller ones employing one hundred, two hundred people which make any number of different kinds of products like electronics, and industrial metal containers, and paper-board and veneers, and many, many other products.

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YOUNG: Senator, with that in mind, do I infer, then, from your earlier statement, that labor in most of these industrial plants, itself then, tends to be labor of local origin rather than from newer immigration of the late 19th century?

MARTIN: This is very substantially so, and there is not a great deal of labor union activity of any great degree in the area. As a matter of fact, the major plants do not have any union activity in them at all, except one which is a part of the American Marietta Company, it is a very large cement plant, and the only one now in the state of West Virginia. However, union activities are very minimal.

YOUNG: Well, Senator, I think, then, that this poses some interesting questions. We are talking about a section of West Virginia that is largely native, that is White-Anglo-

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Saxon-Protestant. How did you feel about the possibility of Senator Kennedy's religion, then, as an issue in the West Virginia primary as you approached it?

MARTIN: Well, obviously, his religion was an element in the situation. This was something he had to overcome. It was a distinct element in the election itself. However, I would say that the people overlooked it to a great degree. This is not anything unusual. I am a Catholic myself, and I have been elected state senator in an area which has very few Catholics in it since 1951. And prior to that I was elected to the office of prosecuting attorney on two occasions in this same county, and I also met the same kind of opposition. As a matter of fact, when Kennedy came here for his first visit he discussed this very situation with me and asked me

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what I did about it, and I said I openly admitted it and made no bones about it, and I wasn't concerned about what people felt about my religion as long as they weren't concerned about how I felt about theirs. The people are not biased to the extent that they can't, at least, use their intelligence.

YOUNG: Senator, I have just finished a series of interviews in Wheeling, and, as you know, that section of West Virginia is the most Catholic section, I think, in Ohio County. The estimate is about 50 percent Catholic, 50 percent Protestant. Could you give an off of the top of your head estimate of the Catholic population in the senatorial district in which you worked for Senator Kennedy's nomination?

MARTIN: Well, I should say, at the most, one percent.

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YOUNG: I would gather, then, from what you have already said—I don't want to be reading this into the record, but—there were not anti-Catholic campaigns or sermons from pulpits, and that sort of thing during the primary—that the religious issue didn't figure prominently in the primary. Is that correct, sir?

MARTIN: No, that is not wholly correct. There were some sermons from pulpits so I have been informed, and there was discussion about it. There was a great deal of feeling about it, nonetheless, I feel that the people's emotions did not overcome their better sense.

YOUNG: Senator Martin, when Catholicism was attacked as such, do you know any of the basis on which the local attack was made? The old saw, of course, has always been the tunnel from the Vatican to the White House,

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and I wondered if it was of that order or whether you had a different level of sophistication in any anti-Catholicism in the area.

MARTIN: Well, of course, part of it from a political standpoint is that a great many people felt that a Catholic couldn't be elected President, and why should they, then, be for a man who maybe might not get elected. The other was, actually, brought about by people who had come into the area, such as preachers and ministers, who were not native.

YOUNG: You are suggesting then that the natives had better manners than the carpetbaggers?

MARTIN: Well, I should say this is true, yes.

YOUNG: Senator, much was made in West Virginia of the Kennedy volunteers, and I think Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough] was quoted by Theodore White [Theodore H. White] as saying, "Hell, anybody

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can find volunteers. The trouble is to find something for them to do." Would you state your relationship with or to any volunteer help, if any, you may have had?

MARTIN: Well, frankly, I don't know what happened in the rest of the state, but certainly in this part of West Virginia there was very little voluntary help. It would have to be paid to get anything done with it.

YOUNG: Then would you move on to the Senator's opponent in the primary, Senator Martin, and say a word about the Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] organization, if any, in this area, and its activity.

MARTIN: Well, the Humphrey organization didn't even exist in this area. In fact, it was practically ignored, what little sentiment there was, and really I don't think there was any sentiment for Humphrey

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at all. As a matter of fact, his appearances in the area were very badly attended, and there was not much enthusiasm or consideration given to Humphrey.

YOUNG: Well, Senator, would you analyze then the choice of the area for Senator Kennedy as opposed to Senator Humphrey either in terms of personality or in terms of issues—any way that you would care to approach it?

MARTIN: Well, I think personality had a lot to do with it. The personality of Kennedy was far more attractive and winning than that of Humphrey as well as the fact that Humphrey spoke more like a politician than Kennedy did—a politician in the sense that it is used in the popular way. Or in the connotation, rather, that politicians will promise you anything and then don't produce.

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YOUNG: Well, since you gave an analysis of organized labor in the area a little bit earlier, I just wondered if the feeling that used in some sections of the state existed here, that Senator Humphrey sort of had the word radical attached to his name, whereas Senator Kennedy didn't.

MARTIN: Well, this is true. Of course, Humphrey came from a part of the country which has a more radical background, from a political standpoint, and he was considered more of an ultra-super-liberal, I would suppose you would call it, than Kennedy.

YOUNG: Senator, before we move on into the general election, I wondered if you would make any final analysis that you might make of your own efforts, any unique efforts you made in the campaign, and then, any further discussion of the reasons for the Kennedy victory in the primary in this particular part of the state?

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MARTIN: Well, as a matter of fact, I predicted that Kennedy would win in this senatorial district by 3 to 1 in the primary, and he did. I think that the great efforts made on behalf of the people who were working for him were very productive.

They generated a lot of enthusiasm, and as you know, the more a man's name is heard whether in a good way or in an evil way, people recognize a name. They vote for a name very frequently instead of voting for a candidate. I can't say that the volunteers had a great deal to do with Kennedy's election. It was his paid organization that produced for him.

YOUNG: Senator, would you name the counties that are in your senatorial district just so we get some idea of the area covered?

MARTIN: Berkeley, Jefferson, Morgan, Mineral, Hampshire, and Hardy counties, and they are known as

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the Sixteenth Senatorial District and comprise the extreme northeasterly end of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Much was made, Senator, in other sections of the state of the appearance, especially of Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.] and Sargent Shriver [Sargent R. Shriver, Jr.] in Huntington. Were there other people than the candidate in here? Did any of these national celebrities come into your particular district?

MARTIN: No, we didn't have any of these people over here at all. I assume that they concluded that they would go where the larger volume of votes happened to be rather than in this area.

YOUNG: Well, Senator Martin, much has been made of the financing of the campaign on the part of both senators and the number of people that Senator Kennedy had coming in to work for him. Had the forces been equal, had both sides equal resources,

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do you feel that this might have substantially changed the outcome of the primary?

MARTIN: I don't think so.

YOUNG: Would you go on, then, to the general election and talk about any activity, any participation, you may have had in the campaign against Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] in the general election?

MARTIN: Well, of course, I was involved in the general election. I took a very active part in it on behalf of the whole Democratic ticket. As you know, Kennedy did not carry the ticket in this area. Nonetheless, I think that Nixon's personality certainly, in this area, reacted against him. I think that he had no program, at least the people felt this way, and that Kennedy was a far more intelligent man who could be trusted. I believe that the people

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actually in the general elections were voting their convictions rather than their emotions, and somehow or another, it seems to me, they got mixed up in their convictions because Kennedy didn't carry the area. And in this respect, I think that his religion had a lot to do with his not being elected, as well as the fact that he was running on another ticket which was not the state ticket which did not have the respect for it that it has formerly had and also did not have the respect that Kennedy had.

YOUNG: Would I infer from this, sir, that rather than Kennedy being a liability to the Democratic ticket in the state as it may have been considered in some sections, that you are saying that the Democratic ticket in the state may have been something as a liability for the President?

MARTIN: Oh, I think that this hurt him to some

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degree. Yes, I do.

YOUNG: Senator, much attention was focused on West Virginia nationally during the campaign by the national news media. Would you give any general observations you might have on cause and effect and general importance attached to this sort of thing?

MARTIN: Well, I think that it was a very unfortunate and unhappy circumstance that both

Kennedy and Humphrey painted West Virginia as poverty stricken, and we now have an image in the United States as a dying state with extreme poverty and people who need someone to help them get along—that they can't do anything for themselves and that we have to live on federal handouts. I think both Kennedy and Humphrey produced this image. I think that it is very unfortunate. It is not true. We have been maligned in many respects as a result of it, and before

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this we had not been held up to what I say has amounted to national ridicule and scorn and lampooned on a national basis.

YOUNG: Senator, before we started the interview, we were talking privately about the effect of the Kennedy primary on the state senate and West Virginia politics. I wonder if you would go over that for the record.

MARTIN: Well, of course, I have no knowledge of what happened in other parts of West Virginia, but I can say this. As a result of the primary campaign that Kennedy and Humphrey carried on, there were many what I consider to be worthwhile men who lost in the senatorial primary election of that year, men whom I know have been dedicated to public service in the legislature of West Virginia. And why this happened I have no personal knowledge. But this I do know, that it upset what I considered to be the sound progress that had been going

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on at least in the state senate.

YOUNG: Senator Martin, I wonder if we might turn now to the Kennedy years in the White House, the New Frontier and West Virginia. If you would speak to this question first—the reaction of your particular section of West Virginia to the New Frontier, praise of it as well as criticism of it. In other words, a critical review, from your standpoint.

MARTIN: Well, this part of West Virginia was not benefited such as you would call a benefit from a financial standpoint from Kennedy's years in the White House. So far as I know, we received no federal money for any purpose except what other areas of the entire United States received. We got no preferential treatment. As far as I know, West Virginia didn't get any preferential treatment. I know that it was a general

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feeling in this part of West Virginia that Kennedy was going too far too fast. Although he did have what he called a New Frontier which was supposed to be a fresh vigorous approach to problems, nonetheless the people, I feel, in this area felt he was going too fast, and he could have done it in a more conservative way. I might say this, that it is my personal deduction from conversations I have had with people that Kennedy went too far too fast on civil rights, and also, that this continual support of all the welfare programs is producing a great many loafers—well, I guess a better word for it really is chiselers—and

people who just don't care any more as long as they can live on welfare. We're now, as you know, in West Virginia, getting into the third generation living on welfare programs. Of course, the

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Kennedy program amplified this and put more money into it. And other than that, I can't say that there was any general criticism of Kennedy's administration in any way whatsoever.

YOUNG: Would you say just a word, Senator Martin, about President Kennedy's conduct of foreign policy? I am thinking immediately of such items as Cuba, the Nuclear Test Ban, and that sort of thing. Any reaction to foreign policy that you may have picked up among your constituents.

MARTIN: Well, so take the Nuclear Test Ban; this is something about which I guess there is a pretty general feeling, but I can't say that I know of any particular acute feeling about it. As far as the Cuban situation is concerned, I feel that the people in this area felt that he handled it very wisely and did the right thing at the right

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time and was tough when he should have been tough, and perhaps, should have been tougher.

YOUNG: Senator, we have covered a good number of topics, but there is one final question that I would like to ask unless you have some other material. That is, do you have any stories or anecdotal material of your relationship with the President that you think might be worth preserving?

MARTIN: Well, other than just several personal conversations I had with him that were generally political, I don't have any personal anecdotes except the one instance when he came here on one occasion and asked me to sit down and discuss the problem of Catholicism with him in the primary campaign. We went into a room in the local radio station to discuss it, and the people who were running his schedule

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kept bursting into the room insisting that he go, and finally, he told one of them, "to get the hell out of there," that he was discussing politics with a man who was supposed to know something about it, that he wanted to sit there and discuss it, and that this was doing him more good than getting along on the trail.

YOUNG: Senator, is there anything by way of a summary then that you would care to make as we conclude this interview, or any topics that I haven't touched that you might think worth recording?

MARTIN: Oh, I can't think of anything. I remember the occasion when he was speaking at the

Charles Town Race Track when his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was late. He stopped in the middle of his address when he saw her coming up to the front of the grandstand. He turned and looked at her, and I would say that I have

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never known a man who had a more look of perfect adoration and love in eyes for his wife than Kennedy did on that occasion. But other than that I don't know how I could summarize all this succinctly.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Senator Clarence E. Martin, Jr. of Martinsburg, West Virginia. The interview took place in the Senator's law office in Martinsburg on February 27, 1965. The interview by William L. Young.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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