

**John G. Chernenko Oral History Interview—9/8/1964**  
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**Biographical Note**

Chernenko, Chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee in Brook County, West Virginia (1960), discusses the 1960 Democratic primary and presidential elections in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

John G. Chernenko

September 8, 1964  
Wellsburg, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: John, what was your official position in 1960 in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] primary in West Virginia?

CHERNENKO: In 1960, I was county chairman of Brooke County Democrat executive committee.

YOUNG: Well, when did you first meet the then Senator Kennedy? What were your first contacts with him?

CHERNENKO: I first met Senator Kennedy in May 1959 at Welch, West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, when did you become interested in him as a presidential possibility? When did you become actively involved in the primary campaign?

CHERNENKO: In May 1959 after we left Welch.

YOUNG: Well, were you aware of the Senator's indecision as to whether or not it would be wise to enter the West Virginia

primary? He had everything to lose and nothing to gain.

YOUNG: Well, you were at a number of primary meetings and preprimary meetings, were you not, at which Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough] and others were present?

CHERNENKO: I believe I was at every meeting held in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, after the Senator made his decision to enter the primary, what role did you play actively in the primary campaign?

CHERNENKO: I helped to set up Brooke County and Hancock and Marshall County, Ohio County, made several trips to Wetzel and Marion County to get a strong organization and all the help we could find.

YOUNG: Well, you had mentioned before we started this interview—and I remember personally, of course, from reading in the paper—that you entertained the Senator and his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], I believe, in the fall of 1959. What was the occasion of the Senator's visit to Brooke County at that time?

CHERNENKO: Senator Kennedy was on his way to Charleston, West Virginia, for a Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner. We decided that we would test our strength in Brooke County by having a luncheon. We were shooting for two hundred to three hundred people. We figured if we could get three hundred people to attend a luncheon on a Saturday afternoon that would be a barometer and we would know what chance Senator Kennedy had in our area.

YOUNG: Well, this was a luncheon that was held in October 1959 at the Wellsburg Elks Club Country Club?

CHERNENKO: That's right.

YOUNG: How many people actually then turned out for the luncheon?

CHERNENKO: Four hundred eighty-six paid people.

YOUNG: Well, did you begin to feel then that perhaps your earlier judgment as to his coming into West Virginia may have been unwise? Did this seem to indicate then that this would be a great amount of support?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: As in many counties, of course, as we know in Brooke County, there are rival Democratic factions. Did you find that all factions were willing to support the Senator, or did some of the support go to Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey].

CHERNENKO: Some of the support went to Senator Humphrey.

YOUNG: What do you attribute the fact that more people turned out for the luncheon than you had anticipated, other, of course, rather than regular party organization? What seemed to be the Kennedy magic at that particular time?

CHERNENKO: The Senator and his wife were a drawing card.

YOUNG: Well, at that particular time did the Senator discuss issues of a local nature, or was he speaking more of national issues?

CHERNENKO: National issues.

YOUNG: I believe your wife [Katherine Joyce Smith Chernenko] entertained Mrs. Kennedy, didn't she, with one of the famous Kennedy coffee parties?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Could you say something about the hustle and bustle in the arrangements that were necessary for that sort of thing?

CHERNENKO: Well, I couldn't tell you too much on it, Bill, as I was at another place with the Senator. But I do know at one time there was fifty-five women in the living room here. And my wife had a schedule up that there wouldn't be over twenty-five people at one time. They were to stay ten minutes and a fresh group would arrive.

YOUNG: You mean they came and stayed and stayed and stayed?

CHERNENKO: Some of them stayed, yes.

YOUNG: Well, how many women do you suppose you entertained in the course of the whole coffee reception?

CHERNENKO: I wasn't here but by the talk from some of the women that were here, I would say from one hundred to maybe one hundred seventy-five women.

YOUNG: Well, John, Brooke County is a county that has a very cosmopolitan population, great many immigrants, of course, from many different parts of Europe. How did religion figure as an issue in this particular part of the state? In the primary election?

CHERNENKO: Religion wasn't an issue in our county.

YOUNG: You mean there weren't then sermons either for or against Kennedy, and there were not...

CHERNENKO: There were a few crackpots would come in from Boston, but they didn't stay too long.

YOUNG: You mean these were the people that were stirring up anti-Catholic sentiment?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: There were no sermons from the pulpit, that sort of thing?

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: Anything by the nature of a whispering campaign?

CHERNENKO: Yes, there was a few. Local politicians had a whispering campaign on.

YOUNG: Well, could you indicate the nature of the sort of thing that was being told or said? That it resembled the old Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] charges of 1928, or was it a little different than that?

CHERNENKO: Well, some of the whispering politicians would say that Senator Kennedy was too young, that we weren't ready for a Catholic in the White House, and he would make a good vice president.

YOUNG: But they weren't yet willing to give him the number one spot?

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: Well, you had mentioned that there was, of course, some opposition and some very mild Humphrey support. Why do you think the state Humphrey people ignored Brooke County or at least why were they not successful in getting stronger Humphrey support?



CHERNENKO: I think they were promised Brooke County by various groups.

YOUNG: Then took it for granted and didn't get it.

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: I don't happen to remember—I don't know whether you would either off the top of your head—but in that Democratic primary in May 1960, what were the results in Brooke County? Do you have any general recollection of the....

CHERNENKO: No, I don't, Bill.

YOUNG: Kennedy did carry the county though.

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: No question about that. Was the Senator ever in Brooke County then after the primary? Did he return at any time?

CHERNENKO: No. He was in Ohio County as president.

YOUNG: Well, I believe that, did Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. come to Wellsburg or Brooke County at all?

CHERNENKO: Yes, I had Franklin Roosevelt for one whole day in Brooke, Wetzel, and Ohio County and Hancock County.

YOUNG: Well, John, since we're really talking not about a county, but we're talking about that part of West Virginia which forms the northern panhandle—Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, and Marshall Counties, as you've mentioned, then on down into Wetzel—in terms of specific issues in the primary, did there seem to be any real difference between Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey, or was it on the other hand pretty much a battle of personalities?

CHERNENKO: Battle of personalities.

YOUNG: This is not an area which generally would be considered to be depressed, and I don't really remember what the steel index was in 1960, but can you think of any issues that were raised in terms of Senator Kennedy localizing his appeal? I mean, in other words, appealing to the upper Ohio Valley or the section of which Brooke County

would be a part?

CHERNENKO: There's no one particular thing that I can point out, Bill. All I can say is that his good looks and his Boston accent and being a hero of Pacific campaign.

YOUNG: Well, John, were you associated in any way with any of the volunteers that worked for Senator Kennedy in licking envelopes or mailing out information, running that sort of thing?

CHERNENKO: Yes, I said I was the local chairman for the citizens for Kennedy, and I formed all groups: telephone committee, and baby sitters committee, and drivers. Every committee that was set up in Brooke County I set it up or helped set it up.

YOUNG: Well, John, did you notice any significant increase in the number of people taking an interest in politics in that election?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Did you at the same time, did they seem to come from all classes and all religious groups or did they represent any particular section, or group, or religion?

CHERNENKO: All groups. They found more Republicans wanting to help Senator Kennedy in the primary.

YOUNG: Well, would these in any way be Republicans that might be members of the President's church or were they Republican Protestants as well as Catholics?

CHERNENKO: Protestants as well as Catholics.

YOUNG: In other words, it wasn't limited to any particular group?

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: A number of people in these interviews have indicated that—I think we were talking about this earlier—that some of these people, of course, remained active in politics. Did you notice any of this? People that had not been active working for Kennedy and then remaining active in political life?

CHERNENKO: In our group here which is Republicans that worked for Senator Kennedy in the primary and general haven't taken a part in any campaign since.

YOUNG: How about Democrats that volunteered and worked, did they continue an interest in politics as far as you can tell, any of them?

CHERNENKO: A small percent.

YOUNG: John, let's move on then to the general election. Do you think that following the primary the various factions of Democrats in the area did they let bygones be bygones and work together then for the party victory?

CHERNENKO: Yes, they did. We had no fight in the primary or general.

YOUNG: Well, did you notice in the general election whether or not the issue of the President's religion seemed to be a closed case, or was the whispering anti-Catholic campaign continued through the general election in the fall of 1960?

CHERNENKO: We found a small percent in our area had the whispering campaign on.

YOUNG: But, not to any great degree.

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: Well, John, let's move on to something else. Remember in 1962, Cleveland Bailey [Cleveland M. Bailey] of course was running against Arch Moore [Arch Alfred Moore] for the first congressional seat in the First Congressional District in West Virginia and many of the Republicans, of course, charged that President Kennedy had exploited West Virginia and then not kept his promises. Let's talk a little bit about the reaction in West Virginia to the New Frontier. Could you cover this in two ways: first of all, ways in which you know West Virginians were pleased with Kennedy and his administration, and then, perhaps, ways in which they might have felt some disappointment, if any.

CHERNENKO: Bill, that is a hard one for me to answer because I haven't heard any group grumble on being let down, and Senator Kennedy did a lot for our area here, for Ohio County especially.

YOUNG: Well, could you think of any specific, these were things, of course, that come to mind: the food

stamp plan, which was much more successful in the southern part of the state where unemployment is higher; the north-south highway, which really doesn't touch us too much in this section, although it will run relatively close to us through Pennsylvania. Could you be specific about any of those or any other things that seem to run in public favor in this area.

CHERNENKO: No. There's no one thing that I could point out, Bill, that....

YOUNG: Well, on the other hand, did you notice any things where it was felt that the President didn't work hard enough for the area? I'd still like to tie this into the charge in 1962 in the congressional election that the President had exploited West Virginia and then not kept his promises, and, of course, this is the congressional district in which that battle was fought. You may, of course you're quite well aware that the President himself came into Wheeling Stadium to speak for Mr. Bailey. Would you have any more reaction to that general feeling?

CHERNENKO: No. The President did all he could for the state of West Virginia and so did Congressman Bailey.

YOUNG: Well, John, you're now serving as United States marshal for the northern district of West Virginia. Did you have this position in 1962?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Were you part of the President's party, then, when he came to Wheeling?

CHERNENKO: I attended as an observer and had a special badge from the Secret Service that I could go any place in the stadium and I would be on security.

YOUNG: Did you have any personal contact with the President at that time? I mean any brief conversation or anything of that sort?

CHERNENKO: No. I shook hands with the President at the airport.

YOUNG: Let's go back, then, to the campaign of 1960. Do you remember anything from your contact with the President when he was here at your home and when he was at the Elks Club luncheon? Any anecdotal material, stories, anything that would indicate the Kennedy style or the Kennedy

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personality in action?

CHERNENKO: No, but I can remember one instance when we were over in Ohio, in Bellaire. After we left the meeting, the President left the meeting with

several members of our party and we went to the Ohio County Airport and we just had a wonderful dinner. It seemed that the Senator was hungry and he had two bowls of soup and didn't have any money to pay for them.

YOUNG: Who bought the soup?

CHERNENKO: Alfred F. Chapman from Wheeling.

YOUNG: Well, this was still in the primary campaign.

CHERNENKO: In the primary campaign.

YOUNG: John, you were telling me a minute ago—before, we started—about being in Washington, I believe in August 1959. Would you repeat that story for the interview?

CHERNENKO: Yes, Bill. The wife and I were coming back from a Howard Johnson's. We had a sandwich, and a horn blew when we were ready to cross the street, and here was Senator Kennedy in a convertible. He blew the horn, and we walked over to the car, and he recognized us, he wanted to know what we were doing in Washington. We told him we came over to go sightseeing, and I was to have a meeting with him the following day. While we were talking there for a minute or two, I would say there was one hundred fifty to two hundred people started gathering around the car, and pointing, "Senator Kennedy, Senator Kennedy."

YOUNG: They weren't pointing at you?

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: Well, John, since your main role in the 1960 primary was to organize an area which included these counties in the northern part of West Virginia. I wonder if you would take the counties one at a time and indicate the particular way you worked, with whom you worked in each county, beginning with Hancock and then going down through Ohio and Marshall, Marion and Wetzel, and so on.

CHERNENKO: Well, our first trip into Hancock, our sister county, we were.... We made several trips to find

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a chairman who was willing to go on with Senator Kennedy and to organize the Kennedy for President club. So Dick Wright, former sheriff, agreed to take the job over. Since there was two factions, we got Frank Rybka [Frank A. Rybka] who served in the Butler district as president for Kennedy. Then we went to Wheeling, to Ohio County, we got John Kamlowksi [John H. Kamlowksi], a young assistant prosecuting attorney, to take

the chairmanship, in Ohio County. In Marshall County we had Mayor Mojer [Victor Mojer], in McMechen, Henry Muselli in Glenwood, John Higgins in Glen Dale, Mary Petrella in Moundsville. Stop. I can't think of who we had in Wetzel. Going over to Marion County we had Joseph Sucuri and Jack De Lagotti as co-chairmen.

YOUNG: You said you had some difficulty in getting an organization established in Marion County.

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Do you remember—just again, off the top of your head—the primary election results in these counties? Did Kennedy carry all of them?

CHERNENKO: Kennedy carried Hancock, Brooke County, Ohio County, Marshall County, and Marion County. I'm not sure about Wetzel.

YOUNG: Well, in the general election did you.... The interesting problem here, I think, is Ohio County, which normally has a fairly heavy Republican registration—is that not right?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: But that in that particular election it was felt, or it was charged at least, that a number of Catholics changed their Republican registration to Democratic so that they could vote for the President in the primary.

What's your observation on this story?

CHERNENKO: I don't think they were just Catholics. I think there were Protestants as well.

YOUNG: In other words, a great many Republicans of every religion that wanted to vote in the Democratic primary, since we cannot cross party lines in the state, of course, without changing registration.

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Why, John, did you have volunteer organizations

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in all these counties, too?

CHERNENKO: Yes, we had volunteers in every county.

YOUNG: Well now you were working then, is this not right, with Judge Ralph Pryor [Ralph E. Pryor] at this time?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: And he was a member of the original committee which Bob McDonough set up—is that correct?—even before the President, when the President was thinking about entering the primary.

CHERNENKO: Yes. That's right.

YOUNG: Well, John, as you remember the campaign, of course, the amount of money which the Kennedys spent in West Virginia, the long campaign that they conducted, all of the members of the family, all this became political issue. As a chairman over several counties, would you comment on the financing of the Kennedy primary campaign?

CHERNENKO: Yes, Bill. We used eighty-three dollars of Kennedy money for four or five counties that I know of. That was mainly spent to distribute the tabloid.

YOUNG: Well, did you sponsor in this part of state also the television program in which the President made his rather definitive statement on religion? I believe this was a program that was replaced throughout the state, but I don't know whether it was shown on WTRF-TV or not.

CHERNENKO: I don't believe it was shown on WTRF. I'm not sure.

YOUNG: Well, how about financing of the campaign other than money, of course, which might have come from the Senator's own campaign chest? Was this then handled locally in this county?

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: Do you have any idea the amount of money that was spent on an average or in any county?

CHERNENKO: Yes, I would say this for Brooke County, being a county chairman: from President on down to the small constable, we spent about, I would say, sixteen to seventeen hundred dollars for all candidates.

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YOUNG: Are you speaking now of the primary or the fall election?

CHERNENKO: For the fall election.

YOUNG: Well, in the primary campaign, of course, it would be a question there of every candidate for himself, at least officially, as far as the county committee is concerned.

CHERNENKO: That's right.

YOUNG: Just as a matter of curiosity, what did you spend the eighty-three dollars for?

CHERNENKO: To distribute the tabloid.

YOUNG: Oh yes, the tabloid. You mentioned that. Did you get volunteers in some of this help, too?

CHERNENKO: Yes, we did. Mostly distributing the tabloid in Brooke County was taken up by my family, Gary [Gary C. Chernenko] and Mark [Mark B. Chernenko], and brother-in-laws and sisters and aunts and uncles and a few kids that we paid.

YOUNG: For the record we might say that at that time the population of Brooke county was about twenty-six, twenty-eight thousand?

CHERNENKO: That's right.

YOUNG: The population of Ohio County is what sixty-seven thousand?

CHERNENKO: Sixty-seven, sixty-eight thousand.

YOUNG: What about Hancock County?

CHERNENKO: Hancock would be about thirty-six thousand.

YOUNG: Marshall?

CHERNENKO: Marshall would be about thirty-six to thirty-eight thousand.

YOUNG: And Marion is a good bit larger.

CHERNENKO: Yes, be around sixty thousand.

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YOUNG: And Wetzel is relatively small.



CHERNENKO: Small.

YOUNG: John, as county chairman, you were in a good position to observe the reaction to the President's religion in 1960. Did you have any trouble getting clergymen to participate in any of the rallies that you had for Senator Kennedy?

CHERNENKO: Not in Brooke County. We had several ministers volunteered.

YOUNG: So that there was never any problem in terms of Protestant-Catholic relations?

CHERNENKO: No.

YOUNG: Well, you have mentioned also that while there wasn't active opposition or a very strongly organized active opposition to Senator Kennedy and that the Humphrey forces were relatively weak in the county, you did mention that there were a few people, perhaps in the county organization, that "dragged their feet" and weren't as active as they might otherwise have been. Could you continue and say another word about that, not in terms of who they were necessarily, but just their reasons.

CHERNENKO: Well, in one case I would say the one individual was bigoted. In the other....

YOUNG: By bigotry, you mean religion.

CHERNENKO: Religion. And the other one didn't think the President had a chance and he didn't want to get involved, thought it would hurt him with the state organization.

YOUNG: Well, did you notice any feeling among the members of the state Democratic organization that Senator Kennedy might pull them down in the fall election? In other words, did you find the State House Democratic Party willing to associate itself in the fall election with the Kennedy national ticket?

CHERNENKO: In the primary, Bill, we had several doings, banquets where Senator Kennedy appeared and we sent invitations to various members in the state to participate, and few accepted.

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YOUNG: Do you feel that was a pressure of time or perhaps an unwillingness to take sides before the Convention [Democratic National Convention]?

CHERNENKO: I personally think that some of them thought it would hurt their chance.

YOUNG: Well, then after the nomination, of course, was given to Senator Kennedy in the fall election, did this coldness continue or was there a closing of the ranks in an attempt to beat Senator Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] at all levels?

CHERNENKO: There was a closing of ranks. They all appeared.

YOUNG: So that there was no problem then after that of...

CHERNENKO: No problem.

YOUNG: ...The state officials associating themselves with national ticket.

CHERNENKO: I may say this. John Kelly [John H. Kelly] and Don Robertson [C. Donald Robertson] attended every function in Brooke County where Senator Kennedy appeared.

YOUNG: Why Robertson at that time was a candidate for attorney general?

CHERNENKO: That's right, and John Kelly was a candidate for treasurer.

YOUNG: And both were elected, and both were quite willing in the fall election to be associated with the Kennedy name.

CHERNENKO: That's true.

YOUNG: Did you attempt at all to get the gubernatorial candidate? Was Governor Barron [William W. Barron] at any time present in Brooke County in association with the Kennedy campaign, or do you remember?

CHERNENKO: His schedule was different. He was always booked up ahead. I don't believe any one time in the primary that they both appeared in Brooke or Ohio or Hancock at the same time.

YOUNG: Well, it was understandable that those running for the lesser positions might have a little more time

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to give, I suppose, to all the rallies.

John, is there any other observation, any kind of summary that you would like to make with respect to your activity with Senator Kennedy and then President Kennedy and the political campaign in West Virginia which you were a part?

CHERNENKO: The only thing I can say is that: we believed in the man, and I thought that we had a sure winner, and he was an easy candidate to sell and you just wanted to be near the man just to hear him talk.

YOUNG: You feel then that his Harvard accent wasn't a liability?

CHERNENKO: No, it wasn't.

YOUNG: John, had the President lived and been the candidate, of course, as he undoubtedly would have been this year, do you think he would have carried your section of West Virginia by a greater majority than he did in 1960?

CHERNENKO: Yes, I believe he would have, Bill.

YOUNG: In other words, his popularity increased in the White House rather than decreased.

CHERNENKO: Yes.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. John G. Chernenko, who in 1960 was county chairman of the Democratic county organization in Brooke County, West Virginia. He worked actively in the campaign and entertained Senator and Mrs. Kennedy in his home. Present in and out for the interview, not all the time, were his two sons. You might identify them.

CHERNENKO: Mark Brian and Gary Craig Chernenko.

YOUNG: Were either of them around at the time of the 1960 campaign?

CHERNENKO: Yes, they were both around, When Senator Kennedy stopped in front of the house to pick up Mrs. Kennedy, soon as the car stopped, Gary and Mark both jumped in the automobile, and Senator Kennedy picked Gary up and put him on his lap, and they had a talk for about a minute or two.

YOUNG: Well, that will be something that he'll tell his grandchildren.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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