

Marjorie McKenzie Lawson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/25/1965
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Biographical Note

Marjorie McKenzie Lawson (1912-2002) was a civil rights advisor for John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign. This interview focuses on attempts to gain support from the African American leadership and voters during the 1960 Democratic primary, among other topics.

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Marjorie M. Lawson
Marjorie M. Lawson

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Marjorie McKenzie Lawson– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JUDGE MARJORIE MCKENZIE LAWSON

October 25, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mrs. Lawson, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

LAWSON: Yes, I do.

GRELE: When was this?

LAWSON: I remember the occasion perhaps better than the date although I can probably fix it. My husband introduced me to John F. Kennedy as a result of a conversation that he had with [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen. My husband had been in touch with the the Senator and with Ted in respect to some difficulties that Senator Kennedy was having in Boston with the Negro population there who were disenchanted because he had voted to send the 1956 Civil Rights bill back to the Judiciary Committee; when the bill was on the floor, he also voted in favor of the Jury Trial Amendment. The people who were in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] leadership in Boston and other community leaders who had been his friends since his early days in Congress felt betrayed by these votes. He sensed the difficulty, and he did not want to face the 1958 campaign without doing something to bring about a reconciliation. He met my husband as a result of the fact that Belford [V. Lawson Jr.] was on the 1956 Democratic delegation from the District of Columbia which was the first presidential delegation that had been provided for by vote. This delegation was committed to [Senator Estes] Kefauver under the unit rule, but my husband was for John Kennedy, whom at the time he had never met. He spent his time on the convention floor buttonholing people to vote

for John Kennedy for Vice President. This came to the attention of the Senator and Ted Sorensen. But first, when my husband returned to Washington, having been defeated in his interest in the Senator, he sat down and wrote a letter to him and told him that he was sorry that he had lost, but that, in any event, he was going to predict that John Kennedy would be the first Catholic President of the United States. There should be a copy of this letter in the Senator's

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files — or in Ted Sorensen's files. They had heard about his efforts on the Convention floor, and they were quite intrigued by the letter. So they called my husband up and asked him to come down to the Senator's office; they talked to him about this and other situations in race relations. They asked him if he would help them in Boston; he said that he would. Thereafter, he went to Boston several times with them and talked to Negro leaders in Boston.

GRELE: Whom did he talk to in Boston? Do you remember?

LAWSON: Yes, Ruth Batson was one of the people; she was a leader in the NAACP. I'm not so sure whether she was at that time the president of the chapter or, maybe, a regional officer. He also talked with Herbert Tucker, who is a Boston attorney. I guess Mr. Tucker was at that time the president of the NAACP — and any number of other people. My husband had been the former national president of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, which has a very active chapter in Boston, or did at that time. So he knew a lot of the professional and business people in Boston, and he could speak to them in a very confidential and friendly way about the Senator.

This kind of relationship between the three of them went on for quite some time. At one point then, Senator Kennedy asked my husband if he could come to work for him, if he could be on his staff. My husband said he appreciated the offer very much, but that he could not leave his law practice. He never has left his law practice. He's been practicing law in Washington since about 1933, and he's never taken a job with anybody else. I think he's constitutionally unable to do so. It was flattering, but not really anything that he was interested in. But he said that he would continue to give advice and assistance whenever he could.

Then — maybe then or later — when they asked him to go somewhere with them or do something to help them, he suggested that maybe his wife was the person whom they needed. Then they asked if they could meet me and invited us to lunch. We went down to the Senate Office Building, but it happened that the Senator was on the floor. So Ted said, "Come on, we'll go on over, and I'll call him off the floor." He did. We walked down the corridor together, and we sat down on a bench in the corridor and had a talk. They apologized for being unable to take us to lunch because there was an important bill pending, and the vote was imminent. The Senator said that he wanted some help in Boston on civil rights questions. He asked me if I would help, and I said that I would. I don't remember exactly what I did, but I must have written some memoranda; I went down and talked to them; I made some suggestions about the Negro press. Sometime later Senator Kennedy invited me to join his staff, but I felt at that time about the way I do now, that it's much more fun to practice law.

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GRELE: What were your impressions of John F. Kennedy at that time? Do you recall them?

LAWSON: Well, I thought he was extremely attractive and charming; it was exciting to meet him. He was rather a minor Senator at that time. I think, mainly, my impression was that here was an attractive young man who was working hard who didn't need to. I also thought that he was ambitious and capable, that he probably would have quite a career. I thought it was unfortunate that the Negro leadership in Boston should not understand him better or know him better, and that he should not understand their problems. I was sure that if there could be more communication between them, they probably would find that they didn't have as many differences as they seemed to have. One of the things that impressed me then, and that always impressed me later, was his reaction to nonunderstanding and criticism. He seemed never to defend himself. When someone had criticized what he did, he just let it lie there. He never said, "Well, you know the reason I did this was because of so and so." He just let events eventually prove where his heart was or what his mind was thinking. He didn't spring to a quick verbal defense.

GRELE: At that time, as you have said, his stock with civil rights leaders in Massachusetts was at a pretty low point. Did you yourself have any reservations about joining him because of this record, or did you see it in a different light?

LAWSON: The first thing I did, as I remember.... I have some files myself that I haven't really gone through, and I should.

GRELE: The Library would like to have those files.

LAWSON: Maybe I'll be able to put some of the things together for you, some of the memoranda that I wrote on race relations.

GRELE: It would make a good collection for the Library.

LAWSON: There may even be a book in it. Not from me, I'm not going to write a book. I think that it would have meaning in terms of later statements and actions to see what he was thinking about race relations as early, as 1956 and 1957. That's when all of these things did occur originally. He would listen while we talked. He didn't agree. I could tell that.

GRELE: On what particular point?

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LAWSON: I wanted him to do things.

GRELE: Like what?

LAWSON: I wanted him mainly, at first, to be more available and to talk with Negro leadership, to understand more about the problem, and then to say something that was usable in a political campaign. This was the process I went through with him, making him understand the importance of not only understanding but of speaking something that was not the kind of mumbo jumbo, no-win kinds of things that President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower had been saying. For example, I remember one of the first things I told him he must say was that the 1954 school desegregation Supreme Court decision was morally right. Mr. Eisenhower kept on saying it was the law of the land and he would obey it; Negro leaders were demanding at that time that President Eisenhower say he believed in it. He could not give this extra thing. This became a very sore point with Negro leadership. It was the point where President Eisenhower had stopped and where I wanted Senator Kennedy to begin by saying: Yes, it is the law of the land, and yes, he agreed with it, and it is morally correct. He did say that again and again, later. I don't remember that he said it right then, but he began to use it in his speeches.

GRELE: You said he had reservations about this at that time?

LAWSON: He didn't express any reservations. He would listen to me and I guess he read the memoranda sometimes — maybe only Ted read them sometimes, maybe only Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] read them. But occasionally he did read them, especially in the early days when he wasn't as busy. He would never say openly that he disagreed. He would ask questions which would indicate that he really had very little understanding of the total factual picture. I always had a feeling that if he had the information, he would do the right thing. I thought this was the basis of his difficulty with people in Boston. They wanted something from him by way of commitment that was not only in terms of the votes; they wanted a more personal association with him. They felt he was distant and unapproachable and unaware of them, and they wanted "at him" so to speak.

GRELE: You traveled to Massachusetts for the 1958 campaign, I believe.

LAWSON: Yes, I did. We have a summer place at Martha's Vineyard, which is not very far from Hyannis Port, and my husband and Senator Kennedy used to joke about being neighbors. Sometimes when they were going up, they would call and ask if we were

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interested in transportation or going that way. I remember saying to [Stephen E.] Steve Smith that I would be in Martha's Vineyard in the summer, and if they had anything they wanted from me, they could get in touch with me over there. That was the summer and fall of 1957. We were entering our son in Groton School. I think it must have been the Senator himself who knew this because he had written a letter of recommendation for our son to be admitted. He said, "Well, why don't you stop by the Boston office?" He told me about setting up the Boston office for the campaign. He said he'd like for me to stop by on my way home. So I did. My husband came on back to Washington after we drove out to Groton and left our son, and I went on by the office. I had been there earlier that summer too. The Senator came in, and we went in an office and had a

talk. He said he 'd like to know if I could help them in the campaign in Boston. I said, "Well, I hadn't expected to stay. I just came by for a talk." So he said he really needed me; he'd appreciate it if I could stay through the campaign. So I said I would go home to Washington and see how things were in the office. Since I was no longer a working mother, my only child being in school, I said that I would come back, and I did. This was in mid-September. I stayed on through the election. I think the really significant thing about that period of time was that when I spoke to the Senator about what I could do to help him in Boston, I said I considered it rather unimportant what happened in Boston in terms of his winning again. You know, whether or not he got the Negro vote in the two Negro wards. He would certainly make it without them. But, if he was going to be a serious national candidate, Negro leadership would be looking at his performance in those two wards very carefully, and if he did badly, it would be more difficult than if he had just won them in an average way. I looked up the records of some of the other candidates that had run on a statewide basis. I found that all of them had done well in these two wards, and I thought it would be most unfortunate if he did badly; I strongly suspected that he would because they were still very angry about the vote on the Civil Rights Act.

You might be interested in knowing what the Senator said to me by way of explanation why he had voted this way.

GRELE: I'd be most interested.

LAWSON: This was a conversation that I had with him in the beginning because I needed to assure myself that if I was going to lay my reputation on the line in helping him, I had...

GRELE: Had you ever done this for another Senator?

LAWSON: No. I'd never been in any kind of political activity

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before. As Katie Loucheim says, "You can go into politics as a woman two ways. You can start at the bottom and ring doorbells and fold envelopes, or you can do like Marjorie Lawson did and get in at the top."

Anyhow, very early, when I first met him, I asked him why he voted as he did. I'm sure my husband asked him the same question. He told us that he had discussed the legislation with a professor at Harvard Law School. I'm not sure of the name right now.

GRELE: Paul Freund?

LAWSON: Yes, Paul Freund. Freund had given him a long lecture about civil contempt and criminal contempt and how these two issues related to the American jury system. He had voted as a result of the advice that he had received from Professor Freund. So I said, "Don't ever mention it to any Negro leader that you voted the way you did because Paul Freund suggested that you vote this way. All you can say to Negro leadership from here on out is: "I made a mistake!" There is no justification to Negro leadership for condoning a situation

in the South where they know that southern juries are not going to convict. This is the heart of the matter. To get into a very high level discussion about whether this is civil contempt or criminal contempt is ridiculous because even lawyers argue about the very fine distinctions between the two.

I often wished that President Kennedy had been a lawyer or had had training as a lawyer. I think this lack, sometimes, caused him to take a little longer to get around to the why something should be done because he didn't have this background. Maybe this was one reason why he also relied so heavily on Bobby. This is a mistake a lawyer would not make, this vote on the Civil Rights Bill, because as a northerner he had nothing to lose by voting emotionally on the issue, in other words, "right" on the issue. I didn't see that he had anything politically to gain to throw away so much to pick up a friendship in the South. You cannot appease the South no matter what bones you throw — you have to give them the whole carcass. He could only lose in the North. I thought it was a most unfortunate decision, and it was one that plagued us all through 1959 and 1960. As I went around the country trying to win support among Negro voters for him, I was forever answering this question; I was forever having people pound on the table and shout at me that they could not understand why a man from Massachusetts would have voted this way. He couldn't have had the conviction; he didn't need to do it. What was the meaning of it? They tried to read into this vote some deeper commitment to a really conservative point of view on race relations or lack of concern or interest or knowledge. It was a great stumbling block. If he had taken advice from a Negro friend — any Negro

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friend — before he voted on that issue, he could have saved himself a lot of heartache and troubles and things that required a great deal of doing later on.

GRELE: Getting back to 1958, now, did it hurt him in the election in '58? Or was it overcome by that time?

LAWSON: We ran rather well in those two districts, but.... Who was running for governor then?

GRELE: [Governor Paul] Dever.

LAWSON: Whoever was running for the legislature in those districts ran way ahead of him. We just skimmed through with a.... I have the figures in the files, on what we did.

GRELE: Did he do as well as previous candidates?

LAWSON: No. But it did give him some idea of how serious our problem was. I had also told him that if I was going to come to Boston and help with the 1958 campaign, I would do it on the basis that two things were necessary. One, that we would run a nonsegregated campaign, that we would have Negro workers right there in the headquarters, and that Negroes would be invited to the teas on a nonsegregated basis for our national campaign. We were never going to have any separate setups. What small reputation I had as a civil rights person

and whatever I had by way of strength to give him would be lost if I were to compromise on this question as late as 1958. So I had a very firm understanding that we would use the 1958 campaign as a springboard for the national campaign, bringing in national Negro leadership to alert them in 1958 of his possibilities, so that when we struck out later, we would have made some friends; he would know some people. I did that. We had a big dinner. We brought the Negro press in from all over, and he had a wonderful time with them.

GRELE: Whom did you bring in?

LAWSON: We had representation from the *Afro-American* in Baltimore, one of the members of the Murphy family who own the paper came up; Mrs. Robert L. Vann, who at that time owned the *Pittsburgh Courier* came; and Mrs. John Sengstack, the wife of the publisher and owner of the *Chicago Defender*, came from Chicago. We also had Mrs. Christine Ray Davis, who is the staff director of the House Government Operations Committee [House Committee on Government Operations] and a long time associate of Congressman [William L.] Dawson; she came and brought his greetings and best wishes. George L. P. Weaver, who at that time was a special assistant to James [B.] Carey in the Electrical Workers, came

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and gave good advice on political action. As you know, Mr. Weaver is now the Assistant Secretary of Labor. My husband was able to get a bishop in the Methodist Church to come and make one of the speeches. This was especially interesting because he was a Republican. He pulled out all the stops that night, and he finally wound up a very emotional speech about Kennedy by saying, "He is my prince."

GRELE: How long did it take before you were able to approach the more nationally known leaders, such as Roy Wilkins?

LAWSON: My husband had made some efforts in this direction before 1958, particularly in.... Was Caroline born in 1956?

GRELE: Goodness. I forget offhand.

LAWSON: I think she was. No, 1957. Around the time Caroline was born, there was an annual Freedom Fund dinner for the NAACP in New York, and my husband persuaded Senator Kennedy that he ought to go, and made the arrangements. The idea was to begin to introduce him to the national Negro community and to the important leaders. You really ought to get my husband to tell you about this part of the story because I wasn't there.

GRELE: We plan to interview him.

LAWSON: All right. He will tell you that there were some leaders who did not wish to be photographed with the Senator. They thought it would compromise their own position. They didn't have anything against him personally.

GRELE: Things were that tight?

LAWSON: Things were so bad that it was impossible to get pictures, for example, with Roy Wilkins.

GRELE: How did you overcome this prior to the Convention? Or didn't you?

LAWSON: Oh, I think so. Yes. We worked at it all the time. It was a good step that he went to the dinner because this in itself said something to them, that he was willing to go. It was particularly a sacrifice because it was the weekend that Caroline was born. For him to take the time to be away from his wife indicated that he felt that it was important; he went. My husband will tell you who did consent to get into pictures, but there were people who refused because they thought it would compromise them.

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The meetings in Boston followed that. What we tried to do was to make up a list of people that we thought he ought to know and tell him who these people were. Whenever any of them would happen to be in Washington, we would call up and run them in for an appointment, if possible, so that over the next couple of years, he got to know a great many people. In addition to that, when he was going somewhere to make a speech, we would make a list of Negro leaders in that community and get somebody to organize them and arrange for him to have a meeting with those people. He would work that meeting into his schedule for a particular town. In this way, he began to know leadership all around the country. I think I can safely say that he was better known on an individual basis and had more friends among Negro leaders than any presidential candidate had ever had. By the time 1960 rolled around, he knew everybody who was anybody.

GRELE: Did you work directly with the then Senator, or did you work with someone on the staff?

LAWSON: I worked with him sometimes and with Ted Sorensen in the beginning. But then, of course, the staff grew larger. On some items I might have talked with [Timothy J.] Ted Reardon. Many times I only talked with Mrs. [Evelyn] Lincoln, just to make arrangements for the Senator to see somebody. If I was setting up an appointment, I would only call Mrs. Lincoln. She had quite a lot of authority; she could make the arrangements without checking back. She would just run somebody in when he had the time. Very often, she would arrange for whoever it was, if it was someone that we thought could be really helpful to him, to go up to the Hill and have lunch. You remember the period in which Mrs. Kennedy was sending a hot lunch up to the Senator's office. Well, on these occasions, sometimes my husband and whoever the visitor would be would be there, and Mrs. Lincoln would serve all three of them,

and their lunch would be expanded to be rather festive. Of course, people were tremendously impressed by this opportunity because by now he was being talked about seriously — or at least being talked about. It was quite an experience to them to come to Washington and have lunch with the Senator in his private office, being served by his private secretary. It was little personal things like this that endeared him to people and enabled them, sometimes, to close their eyes to what they might have thought was a philosophic difference they might have with him. He was quite able to charm people without saying anything about the substance of the matter.

GRELE: You traveled with the Kennedy staff during the Wisconsin primary, I believe. What did you do in Wisconsin?

LAWSON: Yes, I did. Had a very rough time.

GRELE: You had a very rough time?

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LAWSON: Yes, I did. As I look back on it now, I would say the Kennedy strategy was to forget about the Negro vote in Wisconsin. They had probably been counting various groups, tallying up the totals, and when they got to the Negro vote, it just wasn't that important. There were other people whom they could not have courted had they courted the Negro vote. Besides, they were fighting Hubert Humphrey, and in Wisconsin, where he was so well known to Negroes anyhow. So I had an impossible job to win people away from Hubert Humphrey, and I had very little assistance from the staff because, I would say, they really were interested in muffling the issue of race relations in Wisconsin. That was kind of a shock to me because I had thought of Wisconsin as a fairly liberal place; I hadn't been there long before I realized that it wasn't very liberal, and that Negro leadership was rather out of things except in Milwaukee; in Madison it was even more so. There were a lot of liberal thinkers in Wisconsin but the vast bulk of the people seemed to be quite conservative and not at all broad-minded on race, so that in terms of strategy, their tactics were right. But, you see, I was building a record, and I had to be convincing to the large majority of the people in the big cities.

GRELE: How helpful was Vel Phillips in Wisconsin?

LAWSON: Vel Phillips took up a lot of our time trying to persuade her that she should be for Senator Kennedy. I don't even remember when the campaign to win her over began, but we spent a lot of time on it. Sometimes Pat [Patrick J. Lucey] and I would sit up all night talking to Vel.

GRELE: Pat Lucey?

LAWSON: Pat Lucey and I and others and Jean [Nasis Lucey], his wife. We'd go over all the arguments. Vel was talked to here in Washington and in Milwaukee. I think she enjoyed the game; she let us keep talking. The thing that was really rather funny about the whole business was that at one point the Senator and I were talking in his office all

alone, and he said, “You know, she’s really not very important, Marjorie” as if to say, “Don’t really worry too much if you don’t get her.” I said, in return, I knew she wasn’t very important, but she had a symbolic meaning — she was the only Negro woman who was a national committeewoman in any state, and the only one who had ever been one, and we didn’t have a Negro man at that time. So here was this one political figure in the whole United States, and I was determined that she was going to be for him. Her difficulty was personal. She felt that if she took a position too soon, she would alienate some of her support; she wasn’t too sure about her own chances to get re-elected. What she needed to understand was that supporting Pat Lucey was the most important thing she had to do, that he could either rescue her or not, and that she was not on her own. It took a while.

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One time, I remember, Senator Kennedy and Vel and I were in his office — this was on another occasion — when she was telling him all of the pressures that had come her way after she had declared her support. She was telling him the various things that people were saying. He said, “Vel, look at it this way. That’s what those people are saying, and this is what you say. You just say, I’m for Senator Kennedy, and this is why I’m for him. Then you don’t care what those other people say.” He could never quite understand that she was kind of wishy-washy about it. I think that while he was always gracious and charming with her, he didn’t forget how difficult our task had been, and that she could have declared sooner. I think perhaps her view of the matter at a later date is that they were much greater friends than they were.

GRELE: We’ve heard a lot about [Jack R.] Jackie Robinson in that primary. You dealt right with the Negro leadership. Do you think he was effective or not?

LAWSON: I would imagine that Jackie Robinson probably affected more white votes in Wisconsin than he did Negro votes.

GRELE: Which way?

LAWSON: Well, because he was out there for Hubert Humphrey, but he kept saying he was a Republican. He was making some pretty wild statements in those days. I know on one occasion my husband, who had been to Wisconsin for a meeting, came back to Washington and had a meeting with Jackie here. I think you’ll find that Belford has some very interesting things to say about what Jackie said to him at the time. The thing that was so annoying to me was that what he was saying publicly apparently was not what he really thought privately. On one occasion he said something about “If Marjorie Lawson thinks that she can get Negroes to vote for Jack Kennedy, she’s very much mistaken.” This was after the Wisconsin primary. Then later, after the election, he had some very nice things to say about Marjorie Lawson and President Kennedy. I had a feeling that, first of all, as my husband says, Jackie Robinson is a better baseball player than politician and that no one should have taken him quite as seriously as people wanted to take him and that this only tended to increase the difficulty he was causing us because it would just make him say more things. I didn’t regard him as so serious. He was a stranger in Wisconsin, just as I was. I think that it’s pretty difficult....

GRELE: Lucius Barker has told us that he noticed a difference between the Kennedy and Humphrey campaigns. He said that the Kennedy teas — or Kennedy festivities — were all integrated; whereas Humphrey seemed to conduct a segregated campaign. He had a white staff and Negro staff. Did you notice this?

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LAWSON: I tried to comment on it at every opportunity. It was exactly in line with what I had started in Boston. I think the difference was that Senator Kennedy had me to tell him that this is not the wave of the future, and that Mr. Humphrey was relying on some local leadership in Wisconsin that saw an advantage to themselves to be able to run a campaign uptown and in the Negro districts and have a little campaign money to spend. He was in a segregated operation before he realized what was going on. I don't for one moment think that Senator Humphrey intended to run a segregated campaign in Wisconsin. I think he went to his old friends like [Isaac] Ike Coggs and said, "What shall I do?" And Ike said, "I'll run your campaign for you." That's what happened. I guess that's what happened; I don't really know. That's what it looks like. Also, Senator Humphrey was very available for making speeches in the Negro neighborhoods with the result that he went to Negro churches and made a lot of speeches. It happened that I never got my hands on my candidate throughout the Wisconsin primary; this made me very unhappy.

GRELE: You never got your hands on him?

LAWSON: I mean I couldn't get him for a meeting. I finally had one meeting set up at the Jewish Community Center, which was to be the big race relations rally, not just for Negroes but on minority questions. I thought it was rather strange to take it to the Jewish Community Center, but some of the people who were working in the headquarters in Milwaukee thought this is what we ought to do. It turned out that it was way over on the lakefront and kind of far away for people to come. We had a good crowd. We had some speakers like [Gene] "Big Daddy" Lipscomb of the Baltimore Colts who was sent by Mr. [Carol] Rosenbloom in Baltimore to be a speaker. I had gotten some people from Chicago, who were part of Mr. [William L.] Dawson's district. The Senator was supposed to come and speak, but he called from Washington and said that he was delayed on — I think it was another civil rights bill that was being discussed at that time. We set up a phone conversation so that the phone was connected to the loudspeaker system. He and I had a little conversation on the telephone which the people in the audience could hear, and Mrs. Kennedy came on the phone and said a few words, too. That was as close as I got to actually being able to produce the candidate for an interracial audience. We didn't do very well.

GRELE: I was just going to ask, how did you do?

LAWSON: We didn't do very well. One day I had set up a meeting with some Negro ministers, and [Franklin D., Jr.] Frank Roosevelt went and spoke to them. Then we were going to take them to lunch. The luncheon was at a different place; it was

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at a restaurant in the heart of the Negro district. When Frank and the ministers came over.... Mrs. Kennedy had heard about it, and she and Pamela Turnure came along with Frank Roosevelt and sat and talked with the ministers and with the people who were at the luncheon all afternoon long. This went like wildfire all over the the Negro district, and people came in. We had photographers there so that she had her picture taken with this motley crew of people. We had these pictures blown up, and we had one in the window of all of the little shops and barbershops and beauty parlors and grocery stores — every place in the neighborhood.

GRELE: You talk about meeting with the ministers. Was there ever a problem about John F. Kennedy's religion? Were they hostile to a Catholic or fearful?

LAWSON: Yes, the Baptists were very hostile. This was before some of the very important speeches on the question had been made. Therefore, I spent a great deal of time talking to the Baptist ministers in particular.

GRELE: You had a double kind of problem then.

LAWSON: Yes. I did. I was never hopeful that we were going to do well. For one thing, there are a lot of Negro Republicans in Wisconsin. We didn't have a big Democratic registration to begin with. We had Jackie Robinson making lots of noise. Frank Reeves was out there for Senator Humphrey; he had a lot of fraternity brothers in Milwaukee, and he could get his hands on the candidate whenever he had a few people gathered together.

GRELE: Was the fact that Senator Kennedy didn't do well in the Negro wards in Milwaukee ever used by the Negro leadership as a reason why Senator Kennedy could not win?

LAWSON: Yes. It was discussed throughout the spring of 1960. It haunted me right up through the NAACP Convention in St. Paul and in Minneapolis.

GRELE: What happened there?

LAWSON: By this time we were rolling along really well toward the Convention. I guess this was late May or, maybe, early June — my files would show all of these dates which I don't remember now. But people were still coming up to me at that time and saying, "You got clobbered in Wisconsin, didn't you? All I could say is "But look what happened in West Virginia." I brought in about 98 percent of the Negro vote in West Virginia.

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GRELE: I'm going to ask you about West Virginia.

LAWSON: I still think that one of the things I did in Wisconsin which was a plus in the overall strategy was that I went to every single organizational leader, every single private citizen who had a position of leadership, and sat down and had talks with them. I think that I won an intellectual victory. I may not have been able to persuade them at the last minute to vote for John Kennedy. The appeal I was making to them was on this very basis: "Here is a man who is running an integrated campaign. He's appealing to you on the very highest level. You can't ignore this. You have to consider what this means and be able to respond in kind." I think that the integrity of that effort was helpful later on when I was trying to persuade people who were potential delegates to be for Senator Kennedy. I could say, "Since 1958 this is the way we've been doing things. And this is the first time it's ever been done this way. This is the first time that any candidate has ever cared about the Negro vote prior to the Convention, enough to have constant attention being paid to it."

GRELE: From Wisconsin you went to West Virginia with the candidate?

LAWSON: No, I didn't although I was invited to. I remember, as we were closing up the headquarters in Milwaukee, [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien said that he and some of the rest of the staff were going to Charleston the next day and was I coming along. I said, "No, I'm not," and I came back to Washington.

GRELE: Why?

LAWSON: I didn't think I could go into West Virginia without a candidate.

GRELE: What do you mean "without a candidate?"

LAWSON: I meant I had to have contact with the candidate, and I had to be able to produce him.

GRELE: Did you tell that to Larry O'Brien?

LAWSON: No, I didn't tell that to Larry O'Brien. I told that to Bobby Kennedy. I came back to the office, and I didn't do anything. After a while I got a call from Bob, and he said "We'd like to have you go down to West Virginia." I said I didn't see much sense in going to West Virginia if it was going to be a repeat of Wisconsin, that I really just couldn't go and talk to people about somebody whom they wouldn't see. So he asked me if I'd go down and take a look around as to what needed to be done there.

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I'd had a discussion with Larry and somebody else in Milwaukee, and they said, "Oh, there isn't any Negro vote in West Virginia." I said, "Well, of course there's a Negro vote in West Virginia." They said, "It doesn't matter, you know." So I thought maybe I just see this thing through very narrow vision because I know people in Charleston and I know people in Bluefield; perhaps I think there is more of a population than there really is. I came back to Washington and after this

conversation with Bob I looked up some statistics. You know, the question isn't how many people, it's how they are distributed.

I went down to Charleston and took a swing around that area, and then went down to Bluefield and called some friends and had some talks and came back. I think Bob called me again. I said that not only would I have to have the candidate, I'd have to have some money; that everybody was so poor down there that it was impossible to get anybody to work in the Negro districts just for the pleasure of political action, and especially in the coal districts. They just couldn't understand, considering their problems, how a rich man could come in in a primary fight and not expect to pay political workers; they'd always been paid. Even poorer candidates had paid them. Why should they work for Jack Kenedy for nothing? They said they weren't going to do it.

GRELE: There was an Eagleton Institute study done of the West Virginia primary that made the claim that historically those wards in northern West Virginia had been bought and paid. I was going to ask you if this took place in '60 as well.

LAWSON: I don't know what was done generally in the campaign, or who paid for what. I have no information about that. What I do know is that in the southern part of West Virginia there is quite a concentration of Negro coal miners who were out of work at the time, living back in the "hollers." I had friends who had lived in Bluefield, had been there many years, and knew the area intimately. They said that it would be absolutely essential to have a small budget, that I just couldn't get anybody to do anything if I didn't have some money. So I proposed a budget of \$5,000 for my part of the West Virginia campaign. I discussed it with Larry in Charleston, and he was unable to give me any kind of answer. So I just came on back to Washington. I'm not sure whether I had a call from Bobby or from [R. Sargent] Shriver at this time. No, I had a call from Bob, and he asked me to come on down and something would be worked out. He wanted to know where did I want the candidate. I said I thought my whole effort should be in southern West Virginia.

GRELE: Not in Charleston?

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LAWSON: No. Most of the Negro voters in Charleston were Republicans, and it would be a waste of my time there. But I had a solid core of Democratic voters in the southern part of the state where they could appreciably swing a county one way or the other if I could get them out of the "hollers." This would take some heavy campaigning, and a lot of people running back in there in cars and bringing those people out; being sure that they were registered and making them vote; bringing them to rallies and getting them interested. After I got to Charleston, I think that I had a conversation with Sarge who was over in Huntington. It was agreed that I could have \$4,000, or something like that. He sent me \$2,000 to begin with. At the time, there was a little office being opened in Bluefield, West Virginia, by Bill Walton. You know, William Walton.

GRELE: The artist?

LAWSON: Yes, the artist. Bill and I had this little hole in the wall for the whole of the West Virginia campaign. Bill was sort of the director of the southern part of the state; he did a lot of the moving around; he planned some big rallies. They sent him the \$2,000, or maybe they sent it to me and told him about it. Anyhow, Bill and I trudged over to the bank and put the \$2,000 in the bank. It was doled out at about a dollar an hour to people who were willing to ride around and talk to people back in the woods somewhere and bring them out to meetings. We set up a series of rallies in all of the counties. I did the same thing there as in Wisconsin. Got a list of the leading people in the whole area, not only in Bluefield but in all the surrounding towns. I went all over and talked to all of the doctors and the lawyers and the dentists and the businessmen and so on.

GRELE: Did you get your candidate?

LAWSON: I got my candidate for a rally at Bluefield State College, and there is a picture of it in the book *Kennedy Years and the Negro* that Johnson Publications published. There's a picture of the Senator and me talking. The conversation that we were having at that time was — he had just arrived; it was raining; the student body was all gathered in the gymnasium; and I guess he didn't really know where he was or what was going on, and he said to me, "What shall I say to them?" So I said, "I think that these young people would be interested in where you stand on federal aid to education because their schools need assistance, and they need scholarships. They would also be interested in fair employment opportunities. Where do you stand on that?" With no more than that, he got up on the stage and talked to those young people for a half an hour or forty-five minutes and had his picture taken with absolutely everybody. They all loved him. The word went out that it was just fabulous that he

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had come through Bluefield. Unfortunately, Senator Humphrey had a real "blooper" in Bluefield at about the same time, and we came out "roses."

GRELE: What was the blooper?

LAWSON: He went in a hotel, which is, I guess, the only nice hotel in Bluefield, for a speech at a rally given by some labor leaders in the area. All of the Negro leadership and all the young people from CORE [Congress on Racial Equality] picketed him for going in there because this hotel was segregated. I'm sure he didn't know, but the result was some very bad publicity in the Negro press.

GRELE: Is this the difference between the staff? This is the kind of thing that one assumes one's staff will take care?

LAWSON: Exactly. The same thing happened to Senator Humphrey in West Virginia in dealing with the Negro voter that happened to him in Wisconsin. He was just badly handled by the local Negro leadership. The thing that saved him at all in Wisconsin was the people knew him; he was their neighbor and friend.

GRELE: It didn't save him in West Virginia?

LAWSON: It didn't save him in West Virginia. Well, I had learned a few things, too, by this time.

GRELE: How did you do in West Virginia?

LAWSON: Oh, I think there wasn't a precinct in which we brought in less than 95% of the Negro vote. We had a solid sweep. I drove up to Charleston the next day. Everybody I saw was hugging and kissing me. That night Bill Walton came by the house of some friends where I was staying and said, "I didn't even think he needed to come down here. I want you to know now that I was opposed to your coming down here." I think he thought I would somehow question his leadership, or I would be a counteraction to what he was proposing to do. So he said at first he hadn't wanted me to come, but then he was delighted I was there, that I was needed, and that we'd done a pretty good job.

GRELE: I've never seen any discussion of civil rights as an issue in the primary. Was it an issue at all?

LAWSON: I would say that it was in the sense that those leaders who were really looking ahead — such as the Negro professional people — were able to see that if they voted for Humphrey

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and if Humphrey won the West Virginia primary, he might not win the nomination; that Senator [Lyndon B.] Johnson would get the nomination; that as far as the thinking at that time was going, this was the last chance to vote for a liberal; that, after all, John Kennedy was a liberal — he might not have been as liberal as Humphrey, but he was certainly more liberal than Johnson — therefore, a vote for Humphrey was a vote for Johnson. This was the whispered campaign not only for Negro voters but for people generally. This was the logic of that effort. I'm not saying that this was consciously done by the Kennedys, but it was done by liberals in the state who saw what kind of a proving ground their state really was, and who, when they were liberal, were concerned that it was being said the Humphrey was there for Johnson, that the political leadership of the state — the top leadership — was really for Johnson, and that the idea was to kill Kennedy off in West Virginia.

GRELE: Again, did you have any problem with the religious question in West Virginia?

LAWSON: I would say that I had less of a problem in West Virginia on the religious question. People in West Virginia were concerned about nothing but jobs and their condition and the condition of their state and their future and their needs and the problems that they had. Also, they're not city people in the same way that people in Milwaukee were whose social life was really tied into the church. These people lived such remote distances from each other that the churches were small and not giving the same kind of leadership,

although they gave some. The chief organizer I had down there was a Reverend Davis who was also the state NAACP president — or the director. He and I had a very difficult time because he was one of the main people who was pressing me for money, and when it wasn't forthcoming, he started calling Sargent Shriver in Huntington to see that more money would be sent down. Then Sarge decided that I didn't need any more money — after the first two thousand he didn't want to send me any more. I had made commitments to people and was going to stand behind those commitments. In fact, I did spend considerable money of my own in West Virginia because Sarge was pretty slow in sending the rest of the money.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

GRELE: One always hears that the Kennedys have so much money and spent so much money in West Virginia, yet you say you didn't have any money.

LAWSON: Well, that's true. I think that the Kennedys went considerably out of their way not to spend money because they expected people to accuse them of throwing money around. So

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we were always very poor. We had less money than we ought to have had many times just to do normal things. Everybody was always questioning an expenditure as to whether or not it was really necessary — if we couldn't have gotten someone else to do it for nothing, or do without it. I think they did really lean over backwards as a counteraction.

GRELE: It's often been said that West Virginia was John F. Kennedy's first introduction to poverty in America. Do you agree with that? Do you know his reaction to conditions in West Virginia?

LAWSON: I think that West Virginia was a tremendous experience for him. I saw the patience with which he would stand at meetings and rallies. For example, in Bluefield there was a rally — not my rally but a different one — where people were in some kind of an inn way out in the woods somewhere, and they trudged through mud and darkness to get to this place to hear him and see him. Mrs. Kennedy was there and not feeling very well. He just stood there hour after hour talking to all the people who wanted to shake his hand. He had this kind of fortitude and patience in campaigning that he could always stand one more hour and shake hands to talk to people. I think that his interest in poverty before West Virginia was academic. I think he had an intellectual understanding of poverty and the extent of it in the United States. His interests were largely economic, and, therefore, I think he had probably thought of poverty as a national problem and had some ideas of what he would want to do about it. But, actually, to see the face of poverty the way it is exposed in West Virginia is an experience for anybody, rich or poor. It was a particularly difficult time. The weather was still cold and dreary; it was very early spring, and the trees were just beginning to come out a little bit. Everything was bare. People were tremendously sad.

GRELE: Some of our interviewees have criticized him for highlighting what was wrong with West Virginia and not what's right with West Virginia.

LAWSON: I think he pledged to do something about the problems. It was one of his first commitments, and he carried it out as best he could. I think the whole Appalachia program that we have now is an outgrowth of his concern. He was only responding to what the people in West Virginia were saying to him. I believe he didn't go out of his way to disparage the state; I think he felt real compassion.

GRELE: Where did you go after West Virginia?

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LAWSON: Well, I came back to Washington, and I did a few things with respect to the Maryland primary. But I had done some work in Maryland before then, and I felt that things were in pretty good shape there and that it wasn't necessary for me to do anything in particular.

GRELE: Who ran the operation in Maryland?

LAWSON: Do you mean the overall operation?

GRELE: Yes. It was so close to West Virginia, and everybody else was in West Virginia.

LAWSON: I really think that the work in Maryland had been done before then, and that the people who were working and interested had already done what they were going to do because the one was on the heels of the other. You may remember the Senator made a lot of speeches in Maryland before we went even to Wisconsin; he had been speaking there before then.

GRELE: And then after Maryland?

LAWSON: After Maryland — I'll have to check my files — I probably did a lot of traveling. I did a lot of traveling in the summer of '59. I went out to the West Coast, up through Oregon, Washington, Northern and Southern California — Los Angeles, San Diego, San Bernardino, and Riverside — Denver, Colorado, and Salt Lake City, Utah. I had a Kennedy organizer in every state, and I had done this traveling beforehand. I went to all of the conventions to meet people and to talk about...

GRELE: The state conventions?

LAWSON: I went to some of the state conventions, some of the regional conventions, but I also went to conventions like the Urban League Convention or the NAACP or some kind of fraternity or labor meeting.

GRELE: We were talking earlier about the NAACP Convention, and you had said that up to that time you had gotten a lot of criticism of Senator Kennedy and his record on civil rights. Do you mean to say that after that convention you didn't?

LAWSON: That convention was just about a month away from the nominating convention in Los Angeles. I would say that was the last stand Negro leadership made, raising voices of criticism against Kennedy.

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GRELE: Who were the chief critics?

LAWSON: Well, you remember that even after West Virginia, Kennedy was not the only candidate. In Minneapolis we would certainly find people pretty well split toward Stevenson again. George Weaver was there in the interest of Mr. [Stuart] Symington. There were even a few people mentioning President Johnson's name; he had friends. So it was not clear sailing at the NAACP Convention, but I think what happened there was a new assessment of the realities of what would happen. Out of that, I think people began to resolve that they would support Kennedy. I had been working with the people who were potential delegates. You can never know until the state has its convention who the delegates will be. But you can understand that it takes quite a deal of political work for a Negro to rise in state politics to the place where he's going to be elected to the delegation — either elected or nominated or appointed. It's not easy. The fact that we still have no representation in the state party leadership is illustrative of the fact that it's quite an honor to be on the delegation. Most Negroes who serve on delegations are there, you know, for the symbolic value of saying that this is an integrated delegation from the big states, or else they have really won their spurs, they are really quite powerful people. If they are there because of right, that means they fought off an awful lot of competition, and that they really do represent the areas where they live. There were some fifty-two delegates and alternates who were Negroes. On the first vote in Los Angeles, I had about forty-two or three of them who voted for Kennedy on the first go-around.

GRELE: Is this what you did at the Convention in Los Angeles?

LAWSON: Well, this is what I did for two years before.

GRELE: You continued working?

LAWSON: Yes, I worked with them on the convention floor, holding them still.

GRELE: I've heard that there was a nascent revolt in the Michigan delegation, and that John Kennedy had to do a lot of fast footwork with the Michigan delegation at the convention. Is this true?

LAWSON: At the convention? Not before the nomination? I don't remember. The trouble I had with Michigan was earlier. At one point, the whole group of Negro leaders in Michigan was flown down to Washington on the *Caroline* and entertained at the

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Senator's house on N Street at a luncheon. All of the civil rights issues were threshed out; the meeting went on for hours.

GRELE: This was pretty late. What were their criticisms then?

LAWSON: The same things. Oh, at this point there had also been the [John M.] Patterson breakfast. I had just about dampened down the difficulty about the civil rights vote when lo and behold. I was out West in the summer of 1959 when this Patterson breakfast occurred, and I packed up and came home. The reaction to that was violent. This was hard, again, for Senator Kennedy to understand why people would feel that he didn't have a right to have some people for breakfast in his home, and that somehow he had made a deal because people came to breakfast.

GRELE: Did he ever explain to you why they were there?

LAWSON: Oh, yes. I think he was as heated about that as anything. He just felt that the whole thing was so unfair. He said he didn't know who was coming. They called up and said they wanted to see him; somebody had made the appointment, and since it was so early in the morning, he gave them some breakfast. He didn't even know who was going to be there until the people arrived.

GRELE: He didn't know the Governor of Alabama was going to be there?

LAWSON: Oh, he knew that Patterson was going to be there. But, you know, there were some other horrible people — that Sam what's his name?

GRELE: Lingo?

LAWSON: No. The one who later became the state director of traffic.

GRELE: Yes, Lingo.

LAWSON: That doesn't sound like it, but it's possible. I think the Senator was so accustomed to having breakfast meetings and luncheon meetings and dinner meetings with people because he was using up every minute of the day, and it didn't seem to him to be so unusual that if you would be seeing a person at eight o'clock, you would also give them breakfast. I think he felt this was just a routine part of his operation. What he didn't understand is that with Negroes, if we have a large group of people for breakfast, you have gone to an awful lot of trouble and expense. They wouldn't be — or maybe just the average citizen wouldn't be —

living like that and wouldn't understand that this is something that happens all day long, every day in your life. But if you have this large group of

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people from a governor and his retinue to come for breakfast, it has been prepared, it's understood what's happening, and it's important. I think this is part of the difficulty; it's a cultural problem. Then Patterson made noises as if he was going to support Kennedy when he came out, and everybody cried: "Deal!" Then they wanted to know, what is the deal? He could not understand, and he was very angry about it.

GRELE: You say there was bitter criticism at this time?

LAWSON: Oh, you just have no idea. You see, I had been wooing people away from the idea about the civil rights vote. "That was a mistake. Let's forget that. We're on a whole new program now. Everything since then has been wonderful. You can't throw a man away for one mistake." I had been saying this for a couple of years now, and I was getting along pretty well. Then comes the Patterson breakfast. That proves, of course, that he has not changed, this is what he really thought in the first place, and what kind of fool am I. It did a great deal of damage to my efforts.

GRELE: But you still got forty-two of the fifty-two Negro delegates to the Convention.

LAWSON: Well, I'm afraid my story was beginning to change, too. I was saying, "All right, do you want to be for the winner, or do you want to go down with the loser?"

GRELE: Well, a lot of them, of course, probably would have been with you anyway, wouldn't they? Like Chicago?

LAWSON: Some of them are instructed. It doesn't make any difference what I said about it. Again, I think that my chief contribution, if it was one, was that I was out early, that I was for him, that I never wavered, and that I stayed for him. I argued with all of these people and held them steadfast. Again, I would say that my significance was symbolic rather than political, really, because who am I politically? Who was I then? Just somebody in whom people did have confidence and who was well-known. You see, I was well-known because I'd been writing a column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* for years, and everybody knew my name up and down. I never pulled any punches. People had the opinion that I was very outspoken and courageous and straightforward, and I was going to call a spade a spade.

GRELE: Whom did the other ten people vote for?

LAWSON: Some of them were in delegations that were instructed otherwise. For example, Margaret Holmes in New Jersey. She was dying, she wanted to be for Kennedy, but [Robert B.] Meyner wouldn't release his delegation.

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GRELE: We have to get that story on the New Jersey delegation, and what actually happened.

LAWSON: Remember Margaret Holmes. She wanted to be for him so much. There were others like that. There was Kentucky: Frank Stanley wanted to be for Johnson, I think, or was the Kentucky delegation for Johnson? I think it was. I think Frank Stanley was personally for Johnson, too. Of course, some of these people were not delegates. They were alternates; they couldn't vote. I'm talking about fifty-two altogether. But I didn't miss many.

GRELE: What did you do after the Convention?

LAWSON: We came back to Washington. We had number of meetings at 1028 Connecticut Avenue with Sarge setting up the campaign. Senator Kennedy asked me to head up the civil rights section of the campaign. That's a story in itself.

GRELE: Because of the time, I'm afraid it's a story we'll have to get into some other time.

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