

Marshall G. West Oral History Interview—7/13/1964
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Biographical Note

West, a practicing attorney from Wyoming County, West Virginia and a member of the State Legislature in 1960, discusses his role in the Hubert H. Humphrey campaign in West Virginia, his opinion on the John F. Kennedy (JFK) campaign in West Virginia and the effect of Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., on JFK's primary campaign in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Marshall G. West

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Oral History Interview

with

Marshall G. West

July 13, 1964
Charleston, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This interview is being recorded at the Daniel Boone Hotel, Charleston, West Virginia, on July 13, 1964. The interview is with Mr. Marshall G. West, a practicing attorney from Wyoming County, West Virginia. He was a member of the State Legislature in 1960 and was active in the coal and gas industry in West Virginia. Mr. West, what exactly was your role or what was your interest in the 1960 Kennedy-Humphrey [John F. Kennedy; Hubert H. Humphrey] primary in West Virginia?

WEST: I was co-chairman with Mr. William Jacobs of Parkersburg for Senator Hubert Humphrey's campaign in West Virginia.

YOUNG: What particular section or part of the state were you most active in?

WEST: I was assigned the southern part of the State of West Virginia, comprised, I believe at that time, of some twenty-six counties.

YOUNG: Well, could you say a word about your organization and the effectiveness of your campaign and the way in which you went about the organization of the campaign?

WEST: First, the organization was primarily designed to familiarize the name of

Senator Hubert Humphrey with the people in southern West Virginia. This was done by making contacts with influential people in all of the southern counties and asking them to distribute literature which was prepared and given to them to give to the people of the various sections in the twenty-six southern counties.

YOUNG: When did you first become interested in the candidacy of Senator Humphrey?

WEST: I first became interested in Senator Humphrey's campaign after he had made a speech to a joint assembly of the West Virginia Legislature—I believe sometime in early 1960.

YOUNG: Did you feel at that time that Senator Humphrey's political philosophy would be generally acceptable to the voters of West Virginia?

WEST: I did at that time, although I did think that some of the more conservative elements of the Democratic Party might feel that he was too liberal.

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YOUNG: With this in mind, did Senator Kennedy when he entered the campaign appear to be more conservative?

WEST: I think probably that Senator Kennedy's political philosophy may have suited the conservative element of the Democratic Party much better than Senator Humphrey's.

YOUNG: Mr. West, would you comment on the possibility of any alliance between Senator Humphrey and any other leading Democrat coming out of the West Virginia primary?

WEST: To my knowledge, there was no effort made on the part of Senator Humphrey or any members of his staff to support any other candidate other than Senator Humphrey; and, if it was done, certainly I knew nothing about it.

YOUNG: Now, going back to the primary of Senator Kennedy, as the campaign developed what were your reactions to the Kennedy candidacy and Senator Kennedy's methods of campaigning techniques and that sort of thing in the state as compared with the resources which you had at your disposal?

WEST: I felt, when I was asked to take the co-chairmanship for Senator Hubert Humphrey, that at that time we had an excellent chance to win in West Virginia. This was primarily based upon the conditions—the economic conditions—of West Virginia at that time and I felt that Senator Humphrey was somewhat more personable than Senator Kennedy.

In going about the organization of Senator Humphrey's campaign, he was very well received early in the campaign. Later, through the organizational efforts of the people who were working for Senator Kennedy at that time, and the subsequent bringing in of people like Franklin D. Roosevelt, the tide turned. It was timely done. We saw it before Election Day. We recognized it and we knew that Senator Kennedy was going to win. We just didn't know how big.

YOUNG: What, other than the appearance of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., can you suggest in the Kennedy techniques which may have turned the tide against you?

WEST: I think Senator Kennedy, particularly his political workers, did a very effective job in formulating a policy of making the best out of his religious background. By that I mean they created a psychological atmosphere when they were talking to the man on the street that he was almost indicted if he didn't vote for Senator Kennedy, which was very effective and, I thought, fair and was a good job.

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YOUNG: Do you feel then—would this be another way of saying that religion as an issue may have been exaggerated?

WEST: Very definitely. I think it was. I think the people that I talked with had no real thought one way or the other about either candidate's religious background. I think there were areas where people could probably be sort of urged into voting one way or the other because of certain psychological trends created by the political policy makers of Senator Kennedy's campaign.

YOUNG: Well, you're probably like the rest of us—we all know our own hometown probably better than any other area. Could you speak on the issue of religion in Wyoming County?

WEST: Religion was definitely not an issue in my county. In fact, Senator Kennedy carried the county pretty large and that was as I thought it would be and I had informed Senator Humphrey that that would be the case. It was primarily because of organization and the aid of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. The Roosevelt name is very popular in Wyoming County and people were simply voting for Senator Kennedy because Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. was for him and was campaigning for him.

I think, again, that another thing that was very effective on the part of Senator Kennedy was the fact that he visited and he actually went into the mines, the coal mines, in Wyoming County. This had a very devastating effect on Senator Humphrey's campaign in my county.

YOUNG: It wasn't possible for Senator Humphrey to visit the mines—or he didn't have an opportunity?

WEST: It was not possible. It could not be arranged because of his time schedule, because we had not really thought of it early enough to allow him an opportunity to go into some of the mines.

YOUNG: Did the Humphrey forces, as such, bring in any outsiders comparable to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.?

WEST: I believe that I had at that time the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota assisting me in the campaign, who now is, presently is Governor of Minnesota, Carl F. Rolvaag. He worked with me some five to six weeks in southern West Virginia. It was sort of a street corner campaign with a string band along and a loudspeaker in order to get a crowd together in order that either Governor Rolvaag or myself could speak to them to give them information about Senator Humphrey.

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YOUNG: Do you feel that Senator Kennedy's war record was an asset in favor of the Senator or did this really play a very important role in the campaign?

WEST: I think that his war record was definitely an asset although I don't think that it played a large role in his majority—that is, the large number of votes he received over Senator Humphrey in southern West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, if you were to go back now and analyze the whole primary, could you summarize the factors which you think worked against your candidate and worked in Senator Kennedy's favor? Any four, five, or six items which...

WEST: I don't know of anything that we could have done any differently that would have turned the tide in Senator Humphrey's favor. I felt that the Kennedy political organizers had planned the campaign well, they had organized it well, and they created the right political psychology to get sort of an unknown factor going to make him popular in a campaign.

I think Roosevelt assisted in this. I think Kennedy's war background assisted in this. I think that his brother, Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], was very effective in talking to influential people in southern West Virginia and convincing them to support Senator Kennedy. I think, primarily, that the down-to-earth type campaigning that Senator Kennedy and his staff did convinced the people in southern West Virginia that this man was a winner. And for those reasons, I think, they supported Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: You don't feel, then, that in the final analysis it was a question of platform or policy, a question of liberalism versus conservatism, but maybe one of organization and that sort of thing?

WEST: I think that conservatism and liberalism may have had something to do with it; but I don't think that, assuming everything else to be equal, that that would

have made any difference in the outcome of the election. I did feel that Senator Humphrey's liberal policies or liberal philosophy was a definite disadvantage in some areas. It got some influential people reserving their judgment at a time when it would have been very important to Senator Humphrey's campaign to have them with him, rather than to adopt an attitude of wait and see and take a look at Senator Kennedy.

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YOUNG: Well, this next question, Mr. West, will be a double-barreled one. I'll give them both to you and then play with them from there. It is true, is it not, that Senator Kennedy did get a great deal of volunteer help?

WEST: Yes. It was true that Senator Kennedy got a lot of voluntary help. It was the kindling of a young man and it sparked an awful lot of people. It is something that you just simply can't put your finger on. It takes a number of things to create that type of atmosphere; and, once it is created, it creates a real rush and that's what happened in Senator Kennedy's campaign.

YOUNG: Well, you'd list youth, then, as a factor in drawing volunteers?

WEST: Very definitely. Very definitely.

YOUNG: Along with that, do you think that the Senator's religion played a factor at all in drawing volunteers?

WEST: I think not. I don't think that Kennedy's religion had anything to do with drawing volunteers. Some of them may have felt compelled to go out and work for Senator Kennedy because the atmosphere had been created that anyone voting against Senator Kennedy was almost indicted as a bigot. That was the type of psychology that was created—that was effective and I think influenced a lot of them to do that. Basically, I question whether the people that went out and worked for Senator Kennedy realized the differences in the two men from a religious standpoint.

YOUNG: Do you feel, at least in the part of West Virginia for which you were responsible, that following the primary the two camps closed ranks and generally worked for the good of the party in the general election?

WEST: Yes. Very definitely. Senator Kennedy was acceptable to the supporters of Senator Humphrey. It was a matter among his supporters in southern West Virginia of which man could do the best job as president. I know that a lot of my chief organizers felt as I felt, that Senator Humphrey was better qualified in foreign affairs than Senator Kennedy. We felt that he was more mature and that he was forceful and could be real effective as a president; although we, at the same time, had no doubts that Senator Kennedy was very capable of becoming a good president.

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YOUNG: Mr. West, it has been said by some political writers that some of the leading Democrats in the general election were still afraid that President Kennedy's religion might work against the state Democratic Party and, perhaps, pull it down to defeat. Did you notice any slight hesitation on the part of other Democrats to be associated with the Kennedy ticket?

WEST: Of course, I was a candidate in the fall election. Although Senator Humphrey lost my county by some, I believe, three thousand votes, I won the nomination and was elected that fall along with Senator Kennedy when he was elected to the presidency. I didn't hesitate one minute to support Senator Kennedy, and other candidates that I was associated with in the county did not hesitate to endorse Senator Kennedy without reservation. I found no candidate in southern West Virginia that had any reservation about speaking for Senator Kennedy because they felt that he was going to win and they felt that definitely he was an asset to the party.

YOUNG: In other words, in the area that you were well acquainted with there was little reluctance to identify with the national ticket?

WEST: I could find no reluctance at all.

YOUNG: O.K.—Well, Mr. West, perhaps you are in a good position to evaluate the New Frontier with respect to West Virginia since in the primary you were on the other side.

Mr. West, before we move on to the reaction to the New Frontier, would you make any remarks you care to make with respect to the primary?

WEST: Well, I felt that, about six weeks before the primary, the Senator Kennedy forces were closing the gap that I considered Senator Humphrey to be ahead. The gap, I felt, was completely closed about ten days before the primary and I had indicated to Senator Humphrey that, because we had not dealt on precinct level organizations, it was definitely working against us; that we had such organizations in Cabell County and in Logan County. And, incidentally, in Cabell County—Senator Humphrey won that county and he...

YOUNG: Excuse me. Cabell County would be Huntington, wouldn't it?

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WEST: Yes—and he ran very close to Senator Kennedy in Logan County. I believe that Senator Humphrey got better than six thousand votes in Logan County. Logan County was organized on a precinct level and Cabell County was also organized on a precinct level. The other counties were not organized on a precinct level

because Senator Humphrey and his supporters did not have resources and personnel to organize the other counties on a precinct level.

YOUNG: At what point, perhaps, did you begin to feel that the tide was beginning to turn in Senator Kennedy's favor?

WEST: I felt that about six weeks before the primary the tide began to change. In my sampling of people that I felt would be supporters of Senator Humphrey throughout the southern counties, there was some reservation or reluctance about their supporting Senator Humphrey and I could sort of sense that they were switching from being lukewarm toward Senator Humphrey to supporters for Senator Kennedy. I think that one other thing which certainly did a great deal to get this tide moving in high gear was the visits of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. which were some three to four weeks before the primary. And after talking to people in the counties after his visits, I felt very definitely we had lost the lead in southern West Virginia, and from there on in it seemed like a rush switching from Senator Humphrey to Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Do you feel that there was anything that might have been done at the last minute to change the primary?

WEST: I felt that we could have made the total vote difference in southern West Virginia much closer had we had resources to organize the—or at least partially organize—the other counties on precinct levels and to engage in an extensive television program advertisement on Senator Humphrey's political philosophy.

YOUNG: But this was not done?

WEST: This was not done because we did not have the financial resources, nor did we have the personnel at that time to do it and the time element was real close. It would have had to have been a round-the-clock operation up to the day of the primary.

YOUNG: I know that you can't really measure politics on a ruler, with a scale, and that sort of thing, but I would gather from your conversation that you feel that perhaps Senator Kennedy's most effective weapon was the visit of FDR, Jr. What would you list as perhaps the other two or three campaign techniques along with that?

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WEST: I think his precinct organization. Senator Kennedy's staff organized the large precincts very effectively. I don't know how much resources they had to do this with. I know some of the people they were dealing with and the only way that you can deal with them in a campaign is to pay them for the work and I assume that that was doing it, although I don't know that it was done.

YOUNG: Before we completely finish this business of the primary, there is one more question at least. Were the women members of the Kennedy family effective, do you feel, against Senator Humphrey in southern West Virginia?

WEST: Yes—I thought that the female members of the Kennedy family were effective in the organization of their tea parties and breakfast chats that they had. The women seemed to be very well pleased with them and I think it very definitely helped Senator Kennedy. We tried the same policy with Senator Humphrey, but we did not have enough of the female members of the Humphrey family to get to the areas to be real effective, of course, in the time that we had and—recognizing that this was an asset to the candidate.

YOUNG: You've already indicated that you feel that the Democratic Party then closed ranks after the primary and very little attempt was made to be disassociated with the Kennedy campaign. Do you think that religion, then, figured as an item in the general election? In other words, did many people vote for Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] because they would not, in West Virginia, vote for a member of the Roman Catholic Church?

WEST: I don't know of any person in southern West Virginia that's a member of the Democratic Party, nor did I hear of any person who's a member of the Democratic Party, voting against Senator Kennedy because of his religion. Frankly, as far as I know, and I campaigned rather hard in the general election of 1960, the Democrats didn't discuss the religious background of Senator Kennedy. I think it was a matter of the Democratic Party versus the Republican Party and your party faithfuls, once the man was nominated—they voted the two party system.

YOUNG: In other words, the issue of religion died in the primary rather than in the general election?

WEST: If it was an issue in the primary—I think that very definitely it did.

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YOUNG: Let's turn then to something else. As a West Virginian of long standing, what would your evaluation be of Kennedy's treatment of West Virginia during his tenure in the White House? In rather general terms—and then, if you can be specific about any policies which you think the state found the most acceptable; and, on the other hand, any Kennedy policies which West Virginians found unacceptable.

WEST: General speaking, of course, I was very well pleased with Senator Kennedy's—or President Kennedy's treatment of West Virginia after his election. I felt that President Kennedy would keep his word. I think the political leaders of West Virginia were confident that he would keep his word; and I think very definitely, he did do just that as long as he was president.

YOUNG: Well, in your own particular section of the state did you notice any particular reactions to such programs as the Kennedy medical program? Was it well received or were people quite critical of it?

WEST: The rank and file of the Democratic Party in West Virginia, as far as I could determine, were very definitely in favor of the medical program of President Kennedy. We did have some doctors and the rather conservative element of the Democratic Party in southern West Virginia that were opposed to it. I can't quote this. I think probably Dr. Ward Riley, who was, incidentally, one of the campaign managers for Senator Kennedy, was probably opposed to Senator Kennedy's Medicare plan.

YOUNG: Well, did you find any criticism at all, other than in this instance you've just mentioned, of a professional man criticizing this specific program—did West Virginians that you associated with in any way, feel let down by the Kennedy Administration?

WEST: No. I could find no evidence of that at all. Most of the people that I talked with and, incidentally, this was for Republicans too—I know some Republicans that were strongly in favor of Kennedy's—some of Kennedy's programs. They definitely felt that Senator Kennedy was making a surprisingly good president.

YOUNG: Can you think of any particular items that, perhaps, Republican West Virginians approved of—any specific....

WEST: I think the Medicare plan—some of the rank and file members of the Republican Party, and a number of them, were definitely in favor of it. In fact, several of them expressed that belief to me and felt that President Kennedy was trying to help aged Americans, regardless of politics.

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YOUNG: Well, it has sometimes been suggested that a Harvard accent may be either an asset or a liability. In Senator Kennedy's case in West Virginia, do you think his Harvard accent worked for him or against him?

WEST: I think it worked for him.

YOUNG: Do you think this reminded people perhaps a little bit of FDR, Sr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt] rather than....

WEST: Yes. I think it is another one of those sort of gimmicks that you get going for you that is a political asset.

YOUNG: And this did not make him appear as an effete easterner but really added to his political luster, so to speak?

WEST: Yes. I very definitely think that.

YOUNG: Well, if President Kennedy had been the candidate, or were to be the candidate, in this 1964 election, how do you feel he would run in West Virginia?

WEST: I believe that President Kennedy would have done much better than he did in 1960. I think that President Kennedy would have gotten a lot of the Republican vote in 1964 that he did not get in 1960—and the more conservative element of the Democratic Party—I think he would have picked up that vote. It was the general feeling in southern West Virginia that the President had done a good job and they were just simply not thinking in terms of changing him.

YOUNG: Well, as an experienced old hand in southern West Virginia politics, would you say a few words in general about the counties you are most familiar with in terms of the importance of organization, cars on election day, the use of money in campaigning, personal friendship, party loyalty and that sort of thing?

WEST: Well, in some of the counties in southern West Virginia, of course, money can't help you too much, particularly in two of the counties that I know of. Money can get you started but the people of those counties are pretty much independent and just good coverage of what you stand for in politics usually gets you the votes.

Now in some of the other counties, if you are lucky enough or successful enough to get the executive committees in favor of you—and usually it is money that influences this because it takes

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money to run a campaign and, these people being practical politicians, if the candidate can supply the executive committee with it, why, then they can hand them a very handsome majority. In some of the other counties a combination of both is very effective and, in one or two of the counties, if you can furnish the executive committee or the people who are responsible for organizing a party in a primary and getting the votes out, then you can be very successful.

YOUNG: Well, how would you evaluate this information with respect to the 1960 primary?

WEST: Well, I think very definitely that Senator Kennedy's forces at that time had the advantage on Senator Humphrey because I will recognize the money that it

would take to effectively run a campaign in those counties and those resources were not available for us and as a result we did not get the support in those counties.

YOUNG: Mr. West, if the primary campaign were to be refought, and assuming that both sides would be relatively evenly matched in terms of organizational technique and financing, do you think that the results would be any different than they were?

WEST: I think that Senator Kennedy would have won but I don't think that he would have won by the majority that he did. I think the election would have been much closer, assuming all those things to be true.

YOUNG: Well, in that case, you seem to be saying that financing and organization aren't necessarily the key—that they weren't necessarily the key as to victory, even though the victory might have been smaller. While you have already indicated some of the factors that you think would have been responsible for Kennedy's victory, would you list them again to summarize?

WEST: Well, I think that very definitely Senator Kennedy's resources and his finances assisted him. I think the fact that he had Roosevelt come in and work for him had tremendous psychological affect for him. I think the tea parties and the visitations of the wives of Senator Kennedy and his brother, Robert Kennedy, and I believe his brother, Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy], had real good effect.

I think, again, the Senator's workers worked around the clock in convincing people how good the chances of Senator Kennedy were and that they were voting for a loser if they voted for Senator Humphrey and a lot of people voted for Senator Kennedy on that.

YOUNG: You would say then that toward the end of the campaign there was a bandwagon affect?

WEST: Yes. Very definitely.

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YOUNG: At the time of the President's death, did you notice any particular reaction among those that had perhaps bitterly opposed him? Or what was the general reaction in your section of West Virginia?

WEST: At the time of Senator Kennedy's death, I was trying a case in the circuit court of Wyoming County. Judge Worrell [Grover C. Worrell] interrupted the trial to announce that the President had been shot. I believe that at that time there were four women on the jury and eight men and there were definite cries on the jury and I know the Judge was stunned and so was I to such a point that none of us proceeded through the rest of the trial with any thought of the trial at all.

It had a very stunning effect on all of us. Some thirty minutes to an hour later, the Judge interrupted the trial again to announce that the President was dead and there was definite crying amongst the members of the jury and, of course, the client that I was representing and, I believe, the other client that the other attorney was representing. I believe—as I recall—after we heard this news, no closing arguments were made to the jury. The case was submitted to the jury based upon the evidence rather than making use of closing arguments because the opposing counsel and myself, under the circumstances, didn't feel that we ought to make a closing argument.

There seemed to be, after the court was closed that day, people just all over seemed to be stunned, some of them crying. I know that later that evening, in watching the television programs concerning the president I, myself, broke down in tears when they started to unload him from the airplane at the airbase in Washington, D.C.

YOUNG: In going back and looking at the Kennedy years from the point of view of 1964, do you feel that all of the attention which was focused on West Virginia in the 1960 primary was good for the state, or bad for the state, or have you any particular reaction to that?

WEST: I think that Senator Humphrey's and Senator Kennedy's preferential primary campaigns did more for West Virginia than anything that's ever happened to West Virginia. I think that the two candidates, in talking about the economic ills of West Virginia, not only focused the nation's attention on West Virginia, but it made West Virginians realize that they had to do something about their state. I think it kindled, or rekindled, a spirit in West Virginians that's brought about some definite improvements in the last four years. And I think West Virginia is really on the march and it can be primarily attributed to the discussions and the focusing on the economic wrongs in West Virginia at that time.

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YOUNG: Well, did you as a West Virginian, or as an important official in the primary campaign have any contact with the late President of any kind on any of his visits to the State?

WEST: I did not. I met the President when he was campaigning in 1960. I shook hands with him in my hometown of Oceana. He visited the town and he made a speech to a street gathering in front of the, at that time, general department store in Oceana. My office was just some two or three blocks above there and I was in my office that day and I made it a point to go down and hear what Senator Kennedy had to say. I shook hands with him and also shook hands with Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. who was present with him at that time.

YOUNG: Well, did you notice Senator Kennedy at that time making any special appeal to the people of your district? Was his brief speech slanted in any way for a local appeal?

WEST: Yes. I think he definitely indicated in his speech at that time that he would do something about the coal industry in southern West Virginia. I don't think he limited it to Wyoming County because Wyoming County is—has never been really affected by the coal industry like Raleigh, Mingo, McDowell and Logan. Wyoming County only had one fairly large mine located at Wyoming close down during the late 1950's. Other than that there had been little or no reduction in payrolls of other large mines in the county. Wyoming County enjoyed two of the largest coal producers in the United States. One was located at Kopperston and the other at Itmann; and they weren't really affected too much in the sort of coal recession of the '50's. And they haven't been to this day.

YOUNG: In other words, in the speech there, Candidate Kennedy made both a local appeal as well as a general appeal?

WEST: Yes. Yes. Very definitely.

YOUNG: Mr. West, you were telling me in private conversation that the Mayor of Boston had written to you sometime before Kennedy announced his candidacy and asked you what effect you thought his religion might have on his candidacy in southern West Virginia. Would you give me your reaction to that now?

WEST: When I received this letter from the Mayor of Boston, I talked with several of the political leaders—Democratic leaders—in the town of Oceana and Oceana district and they expressed feeling that they didn't see where it would make any difference. That was my personal feeling. And as a result of that I wrote to the Mayor of Boston, stating that I did not think that the fact that Senator Kennedy was a Roman Catholic would have any affect one way or the other on his success as a candidate in the West Virginia preferential primary.

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YOUNG: How long before the primary was this? Do you remember?

WEST: I believe it was about a year. Maybe a little longer.

YOUNG: Is your district one which has or had a Roman Catholic population—or are they largely Protestants?

WEST: My district has no Catholics that I know of. There could be one or two families in that area and there's about twenty-six hundred population there.

YOUNG: You thought at that time—you sensed—that religion would not be an issue in your district at least?

WEST: Yes. Yes.

YOUNG: Thank you very much. This interview with Mr. Marshall G. West was recorded in the Daniel Boone Hotel, Charleston, West Virginia on July 13, 1964, by Mr. William L. Young. Mr. West served during the 1960 primary as co-chairman for the Humphrey forces in West Virginia with Mr. William Jacobs of Parkersburg, West Virginia.

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