

Gwendolyn Gunderson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/25/1966
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Oral History Interview

Of

Gwendolyn Gunderson

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Oral History Interview

with

Gwendolyn Gunderson

January 25, 1966

Lorraine Hotel, Madison, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Well, let's start by my asking you how you got involved with the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] entourage.

GUNDERSON: The first time I decided to become involved was in 1956, watching the Democratic Convention. I had read a great deal about the Senator then and was very impressed with him. Then when I read that there was going to be a citizens' committee formed—I believe it was Ivan Nestingen [Ivan A. Nestingen], then mayor of Madison—I wrote and offered my services. The next event was a call from Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] in Chicago, and we met down here at the Edgewater Hotel. It was a rather small meeting; I don't believe there were more than eleven people there. Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey] was there, and I was so impressed with him that night because he got up and said that he was the non-partisan state chairman who was going to support Senator Kennedy for president. And, also, all during that meeting I realized that it was going to be a much more tremendous job than anyone had anticipated. While Mr. Shriver was talking and

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while Mr. Lucey was talking and different well known Democrats from different parts of the state, I realized then that it was going to be a long hard job. At that time I was appointed

campaign chairman for Kennedy for president by our county chairman. I was not then county chairman.

MORRISSEY: Had you previously been active in the Democratic party?

GUNDERSON: Yes, I was serving as secretary in the county party at that time.

MORRISSEY: Were most of your colleagues who were active in the party lining up for Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]?

GUNDERSON: Yes, at first they were lining up for Hubert Humphrey. But as I went back into the county and started working, there was a definite trend towards Kennedy. In the final analysis, we thought it was probably the rural people, whom we didn't reach completely, that defeated us in the county because we did have Humphrey come into the county, and we could not get a creditable number for coffee. This was after President Kennedy had been there. And I didn't participate, being in Kennedy's camp, but I was called by one of Humphrey's aides and then by Humphrey and told in a few well chosen phrases about Columbia County. And, also, Mrs. Humphrey [Muriel Fay Buck Humphrey] came into the county, and they only had five for her coffee.

MORRISSEY: Is this because of poor organization or of low sentiment for Hubert Humphrey?

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GUNDERSON: I would say that a lot of it was poor organization. Because I realized our weak spot afterwards in the final analysis was that we should have tried harder at these Grange meetings, and farm affairs because I feel these are the people who recognized the name Humphrey, and he had in the years of senator from Minnesota. So that's why Columbia County did not give President Kennedy a majority although he had a creditable vote there. So, that's the way it started.

MORRISSEY: Well, how did it develop?

GUNDERSON: Work and work and work. Well, the first time I saw the President-to-be was when he appeared at our high school, the senior high school, and it was for an assembly program. It was a bitter cold day and, oh, many, many inches of snow. He was driving down from Eau Claire. And I live very near the high school. As a matter of fact, my daughter was going to take care of Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy]; at that time, Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] and Caroline were traveling with him. But the night before, I believe, Caroline developed a cold, and the weather was not good. So Mrs. Kennedy and Caroline flew back to Washington from Eau Claire. And that's the first time in Portage we had really laid eyes on him, so to speak. But that was one of the most important meetings we had in Portage because he spoke on

Wisconsin politics, on the LaFollettes [Robert Marion LaFollette] and the Progressives. But all the time he was giving a

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message to these young people, and there were well over six hundred young people there. And to me it was so impressive because they came to see, but as his talk progressed, they came to admire and respect, and I doubt if there was one student that went out of that assembly that just didn't go home and say to their parents, we want you to vote for John Kennedy. That is the impression we got. We had brought a few Democrats into the meeting so they could shake hands with him, but it was typically a young people's meeting, and they loved it. They just loved it.

MORRISSEY: Did you get a chance on that occasion to meet the Senator?

GUNDERSON: Oh, yes. I had the job of lining up in groups of four or five our well-known Democrats and taking him and introducing him to these Democratic leaders that were there. And I was so amused, our assemblyman from the county for years has been a very straight laced Republican, and he was one of the first people that lined up to meet Senator Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: How did he vote? Do you know?

GUNDERSON: I'd like to know. [Laughter] But the work started. I was very impressed with the schedule, or the directives, that we would get from the Kennedy campaign office because I had never worked with anything that was so well organized and so well planned. You know, there was a lot of, lot of work to do.

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You always knew where you were going, and you had a deadline or a time limit for each phase of work. We did a mail list of ten thousand for the county, and at that time my children got rather tired of stuffing envelopes in the living room. But that had to be done by a certain day. Also we did start a campaign, by telephone. It wasn't so much a campaign, but actually to find out how people were going to vote. It was more or less to take the temperature of the county. And this backfired in our county.

MORRISSEY: Had you been asked to do this by one of the...?

GUNDERSON: One of the people in the Madison Kennedy office, and it backfired. We have a radio program on our local radio station called Party Line, and we were losing votes by people calling up and complaining about being questioned and called to the phone. And I was going out to the radio station to try and rectify this and appear on Party Line, and I called the Madison office several times asking

that this be stopped. But this was one of the things they felt.... It had worked fine in Milwaukee and the larger communities. Our community, apparently, was unique. And when I called the Madison office, it so happened that Senator Kennedy was in the office that day, and they turned around and explained: "Columbia County is having its problems." And he did come to the phone, and he said to me, "You have made your last call." It was such a relief because I did feel that we were losing a great number of votes. And he seemed to understand in an instant, but these people in Madison were not

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understanding about it. But then as we started working, we had various factions in our own party—some of my good Lutheran friends—who would not support President Kennedy. They did not, in fact, support Humphrey, but they felt that the religion was a real issue. And I felt at many times the Catholics themselves in our county were a problem because they approached it so negatively: He can't be elected because he's Catholic. And it bothered me a great deal. We had collected extra money for ads throughout our seven or eight county papers and tried to combat it in every way. And then after the Senator appeared before—was it the Baptist ministers in Texas?—which impressed everyone, we felt a definite upswing. And we noticed a tremendous difference after the primary in Wisconsin. It seemed to me that our worst trouble was before the primary. The malicious attacks, I mentioned the anonymous letters, and some letters that were signed—all these things stopped after the primary. It would seem to me that when the primary was over, at least as far as Columbia County was concerned, the religious issue had been met and buried. Up till that time it was not pleasant.

MORRISSEY: It didn't reoccur in the Kennedy-Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] campaign?

GUNDERSON: Well, it was mentioned, but we never had the editorials in the newspapers and the Republican ads and the whispering campaign and the telephone calls and the people calling up this radio

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station with these issues that we had to be working all the time. And I felt so much of my time was wasted going on this religious issue which to me was not important. It didn't seem important at the time. When I could have been out in the county doing other things, I spent more time refuting this religious issue than any one thing until the primary was over. But then it never, never did grow to the proportions it did before the primary. And I feel now that in Columbia County there probably never would be anything like that again. But there has to be a first time. The people that you least expected—our Democratic party in the county was divided. We had a bloc of votes in Columbus that the people didn't even vote in that election. They would not vote for Humphrey, and they would not vote for Kennedy. And this was very irritating and trying. This happened in the southern part of the county and over in the Lodi area. But rather than vote for a Republican—and they weren't too impressed—I imagine several of them did go and vote for Humphrey. But it was a good year before some of these breaches were healed in the party.

MORRISSEY: They were a real hindrance then during the fall?

GUNDERSON: Yes, that's a good word—hindrance. A lot of trouble came out of it because instead of just making up their mind and abiding by their decision, they were actually campaigning

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against us. So we had two fronts to meet in that campaign. And many times they were our own people, which was very, very hard. But we had good cooperation from the young people. They would go to the shopping centers and plant gates and hand out literature. The young people seemed to sense his greatness before the older people, which was amazing. And in that vein, going to the shopping centers and plant gates and door to door, this was long, grueling, hard work. Many times when people wouldn't show up, you'd go and do it yourself. But it had to be done. The organization was to me fantastically good because the guidelines were there, and it did make it easier in nearly every phase. I did have a great deal of trouble getting materials. All of a sudden, I suppose it happens in any campaign that catches fire, and I couldn't get materials. And I'd write to Madison and so on. It so happened that my husband plays squash and knew Sarge Shriver before I became acquainted with him in Madison and had been squash partners with him. So he suggested I write to him. So I bypassed the Madison office. I don't know if this was according to Hoyle or not, but I received a tremendous box of material. And it came right at the right time because if you don't have the material and you have the people to work, well, you know, it's rather pointless sometimes.

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But then we had the President come in to the Ram Hotel for a coffee, and that was jam packed. I had made arrangements for him to be interviewed on the local radio stations on tape which would be played at a later date. And that, too, was another cold day. Our former congressman, when the county did go Democratic, introduced him.

One little sideline I liked about that coffee: My son had come to the age where he didn't want to be called Tommy anymore; he was going to be Tom. My daughter had met the Senator, but my son hadn't. So when this coffee was scheduled, I made arrangements to take Tommy with me. One of the first things I did was present him to the Senator, and he addressed him as Tommy. And to this day Tommy doesn't mind being called Tommy. But he also asked the Senator's indulgence if he could take pictures, and he gave his permission. Tommy did get fourteen just wonderful color pictures, and I think they were about the only ones taken that day. We might want to give them to the Library because they are a definite phase of the Wisconsin primary.

That day he spoke a short while, and then he campaigned up and down our streets. And there were still, I am sorry to say, some people who would not shake hands with him. But he had met this in other places. And I doubt if it was six

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months later that these people were bragging that they had seen President Kennedy. At this coffee we had just as many Republicans show up as Democrats although I felt it was very successful, and the tapes he left for the radio station were invaluable.

Then not long after that we set up a tea tour for Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver], and I had some napkins printed "President Kennedy 1960," which she was very tickled with and took one back to him. At that time, I showed her these color pictures, and she said that he would love them and suggested I send a couple of the slides that could be blown up for campaign use. For being an amateur photographer and a small camera, they were very outstanding pictures, and they are very precious to us.

Then not long after the President was elected—I can't quite place the date; I think it would be in '61—I was going to go to New York, and I heard that he was going to speak at the United Nations. So I called Pat Lucey and told him, "Would it be possible for me to stand on the grounds and see the President as long as I will be in New York?" And he must have pulled a lot of strings and made a tremendous amount of phone calls because I had a Clayton Fritchey's pass. It was quite an event for me, and I just will never forget it. But as I was sitting in the United Nations, all those sleepless

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days and nights and all the hard work and criticism and everything seemed to just fall into place. You were so proud that you'd had a small part in this great man because you couldn't help but realize—as I sat in the United Nations—the respect and admiration that all the delegates in the countries were showing him. Then we did get to stand at the rope as he came out, and he smiled and nodded. Of course, this was a big day in my life.

The last time I saw the President was at a Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner when he came back to Wisconsin. And that was a warm day in May, I believe. I think perhaps this was the first time the remark had been made, but it's certainly been used a lot since. He made it at that meeting; he was telling that he knew every footpath and every inch of Wisconsin, and we all agreed with him because we had trod many of the miles with him in cold weather and rain and all sorts of things. And he said he was deeply touched to be back in Wisconsin but he thought we'd all be touched more because it was a hundred dollar plate dinner. And that was the last time I saw him.

MORRISSEY: Were you able to attract much volunteer help when you were campaigning in your county?

GUNDERSON: Yes, I was. More women than men. I had ninety women that worked to maintain the headquarters that I opened up for him and did the mailing and that sort of thing. And I had a nice

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Young Democrats Club that really were quite active and did a lot of hard work.

MORRISSEY: You mentioned before we started that you had some trouble with the local newspaper?

GUNDERSON: Oh, that newspaper! Well, it's been a Republican newspaper since it was started, and the Republican party more or less, well, manages it. And it had always been the policy that we would say to them, "We will do three hundred dollars or five hundred dollars—some sum—of advertising." And then it would vary at the end of the campaign. But in this particular campaign—I believe some of the people involved belonged to Masonic orders and different organizations that weren't too friendly to our cause—before they would accept any Kennedy ad, I had to have the money down there. And what was so irritating to me in many, many instances is that a lot of time and thought would go onto this ad and many telephone calls because often as not I'd have to ring doorbells to collect the money for a certain ad. The Republicans would answer the ad in the same issue of the newspaper, and this was particularly frustrating. So I did go and talk to the managing editor, and things did improve. But that was an albatross around my neck, the whole campaign to have some issue in some particular phase of the campaign that we definitely must have an ad in

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the paper, and then have to find forty-seven dollars and run down and perhaps lose a day and lose the timing and the effectiveness of the ad. But that is the way it was.

MORRISSEY: I want you to tell me again that story about the tuna fish and the can opener. [Laughter]

GUNDERSON: Oh. Well, my family would come home, and they wouldn't know where in the county I would be or what would be happening. But they would know if the campaign was going well or not by if the tuna fish was open or the can opener beside the can of tuna fish. And that was the mainstay of their diet till the President was elected.

MORRISSEY: Do you have anything else you think we ought to put on the record? Do you recall any chats with the President that we haven't already talked about?

GUNDERSON: Well, the few times I talked to him we talked mostly about LaFollette. My family were active in politics in the Progressive party, and we had discussed that a little bit. He seemed to admire the LaFollettes a great deal and complimented Wisconsin on their leadership.

I have a rather humorous story. We have a well known Democrat in Portage who was just so anxious to meet the President. He had put all of his business matters aside and stood down in the cold with the rest of us on this morning at the school, waiting for him to come. But he had hoped for a

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few private words rather than standing in a group of four or five as we had set it up to save Senator Kennedy's time. And this well known Democrat persisted in standing alone. And at the very end of the meeting when I went to get the Senator's coat, he did walk over and say a few words to this friend of ours. And it was not till much later that we found out what the Senator said. We were quite anxious to know, and his question to this friend of ours was, "Would you please direct me to the men's bathroom?" [Laughter] We expected some great pearl of wisdom to come out. And you'll probably want to take that out.

MORRISSEY: No, I think we'll leave it on.

GUNDERSON: That's about all. I think we were quite fortunate in our small county in having him there twice and passing through a number of times that he would campaign at a plant gate on his way to some other part of the state, and I think in that way we were very fortunate and felt quite identified with the whole campaign.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall if he ever commented on the religious issue?

GUNDERSON: Not to me, no. The only thing we really talked about was that telephone campaign. As I say, he recognized our problems right away, and "You've made your last call." It was as simple as that. It was the heavens opening up as far as I was concerned. His brother Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] was in Wisconsin at one time and came up into the county. And his brother Bob

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[Robert F. Kennedy] was out here and appeared at Montello which was very near, and that's in Marquette County. And many Columbia County Democrats went up there. I didn't go along then.

MORRISSEY: Did you notice that the newspaper people who would come with the candidate when he was visiting your county seemed particularly attentive to the religious issue?

GUNDERSON: Well, I might have been supersensitive about it, but I felt that it was mentioned many times when it should not have been. There were so many issues at stake, and there were so many important things that the President was offering and concrete planks from the platform that should be discussed and brought out to the people that I really felt it was a waste of space. But I do feel that it was mentioned much more than it should have been.

MORRISSEY: I know some people feel that the newspapermen were counting heads—dividing Catholics and Protestants.

GUNDERSON: Well, I will say from my own experience that from my own Lutheran Church in Portage, I had more support for President Kennedy than I did from St. Mary's Catholic Church. And that, I know, is a bit unusual. But this is true.

MORRISSEY: How can you explain that?

GUNDERSON: I don't know. I really feel that they came, they met him, they were impressed, and they wanted him.

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MORRISSEY: You'd think that would be as true of the Catholics as of the Lutherans.

GUNDERSON: But it wasn't. In this particular town, we had. . . . Well, to be perfectly honest, at first I was almost afraid to go to church when it was starting to be in the paper that I was his campaign chairman. There is a definite feeling, particularly between Lutherans and Catholics, and our pastor never mentioned it directly to me till after the campaign. And he had a beautiful prayer for President Kennedy, a beautiful prayer! Every Sunday after he was elected, we had a prayer in our church to guide President Kennedy. And it used to be a joke with my Catholic friends; I'd say, "Well, we're still praying for President Kennedy. I hope you are." Also, after that bad day in Dallas, one of the most beautiful services I've ever been to was in our Lutheran Church for President Kennedy by this Lutheran pastor. But that's the way it happened. Many, many Lutherans came forth and offered their services. I suppose there were just as many that didn't, but I didn't know about it. You know, they were on the opposite side. It so happens in Portage that a great number of Catholics are Republicans.

MORRISSEY: Do you think a lot of those Catholic Republicans voted for Kennedy in the open primary?

GUNDERSON: I'd like to think they did, yes.

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MORRISSEY: And then, perhaps, voted for Nixon in the autumn election?

GUNDERSON: Yes, I really believe that could have happened. Of course, when I asked them, they all assured me of the Kennedy vote, but you never know when that curtain closes what's going to happen—you know, if

you wanted to sit down and count noses. But it's unique that there are so many Republicans in the Catholic Church. But they were very nice after the primary. As I say, that seemed to end the religious issue which was not nice at all until the primary was over.

MORRISSEY: Well, I think that about covers it unless you have something else.

GUNDERSON: No, I can't think of anything else.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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