

Margaret Dixon Oral History Interview – 5/23/1967
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Biographical Note

Dixon, journalist and managing editor of *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, discusses the 1956 Democratic National Convention, the 1960 Democratic National Convention, and John F. Kennedy's 1960 Louisiana campaign trip, among other issues.

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MARGARET DIXON

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	1956 Democratic National Convention
4	Newspaper's stance on Senator John F. Kennedy
5	1960 Democratic National Convention
8	1960 presidential campaign in Louisiana
8	Civil Rights issues in Louisiana politics
10	President Kennedy's 1962 trip to Louisiana
11	Possibility of re-election
13	Robert Kennedy as possible presidential candidate

Oral History Interview

With

MARGARET DIXON

May 23, 1967
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: This is a recorded interview with Mrs. Margaret Dixon who is the managing editor of the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*. Mrs. Dixon why don't we start by your describing your role and your activities at the 1956 Convention.

DIXON: I was appointed one of Louisiana's delegates to the Convention. I was also covering it for my newspaper. And the Massachusetts delegation was seated right next to the Louisiana delegation, which is how we happened to know then Senator Kennedy, later President Kennedy. He was interested in the vice presidential nomination at that time. But he found out, I guess, it was as well he didn't get it, although maybe in the long run, it would be better if he had.

STEWART: When you went to the Convention, who was your choice for vice president?

DIXON: Well, we hadn't thought about Kennedy so much. I think most of them were for Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] because Governor Earl K. Long, who was then the Governor of Louisiana, was for Kefauver. Of course, he was almost a neighbor, Tennessee being

much closer to us than Massachusetts. But in the long run, finally, Louisiana did vote for Kennedy for vice president. And I happened to kind of get in on this because I have been a long time friend of Congressman Hale Boggs [Thomas Hale Boggs], who was very active in the Louisiana Convention delegation, and also of Frank Ellis [Frank B. Ellis], who was the Democratic National Committeeman. And Frank Ellis and Representative Boggs were pushing Senator Kennedy's candidacy. And so they thought I had some influence with Earl Long, so they wanted me to arrange an interview, to get Governor Long to agree to see Senator Kennedy, which I finally did get him to do because he said, "I'm not going to change my mind." And I said, "Well, it won't hurt if you interview him anyway." So he did, but I was not present at the interview.

STEWART: Do you remember whom in the Massachusetts delegation you met or had any...

DIXON: Well, I mostly remember Senator Kennedy. All the Louisiana people were very taken with Senator Kennedy, even though we thought that Kefauver might have been a better vote-getter than Senator Kennedy in the South, not necessarily nationwide.

STEWART: In Louisiana you felt that?

DIXON: Well, not necessarily in Louisiana but in the South because Louisiana is a state with a large Catholic population. I guess it's 60-40, 60 per cent Protestant and 40 per cent Catholic. We thought that Kennedy could get votes in Louisiana. But south-wide, Kefauver might get more.

STEWART: Did Senator Kennedy appear before a caucus of the Louisiana delegation?

DIXON: No, he didn't. But we were quite chummy by sitting side by side. He'd come over and talk to the Louisiana delegation, and we would go over and talk to the Massachusetts delegation. And he was very active in that. I'd met him through Mr. Ellis and Representative Boggs. I had known Congressman Boggs when he went to Tulane. He was Tulane correspondent for

[-2-]

the States [*New Orleans States Item*] when I was working on the *Picayune* [*New Orleans Times Picayune*]. He introduced me to Senator Kennedy. He didn't appear before the caucus. But the caucus just voted, and it was overwhelmingly in favor of Senator Kennedy. And I think it was largely his own personal magnetism that put him across because it didn't go along religious lines at all. And some of the Protestants did vote for him. I think it was his own personal magnetism. I became his fan from then on out.

STEWART: Did people know much about his voting record or his activities in Congress?

DIXON: No. They didn't. I think it was really his personality. At that point the ones from Louisiana knew very little about him. I don't mean they didn't know who he was. Of course they knew that. But they didn't know much about his voting record or what he had done before.

STEWART: He came to Louisiana during the 1956 campaign?

DIXON: Yes, he did. It seems to me he was down here twice in that campaign. I know he spoke down here at a luncheon. Then he went over to Crowley where he visited Judge Reggie [Edmund M. Reggie].

STEWART: I think that was later, wasn't it?

DIXON: Yes. I believe that was later. It was after the '56 campaign. He came down here at that time, but I don't remember... Oh, I guess it was in New Orleans. I covered it, but I've kind of gotten the various times a little mixed up. He did come down here. But he was extremely popular in Louisiana.

STEWART: Were you a delegate in 1960?

DIXON: No, I was not a delegate in 1960. I covered it for my paper in 1960, but I was not a delegate.

[-3-]

STEWART: Had you attempted to be a delegate? Were you part of the out group at that time or what?

DIXON: Oh. Well, I didn't attempt to be a delegate at any time. I just happened to be a personal friend of Earl K. Long, and he made me a delegate. And I was not particularly personal friend of Governor Davis [James H. Davis]. But I wouldn't have been for Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] anyway. I would have been for Kennedy, and I'm sure the Louisiana delegation did vote for Johnson. They were pledged to that. But we kept telling them they were crazy; they'd better change their vote to Kennedy. But they didn't do it. But I was not a delegate then.

STEWART: Did your paper support President Kennedy before the Convention?

DIXON: No. We took no part in it. I think we finally did endorse him for President in '60. I believe we did. I can look it up to be sure. Yes, we did. We did endorse him that year.

STEWART: But they took no stand on the...

DIXON: No. No. Not on the delegation. No. not on the Convention. We probably would have been for Johnson had they taken anything because he was a neighbor.

STEWART: You did cover the National...

DIXON: I did cover the '60 Convention.

STEWART: You hadn't covered any of the other primaries or any of the other activities.

DIXON: No. No. You see, we didn't have a primary down here.

STEWART: I mean in any other states.

[-4-]

DIXON: No. No. we don't go out that far. We're strictly a local paper. We use AP for that.

STEWART: Could you describe some of your activities in covering the Convention? I assume you had some contact with the press people in the Kennedy camp?

DIXON: Yes. We had contacts with them. And I sometimes string for the *New York Times* down here, so they kind of took me under their wing. And they were convinced from the outset that it was Kennedy and nobody else, that no one else had a chance in 1960. which when you got there, it was perfectly apparent. There was quite a little boom for Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], but I think it was largely drummed up by Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor Roosevelt]. It was really a serious boom, I would say, for Stevenson.

STEWART: From a reporter's view, did you really feel that you knew what was going on at that Convention?

DIXON: Well, of course, I was just a small part in a small paper and was mostly covering things that were of interest to Louisiana. But I thought I did. I mean I tried to talk to people who knew much more about it than I, the Washington correspondents. I have a good many friends in the press in Washington. And I had contacts with the *New York Times*. And I felt they knew, so I felt they sort of let me know. I felt that I did. It was apparent to me that Kennedy had it, that there was very little chance of not getting it even though the South was opposed to it. It didn't mean that I was; I was for it.

STEWART: Did you attend the press conference that Senator Kennedy had?

DIXON: Yes.

[-5 -]

STEWART: What were your impressions that you recall of his handling of the press?

DIXON: I thought he handled it beautifully. He had a quick, bright mind. I thought he handled the press wonderfully well at the Convention. He was very impressive.

STEWART: After the convention, what...

DIXON: Now, this is '56 or '60.

STEWART: '60. Was there anything else about the '60 Convention that you thought was particularly interesting or significant either from a reporter's point of view or...

DIXON: Well, the most interesting thing was when it was perfectly apparent he was going to do it, and then it was announced Johnson was going to be his running mate. That came as a surprise. Nobody, I think, was really expecting that. Nobody seemed to know who it was going to be, but they didn't expect—at least the reporters that I talked to didn't think... They first thought Johnson wouldn't take it. Number one, Kennedy wouldn't give it to him; and, number two, Johnson wouldn't take. And that came as a great surprise. I mean, at the last Convention, for example, the '64 Convention, it was perfectly apparent that it was going to be Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. As soon as Johnson announced who it was going to be... There was no suspense at all. Although I think that had Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] made a run for it, he could have gotten it in '64 if he had wanted it.

STEWART: Really?

DIXON: Oh, listen, the only bright spot in that Convention—Margaret was a delegate to that one—was when he appeared. They must have applauded for thirty minutes—a thirty minute demonstration. I mean

[-6 -]

if he had really made a run for it, he would have gotten it. And I think the Kennedy glamour still exists. I mean, it rubbed off on Bobby and apparently everybody in the family.

STEWART: I think it's interesting, just a few weeks ago I was reading through some *New York Times* about the 1960 Convention. There was absolutely no mention of Johnson as a possible nominee.

DIXON: None of the reporters that I talked to had any idea who it would be. This came apparently as a great shock and surprise to everybody. I mean even people

who had been traveling with Kennedy and had seen how he had built up his campaign. As I say, all the ones I talked to would say, "Oh, Johnson wouldn't take it, and Kennedy wouldn't have him, anyway." I think they think that there was no meeting of the minds there whatever. A lot of people really can't believe he did it.

STEWART: Was there a problem in Louisiana during the 1960 campaign of major political figures endorsing the ticket? The Governor did, I assume.

DIXON: No, Davis did not...Davis was a Johnson man. He didn't go to the Convention, but he was a Johnson man. They didn't ever want to come over to Kennedy at all. We, the newspaper reporters in Louisiana kept telling them they were fools not to, that it was perfectly obvious; they might just as well get behind him. But he did not endorse either Kennedy or Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] in that campaign, although I'm sure that in the end he voted Democratic because he was a Democrat. When I was out in Los Angeles, I got a phone call from Earl Long saying that he had not been for Kennedy; he had been for Lyndon Johnson, but that he was now announcing his full support for Kennedy. And I think that he campaigned to some extent.

STEWART: Did he?

DIXON: Yes, he did, even though he said he had not been for him. He said if that was the choice

[-8-]

of the Convention, he was for Kennedy, too. He phoned me in Los Angeles the morning after the nomination. There was a time difference there. It was fairly early. In fact, it must have been about 6 o'clock because he got up at dawn.

STEWART: How well organized was the campaign in Louisiana?

DIXON: In '60?

STEWART: Right.

DIXON: It wasn't well organized at all.

STEWART: Frank Ellis was the chairman, was he?

DIXON: Yes. He worked like a dog but there wasn't much money going into it, and there wasn't, I didn't think, much done.

STEWART: Was there a lot less money than there usually is?

DIXON: Well, there seemed to be less enthusiasm and less money spent, I would say. But Kennedy did carry the state.

STEWART: By a sizable margin.

DIXON: Yes. I think really this was almost due to Frank Ellis' working, single-handedly. He worked like a dog. He really worked pretty hard. And, as I say, Earl Long came out for him, and most of the people followed him. All his political friends voted for Kennedy, which is one of the reasons that he carried the state.

STEWART: Was the religion the big problem?

DIXON: No. No. Civil rights was the big problem. It's always a big problem down here.

STEWART: But as between Kennedy and Nixon...

[-8-]

DIXON: It wasn't much choice on civil rights. But the religion, I never heard much mentioned. As I say, this is a predominantly Catholic... It's not predominantly because it's about 60-40. but that was not really a problem, surprisingly enough. It might have been in some areas way up in the northern part of the state. But it was largely civil rights. Of course, they didn't like either Nixon or Kennedy on their stand in civil rights.

STEWART: What stand did your paper take on the Kennedy civil rights programs and all the activities during the Kennedy Administration?

DIXON: Oh well, they were mostly opposed to it, not vigorously or violently. But they didn't endorse it. They felt, as they still feel, that they were attempting to move ahead too swiftly. It's a big problem down here. We have so many Negroes who are completely underprivileged.

STEWART: In the governor's race in, what, in 19...

DIXON: In 1964?

STEWART: Yes. Morrison [de Lesseps S. Morrison] and ...

DIXON: Well, Morrison came out openly... He was openly for Kennedy. Then the main anti-Kennedy person was a former governor named Robert Kennon [Robert F. Kennon]. And Kennon was violently anti-Kennedy. And when Kennedy was killed, he was just knocked out of the race, although I had the feeling up until that point that he would have been in the second primary. Whether he would have won or

not, he'd have certainly have been a formidable contender. But McKeithen [John J. McKeithen], the present Governor, had not said too much about Kennedy at all. Gillis Long [Gillis W. Long] had been fairly neutral... None of them were strongly for Kennedy's civil rights program. But I think most of them would have... Kennedy's death completely knocked Kennon out of the race.

[-9-]

STEWART: He didn't withdraw. He went through with it.

DIXON: No. He went on through. He ran fourth. I think he would have run much higher than that. Morrison, of course, ran way, way up. That was not completely due to Kennedy's death. But I think it that it was almost due to that. He had been the only one who wasn't... The people down here were honestly shocked and grieved—I would say a great many of them.

STEWART: Did people always associated the Kennedy brothers as the bad men as far as civil rights were concerned.

DIXON: It seems to be more Bobby than Jack.

STEWART: Was it that during the Administration, do you recall?

DIXON: Yes. It was more Bobby than Jack. The Attorney General was more immediate. He does more immediate things. He gives the orders and he takes the brunt, which might have been it. And that is one of the things that they still hold against Bobby Kennedy. Not me, I think. I like Bobby.

STEWART: Did you cover the President's trip here in 1962?

DIXON: Yes.

STEWART: Did he have any press conferences here or did you have any direct contact with him?

DIXON: No. We went down to New Orleans. At the airport we saw him. And then we went to the Ambassador Hotel where he made his speech. And that was really a mess. I don't believe had time to call a press conference. They also at that time had great difficulty on civil rights because the hotels at that point were closed to Negroes. And they didn't...

[-10-]

STEWART: What was that?

DIXON: All the hotels in Louisiana were closed to Negroes. The Public Accommodations had not been put into effect. It was always a kind of a problem where to have one because they always had Negro reporters with them, and they didn't want to kick them out. That came up when Stevenson was running in 1954. They kind of had a donnybrook. So when Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] came later, he had his press conference in his railroad car.

STEWART: And how did they resolve this when Kennedy was here?

DIXON: They just didn't have any press conference.

STEWART: They didn't have any at all?

DIXON: They didn't have a press conference.

STEWART: Really. That's very surprising.

DIXON: He made his speech when he came here, but he did not have a press conference.

STEWART: Let's see. I can't think of any other questions. Is there anything else?

DIXON: I don't think there is anything, except that I think that people there did admire Kennedy. They personally admired Kennedy a great deal and I think still do revere his memory. I guess a great many people do. I can't say the same for Bobby. I apparently am one of the few. I like Bobby. I mean I like him politically.

STEWART: Can you think of any internal Louisiana situations that the Kennedy Administration was involved in or it affected? What about the whole problem of electors in the 1960 campaign?

DIXON: Well, no. You see, this state went Democratic.

[-11-]

They went for Kennedy, and there was no problem about electors at all. Kennedy electors were elected on the ballot so there was no problem with that.

STEWART: But wasn't there a question as to whether his name would be on the ballot in 1964?

DIXON: I don't believe for Kennedy. This happened to Truman [Harry S. Truman], and they had to call a special session of the legislature to get him back on.

Right at this point, I'm not at all sure Johnson's name is going to be on unless they do something about it. But I don't believe with Kennedy there never was any trouble.

STEWART: Either in '60 or looking ahead to...

DIXON: Well, no. Well, of course, nobody knows. There must have been an attempt, but I don't think it would have succeeded in '64 had Kennedy lived to go on and been the nominee. And I think he would have carried the state.

STEWART: Johnson did, didn't he?

DIXON: No. We went to Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater]. Unfortunately.

STEWART: You really think Kennedy would have carried the state?

DIXON: Yes, I think he would have.

STEWART: Why?

DIXON: Well, I think the heavy Catholic vote would have gone for him; the heavy Negro vote would have gone for him. A lot of Negroes split on Johnson. They weren't sure what went on. I was up to the Atlantic City Convention. My brother, at that point, lived in Westfield, New Jersey, and I went up there. And when I told them I didn't think Louisiana would vote for Johnson, they couldn't believe it. But I was sure they would not. There was so much anti-Negro feeling down here. But I

[-12-]

think that Kennedy might have because he would have gotten a solid Negro vote; he would have gotten an almost solid Catholic vote. I think that that might have put him over.

STEWART: Is there anything else you can think of?

DIXON: I can't think of anything else really. Except that I really thought Kennedy had a great potential. And I was one of his great admirers. A great many people here in Louisiana are. They seem never to hold so much of the civil rights against Jack as they do against Bobby for some reason. Maybe they were just a little closer to it or maybe the fact that Kennedy was martyred, and they are inclined to forgive President Kennedy. But I can't really think of anything else. Well, I don't know what to say about it. I think in time Bobby will be a contender for the presidency. Whether he'll make it or not, I don't know.

STEWART: Do you want to add anything?

DIXON: Well, Bobby Kennedy did get the biggest ovation of the Convention. Really

more than Johnson. A standing ovation.

STEWART: It lasted about twenty minutes.

DIXON: Really it was thirty minutes. And people will stand in line for blocks and blocks and blocks to see Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] at a reception. I don't think the book situation has hurt her much down here. They say it has elsewhere.

STEWART: It hasn't had that much effect.

DIXON: I don't think it has down here, I really don't, which is a little odd. Except maybe we don't read much. [Laughter] I take that back. I'm reading it right now. It's a very well written book. But I have the feeling it's highly inaccurate at times. It may not be.

STEWART: Well, I don't know. Okay.

[-13-]

DIXON: I enjoyed it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-14-]

Margaret Dixon Oral History Transcript

Name List

B

Boggs, Thomas Hale, 2

D

Davis, James H., 4, 7

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 11
Ellis, Frank B., 2, 8

G

Goldwater, Barry M., 12

H

Humphrey, Hubert H., 6

J

Johnson, Lyndon B., 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13

K

Kefauver, Estes, 1-2
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 13
Kennedy, John F., 1-13
Kennedy, Robert F., 6, 7, 10, 11, 13
Kennon, Robert F., 9

L

Long, Earl K., 1-2, 4, 7-8
Long, Gillis W., 9

M

McKeithen, John J., 9
Morrison, de Lesseps S., 9, 10

R

Reggie, Edmund M., 3
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 5

S

Stevenson, Adlai E., 5, 11

T

Truman, Harry S., 12