

**Maurice A. Shea Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 3/22/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Maurice A. “Maury” Shea

**Interviewer:** Ronald J. Grele

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**Biographical Note**

Maurice A. “Maury” Shea, born in 1916, was a contemporary of John F. Kennedy (JFK) at Choate Academy during the 1930s. This interview focuses on Shea’s relationship with JFK while at Choate, JFK’s qualities and mannerisms, and Shea’s contributions to JFK’s presidential campaign, among other issues.

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Maurice A. Shea—JFK #1  
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Oral History Interview

with

MAURICE A. "MAURY" SHEA

March 22, 1966  
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Shea, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

SHEA: Well, I think when I first met him his family was living in Riverdale, New York, and I went to a birthday party for either John or his older brother, Joseph [P. Kennedy, Jr.]. I can't remember which one.

GRELE: When was this?

SHEA: This would have been back in the late twenties, I imagine. And then they moved up to, as I recall, Bronxville and I didn't see Jack again until we both were at Choate in '34.

GRELE: Do you recall now anything interesting about the family when you first met them at the birthday party?

SHEA: No, I believe the reason I was invited was Mr. [Joseph P., Sr.] Kennedy and my father were both in the theater business at that time and knew each other. I think I was considered a neighbor, and I was probably invited because of business connections. It's quite a ways back, I don't remember.

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GRELE: When you met again at Choate, did you recognize each other?

SHEA: Yes, because through the years we'd bump into each other once in a while. At Riverdale School, as I recall, he was there for a little bit. And I went to Riverdale School and then I went to Choate and he went to I'm not sure whether it was Canterbury before he went to Choate or not. Yes, I think it was Canterbury. So he was at Canterbury and I was at Riverdale, and then we both ended up at Choate.

GRELE: What are your recollections in general of John Kennedy at Choate?

SHEA: Well, he was always running — or seemed to be. It was probably unfortunate. I think he wanted to be one of the boys. He wanted to play football, and he couldn't play varsity football because of an illness. As I recall, the only athletics that he could do at that time was golf. That's probably when his interest in golf took form. He couldn't, as I say, participate; and yet he was probably the loudest in the cheering section for any athletic contest. I think he probably missed not being able to do this, whether it was the varsity or the second team, it wouldn't have made any difference. I think he missed not being able to compete.

GRELE: What kind of student was he?

SHEA: I don't think he was at the top of the class. In fact, I'm quite sure of it. He, like myself, I think had trouble scholastically. Or let us say we never produced what the masters thought we were capable of.

GRELE: Do you recall in particular any courses or any masters that gave him particular trouble?

SHEA: I don't think I was in any of his classes at Choate. It's a fairly large school, and at that time you had quite a few classes all in the same subject. I don't recall that he and I were in any class together.

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GRELE: Did you ever discuss masters together?

SHEA: No. Well, one of my favorite masters was [John] Jack Mahr, and I'm sure he wasn't one of Jack's favorites because he was a corridor master. He gave up on trying to get Jack to be neat — or at least a semblance of neatness in his room. And he always, according to Jack, was down on him. I don't think so. I think fundamentally Mr. Mahr liked Kennedy; I think he was trying to teach him.

GRELE: Was John Kennedy at this time rooming with [K. LeMoyné] Lem Billings?

SHEA: They roomed there and then they moved from Mr. Mahr's corridor which was in the main building, the Hill House building. They moved to one of the cottages. I don't recall who was their master then, but he, I'm afraid, didn't inherit two of the more neat boys of the school — or quiet.

GRELE: They weren't quiet either?

SHEA: No, you could hear them pretty well for quite a distance.

GRELE: What did they discuss at this time. Do you recall?

SHEA: Well, your regular bull sessions would have been at their house just like any I had would have been in my corridor. The subject usually turned to girls; what you were going to do vacations; what you had done vacations. The masters, or masters' wives were always subjects that easily came to the front, I think, in most of the bull sessions — orchestras, movies. But you see, when you're spread out into houses or cottages around the campus, you have to stay within that group most of the time because at night you can't go back and forth. In the daytime that's another time.

GRELE: When you lived in the same corridor, did he ever discuss his father's career?

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SHEA: No.

GRELE: Or his...

SHEA: I didn't live on the same corridor at the same time. He had left the corridor when I moved into it. No, there was no reason for him to. I don't think at Choate very many people talked about father's careers. And there was probably very good reason. At Choate, then as probably now, there were boys who come from very wealthy families and there are boys there on full scholarship. And it wouldn't be quite the thing to do because you never knew. The boy that you were telling what a rich father you had might have no father, or he might have a father who was — nothing wrong in it — a policeman or a minister or what-not. No, I don't recall.

GRELE: Was John Kennedy at that time ill any of the time?

SHEA: He had at that time, as I recall, some type.... We called it a disease. It was a swelling that would come out of the blue. And I don't recall that it

was.... Once it was bad enough that they rushed him down to New Haven in an ambulance. I think that what they were always afraid of was the swelling would come in his throat, and instead of swelling externally, swell in. Of course, that would finish it right there. But at that time they didn't know where it was. Whether they ever found out for sure, I don't know.

GRELE: Did he ever discuss this illness with you?

SHEA: Yes, in a joking manner. He never was morose. It was, I suppose, the contributing factor that they wouldn't let him play football or any of the other sports. I think they were afraid that this might bring it on. And not knowing what it was, they thought that he should be, let us say, pampered a little bit, as far as athletics went.

GRELE: What did he refer to the disease as?

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SHEA: He had some funny or peculiar name for it, and I just can't remember it. But when he mentioned it, he was always joking about it. It was something that he was living with, and as long as nobody knew and he didn't know, he went along with it.

GRELE: Who were the Muckers?

SHEA: Well, there were thirteen boys. We weren't all Sixth Formers, that's seniors. I think some were Fourth and Fifth Formers. I imagine the easiest way to describe the Muckers is we were all boys who, for one reason or another, had been called before either the Headmaster or the Master who was the disciplinarian for the school. Perhaps not any cardinal sin had been committed or any major rule broken, but we had broken rules or we didn't quite toe the line. The Headmaster — the old Head, now is passed away — he had this favorite word “mucker” for anyone who rocked the boat: the boat being Choate, Choate's rules, traditions. Unfortunately, I suppose we just went against the grain a little. So after we had been called before the Head separately numerous times, we just all kind of got together and formed a club and called it the Muckers club.

GRELE: Do you recall why you were brought before the Master?

SHEA: No.

GRELE: Do you recall why John Kennedy was...

SHEA: No, the only time I know why we were all called is when we were all called together. And that was when we were told we were no longer



students at Choate; we could go pack our bags.

GRELE: Why was this?

SHEA: Well, it was before a spring dance, I believe. And we had decided, or it had been decided by the Club — a very democratic club; a vote was taken — that when festivities

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or the dances came, there were certain girls whom some of the Muckers liked, therefore, we would see that they were put over, or were very popular, at the dance. Then there were certain boys, fellow students, that we didn't care for too much. So to get back at them, or even with them, or give them their comeuppance, we decided that we would not put over their girls. In other words none of us would dance with any of the other girls. And then we were going.... Oh, there were wild ideas. We were going to take all of the dates out in the country and have our picture taken in front of a mound of horse manure [laughter] and have Muckers spelled out. Oh, you know. We weren't so young. I guess we ran from fifteen to twenty. But everybody had a different idea of what to do. Unfortunately for us, we didn't realize one of the masters was in the corridor listening to the whole thing. And upon it being repeated to the Head, it probably changed a little more. I imagine it kind of upset the Headmaster. And I don't blame him. He thought that we were not quite the boys that he wanted to have the stamp of Choate on. So, after luncheon we were all called into his study, and one by one as I remember, he talked to each one of us, told us our faults, and announced that there was a train sometime between five and six o'clock and that was the train we should be on; that we were no longer students of his school. However, somehow, between two o'clock and five o'clock he relented or changed his mind and somehow we were given a second chance.

GRELE: Did you follow through with your plans for the dance?

SHEA: No, because part of the agreement that the Head had with us was that if any of the boys broke any of the rules of the school, we would all be expelled. And this time it would be for good. I think the only thing that was done was that one of the boys, [James "Smokey"] Jim Wilde gave our little golden emblem, which was a shovel, to his date right in the middle of the dance which was on Saturday night, which caused the older Muckers to become a little upset. But luckily none of the masters saw it and she was back to school or wherever it was in no time. No, we all lasted through.

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GRELE: Ambassador Kenendy came to Choate a few days later. Did this have anything to do with your being readmitted?

SHEA: No, we had been readmitted long before Mr. Kennedy came up. We knew he was coming. I think he came up to have a discussion with the Headmaster and with his son, Jack. No, I don't think any outside influence would have made the Headmaster change his mind as far as reinstating us. I think he discussed it when he'd calm down. And I think he discussed it with most of the masters who either had Muckers in their houses or on their corridors, or who taught them in one form or another. And I think that they prevailed upon him to allow us to remain, under this cloud. And it was a black cloud. But again, no, I don't think Mr. Kennedy could have smoothed the water. In fact, there is a story about one boy, not a Mucker, who was told he could not return. And at that time Choate had no swimming pool. And his mother came up and said if his son could return she would see that within the next year there was a new building and that in the building would be the swimming pool that Choate needed. And the story went, and probably still goes — the Head said, "Choate needs a swimming pool, but it needs your son less."

GRELE: Who was the Master at this time? The Headmaster.

SHEA: That was George St. John, father of the present Headmaster who is Seymour St. John. And George St. John just passed away down in Hobe Sound, Florida this winter. I think he was ninety odd.

GRELE: Within the Muckers, was John Kennedy one of the movers?

SHEA: I would say he was one of the founding fathers. He, and out of the thirteen — probably this grew more from LeMoyne Billings, Jack Kennedy, [Ralph G., Jr.] Rip Horton, and probably Jim Wilde. Then just like Topsy it grew and grew until it got to be thirteen and that was a good number to have it at.

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GREELE: Did any of the boys whom you didn't like ever become prominent, do you recall?

SHEA: No, because it wasn't "dislike." I say dislike; we probably disliked them that week. And the next week — you know — the way you are in any school; high school, grammar school. You change. Somebody does something that you might have wanted to do, so you dislike them. Well, if you dislike them, then the whole Muckers dislikes them. This was the point of the thing. No, I think the only real large contribution the Muckers made to Choate was the yearbook, *The Brief*. We always had elections by the students of the graduating class — and the yearbook that year — somehow the Muckers got the balance.

GRELE: Who was the editor of the yearbook?

SHEA: I don't recall. I think John Kennedy was business manager. Some of the

others worked on it. At one of our gatherings they were all about. If anybody took the trouble to check back, I think they would find that each Mucker was elected to something; whether it was something funny or something considered quite an honor. In fact, I recall John F. Kennedy was elected Most Likely to Succeed. Everybody got a piece of pie out of it. I don't think the Headmaster or any master ever knew this because they never would have let it be printed and we all would have been expelled for that definitely.

GRELE: Do you recall, then, your impressions of John Kennedy and his relations with his family?

SHEA: Well, what can you say? His sisters used to come up there in the fall. They'd arrive there to see a football game.

GRELE: I asked the question because so much has written about the Kennedy family and their relationships, and I was wondering if at that time you noticed anything different in their relationships or anything special?

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SHEA: No, no, I don't think so. I mean there was always — seemed to be — Well, in fact, when they would come up in the fall I would never see them because I was on the football team and we wouldn't be around. We ate early, we kept to ourselves, we were excused from classes. But I remember that some of the sisters would come over for a football game or two. Kennedy would get like LeMoyne Billings to take one and someone else, maybe Rip Horton, to take another one, depending on how many of them came. They were a close-knit family, I suppose, even then.

GRELE: When you were on the football team did John Kennedy ever talk to you about being unable to make the team?

SHEA: No, I mean everybody knew that it was just one of those things. If a boy had a broken arm, why, you didn't expect him to be playing squash. Well, everybody knew that Kennedy had this weird, as we called it, "unmentionable disease" and that therefore he could play golf and that was about all. It was just everybody knew — I mean just one of those things. There might have been some teasing or joshing about it, I don't know. We all knew that, let's put it this way, if he hadn't been sick we all knew he would've been out trying for the team. And if he wasn't trying for it everybody knew there was a reason because this is the type of boy he was. He wouldn't have been just sitting it out.

GRELE: You say that much of your conversation in those days turned around girls. How did John Kennedy get along with the girls in general?

SHEA: You'd have to ask the girls. [Laughter] Well, you see, at Choate you didn't have dates. The only dates you had — you could bring a girl for the dances which were the festivities. You had two long weekends. One in the fall and one before graduation. The rest of the time a girl could come and see you on Saturday afternoon or Sunday. But the only date as far as going out would normally be on vacations. And on vacations everybody went out their own separate ways.

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GRELE: Do you know why he chose to go to Princeton after Choate?

SHEA: I truthfully would guess that he went there because LeMoyne Billings and Ralph Horton were going. The three of them would go together. They were very close. I don't think he just picked Princeton because he wanted to go to Princeton. I think he wanted to go to Princeton because the others were going, which in those days, a lot of boys did. It didn't make any difference to some boys whether you graduated from Princeton, or Harvard, or Williams, or Dartmouth, or Yale or whatnot. If your father went there, you might go. Now his father went to Harvard. But maybe.... There weren't any boys from Choate going to Harvard. Maybe he felt he'd rather be with his own group. There were quite a few boys, I think, that went to Princeton that year from Choate.

GRELE: Can you think of anything that we haven't talked about — incidents concerning the Muckers or John Kennedy at Choate as you remember him?

SHEA: I wish I could. I wish I could be more helpful. As I told you, it's a long time.

GRELE: When did you next see him after Choate?

SHEA: I probably bumped into him down at Palm Beach. I remember distinctly a few years after we both got out of Choate he had transferred to Harvard and I was up at Boston for a Yale-Harvard game. I was invited to a cocktail party but nobody knew who was giving it. So we all went. It turned out it was [Torbert H.] Torby Macdonald and Jack Kennedy's party. That might have been three years later, I don't know.

GRELE: Did he talk to you then about Choate?

SHEA: No, you couldn't at that type cocktail party. You had probably two hundred people in one living room that

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was meant to hold twenty people. I don't know, I would run into Jack every now and then down at Palm Beach. We didn't talk much about Choate. We would talk more about who we had seen from Choate recently. Had I seen so and so or he had just seen so and so. Then for quite a while I didn't see him. The next to the last time I saw him, or almost the next to the last was in Florida. He was still in uniform. He had come back from the South Pacific. Recuperating, on sick leave — he was down there. He was in Bradley's Club with a girl he'd had to dinner. The next time I saw him was when he was a Senator here in Washington.

GRELE:           When you saw him when you were still in uniform, did he talk to you at all about his impressions of the Navy?

SHEA:            No, because I think he was trying to make an impression on the young lady. He wanted to be a gambler. The rule then in Mr. Bradley's was if you were in uniform you could come into his club. You could eat or you could watch somebody gamble, but you could not gamble. Unfortunately for his wallet, he saw me and he asked me to do some gambling for him. I think the only reason he did it was to show the girl that he was quite a fellow. Because truthfully I don't think he knew the rules of roulette. Needless to say, he did not win.

GRELE:            You saw him again when he was a senator?

SHEA:            I came over to Washington to see him when he was a senator.

GRELE:            Was this after or before he had announced...

SHEA:            It was after the nomination in fact. The day I came, I think he was giving a speech about Medicare. Yes, because he had a doctor in his office and he said to the doctor, "Well, your friends really put the wood to me today." But he hadn't changed. He'd changed — yes. Everybody changes from a fifteen year old boy to a man. But his mannerisms

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hadn't changed. I don't think they ever did change. He'd gotten to be big man. He'd surprised me that he was as large as he was. I don't think fundamentally he ever changed; from Choate or even before Choate. He had certain values, he had certain mannerisms and I think he carried them all the way to Dallas with him. He never changed them.

GRELE:            What are some of the mannerisms that you recall?

SHEA:            One thing I've always noticed. Did you ever see him when he was standing still? He didn't know what to do with his hands. Some time you look. He'd put them in his pocket when the average person would have

them out. They always seemed to be in the way to him. He was that way at school. I remember when he was giving a speech up there. You almost thought he'd wish they'd been chopped off. And yet you look at a lot of pictures of him when he was president. When he talked or was walking with people and he'll have both hands in his trouser pocket if you stop to think of it. I don't know. It's just one of those things. He was a good friend, I think, to most everybody. He was loyal. Of course, maybe I'm biased but there won't be another one.

GRELE:           When you saw him when he was a senator, was this the day that you offered your services in the campaign?

SHEA:            Yes.

GRELE:           Can you tell us what this involved?

SHEA:            Well, I'd moved down to Maryland and I wasn't doing anything at the time. So I came over to see the then Senator. I said I thought he might welcome a little help. It would be very little; I wasn't a politician or anything, but I would gladly volunteer to help out his Maryland contingent. I thought he needed all the help he could get — not only there, but as far as votes went it was going to be a close election. The only string was that I was looking for a job in Maryland. If it came through I would have to quit. Otherwise I would

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volunteer until the election. It was a mistake because I really was only thinking of doing it. Before I left the Senator had called his man in Maryland and said I would be reporting for work on Monday, which was Labor Day. I worked over in Baltimore.

GRELE:           What did you do?

SHEA:            Not very much. I kind of helped out on getting the literature around the state. In other words, if down on the Eastern Shore they were having a rally, and all of a sudden they discovered they had no posters or literature or anything, I'd get in a wagon and drive to Washington. We'd load it up and head for the Eastern Shore. I was just a handyman.

GRELE:           Who did you work with in Maryland?

SHEA:            [Joseph] Joe Curnane. Kennedy brought him down from Massachusetts. He came from — I don't know — it wasn't Waltham — I'm not sure now.

GRELE:           Everett?

SHEA:            Everett, yes. He was the man who tried to pull the fighting factions in

Maryland together or at least temporarily, which he did. As I recall, there was quite an argument one day. He let the different elements have it out and finally he hit the table and he said, "Alright, now let me say something." I think the words were, "You're either going to work together and work with me or you can keep fighting the way you are now. But when the elections are over I won't care because I'll go back to Everett. But you'll care because you'll get nothing because I won't be here to help you!" For the rest of the campaign they were civil to each other.

GRELE: Do you remember who was on what side?

SHEA: Well you always have the same thing, I guess now. You always have Baltimore City and the counties. Because of the counties have always wanted to run

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Maryland and Baltimore City always thought it should. So you have two factions right there without splitting those down. I think it was mostly the city politicians and the county politicians. They finally worked together - and they did. They brought in a tremendous majority for him. I think that as soon as that was over they went right back to not speaking to each other.

GRELE: Did you see John Kennedy after the election?

SHEA: Yes, I saw him twice at the White House. Through getting an O.K. from [P. Kenneth] Kenny O'Donnell, I called Mrs. [Evelyn] Lincoln and said I would appreciate if I could take my wife and youngest daughter, Meg, over to meet the President. Mrs. Lincoln was kind enough to arrange it. My older daughter, Maureen, was studying in Europe and when she came back I thought it only fair that she should have a chance to meet the President. So again I called Mrs. Lincoln and again she was the usual kind lady. She arranged it. Then I discovered that I had a babysitting problem with my youngest child. I had to call back and ask if it was all right to bring her a second time. Otherwise I was stuck. Mrs. Lincoln said she saw no reason not to. I think that both my daughters and my wife were very lucky. They had an experience that they'll never forget. It was very kind of Mrs. Lincoln and it was very kind of the President.

GRELE: When you saw the President these two times, did you notice any change in him? After he assumed office?

SHEA: No, no. In fact, with all his problems he said, "it came across my desk the other day that Rip Horton is married." He said, "Do you know anything about it?" I said, "Yes, I just had dinner with him." He said, "All right, you check up on it some more and keep me informed. Next time you see me I want to know all about it." You see, even with a lot of the world's problems on his mind he — his mind worked that way. I suppose, all right he

walks in the room and sees Shea, and the wheel starts spinning — Shea and Choate and Choate

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and Shea and that means Rip Horton. Mrs. Lincoln probably had seen something about it in the paper and had cut it out and put it on his desk. This is the way his mind would work. As soon as he met my family, the first thing he thought of was Rip and he said, “All right, as long as you’ve seen him, you check and let me know how things are,” — and whatnot, which is quite a thing for a President of the United States to ask. You say, after he became President, did you notice any change? Well, if you’d taken the man in the Cabinet Room and taken a couple of inches off of him and maybe quite a few pounds, everything else would have been the same as it was at Choate in ‘35 and ‘34. His face was fuller, he was heavier and he was kind of a big man, whereas he was kind of a scrawny kid. But the actions, the expressions — they were all the same.

GRELE: I have one final question which just came to my mind. You say that he gave a speech once at Choate. What was that about?

SHEA: Well, you had, at Choate, I think in your junior or senior, which is called Fifth and Sixth Form; you had to take public speaking or you had to have a good reason not to. It was required and he had to take it. I don’t know how I got out of it but I got out of it. I remember one time I happened to be down in the classroom where they had it, which was where they showed the movies — and I just remembered — he wasn’t on the debating team or anything. It was just public speaking which you have in a lot of schools as a required course. It’s to give you self-confidence and poise. I have always maintained that it’s not so much that you can make a good speech. They’re not really interested in that; they’re interested if you can get up on a stage or platform and face an audience. And that’s what it was at Choate.

GRELE: Do you recall what you thought at that time, whether or not John Kennedy was doing well by the speech?

SHEA: No — no.

GRELE: Not too well? Do you remember the topic?

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SHEA: No, because if I was down there in a class where I didn’t belong it was probably some other reason. Probably some of the Muckers were with me at the back. We were probably trying to distract him, truthfully. We weren’t listening to him; we were trying to throw him off base.



GRELE: Can you recall anything we haven't covered?

SHEA: Not right now.

GRELE: Well, when you get the transcript if you can think of anything you can just pencil it in.

SHEA: If I do I'll pencil some on a paper and I'll drop it off to you or send it over to you.

GRELE: Fine.

SHEA: Something could come, you never know. You know it is funny because sometimes I'll be reading.... In fact my wife gave me the book *A Thousand Days* [Arthur M., Jr.] Schlesinger's book. I don't know what it was, but the other night.... I like it in that I can pick it up and read four pages, and if I put it down then I can pick it up again and you don't have to backtrack or anything else. There was something about Kennedy's trying to figure something out. And the way Schlesinger wrote it, it was so true. I mean I could almost see, not Kennedy the president, but Kennedy the schoolboy was the same way. When he wasn't quite sure of something and he was trying to check it in his own mind. And the way Schlesinger described it I could close my eyes and right on the wall I could see Kenendy at Choate doing the same thing — whether it was about if we'd get off for next weekend's cocktail party in New York or and so and so girls are going to be there. You could almost see him trying to — well, can I get off and what can I use for an excuse and if I'm caught how can I — you know — [laughter] get out of this? I think it's quite a book.

GRELE: Okay, thank you very much, sir.

SHEA: Well, thank you and...