

Kirk LeMoyne Billings Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 06/24/64
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Billings was a Kennedy family friend and associate. In this interview, he discusses his trip to Europe with John F. Kennedy [JFK], information about his demeanor and fashion tastes, and his early years with the Navy, among other issues.

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Kirk LeMoyne Billings – JFK #3

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Oral History Interview

with

K. LEMOYNE BILLINGS

June 24, 1964
New York City

By Walter D. Sohier

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SOHIER: Lem, I wonder if we could pick up where we left off last time, which you may recall, was during the period after Jack Kennedy had entered Harvard and, although you were at Princeton at the time and a year ahead of him, you saw him during the weekends, in the summers, and so on. I think we were beginning to discuss what the typical weekend in New York might have been. I think when we left off you were planning to mention one particular evening at the Stork Club. Could you resume at that point?

BILLINGS: I was talking about the Stork Club. In those days the Stork Club was a very popular place with college people, Sherman Billingsley at that time was interested in having pretty girls there. Those who brought

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pretty girls were treated very well. For instance, on Sunday nights they used to have a balloon game. Balloons would drop from the ceiling and you'd all grab them. Some of them contained hundred dollar bills and even one five hundred dollar bill, tickets for free meals at the Stork Club, bottles of champagne, etc. The boys and girls always went out separately. The boys always won lousy gifts while the girls got the five hundred dollars, etc. Anyway we went there a lot and, as I think I said before, I couldn't spend very much money because I didn't have it. Jack didn't mind spending on the same basis as I did. The one thing I was going to say, because it's sort of

interesting and will show how he was willing to go along with his friends on a spending basis, was that we would order one drink at the table and then Jack and I would excuse

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ourselves and hurry over to Third Avenue. There was a bar there where we would have a few beers and come right back. I only bring this up because Jack Kennedy tried to live within the budgets of his friends.

SOHIER: He didn't drink very much later in life. Did he drink more then?

BILLINGS: No, he didn't really drink much then. Possibly more than he did in later life just because, of course, we were young and it was probably more fun. In one typical evening we'd have one drink at the Stork Club and maybe a few beers, which certainly isn't what you would put down as drinking a lot.

SOHIER: Would this be a different girl each time? At this point, I guess there wasn't any steady girl. We discussed this last time to some extent.

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BILLINGS: Mainly, it was a broad variety of different girls, although even during the Harvard years he took out Olive Cawley a good bit.

SOHIER: It just occurred to me that you mentioned balloon night on Sunday, and I guess he had Monday morning classes back in Cambridge. Was he a guy who would skip a class? How seriously was he taking his studies at this point?

BILLINGS: That's interesting, of course, I wasn't up there. You know it was so long ago, I'm wondering if Sunday night was the night or whether it was Saturday night. I really can't remember.

SOHIER: I knew that it used to be Sunday night.

BILLINGS: It was Sunday night? Well, I don't know. I can't answer that. I can't picture exactly how

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he got back to Harvard. I can remember in my own case, I went back Sunday night to Princeton, and quite often I hitchhiked back — the same way I had come up. I suppose he must have gone back by plane or in a pullman berth. I really don't know but I know that every year at Harvard he was getting much more serious about his work. I think that's evidenced by the grades he made even in his freshman year.

SOHIER: What changes from the Choate days did you see in him during this period? I think in your first interview you mentioned that he seemed to grow a lot all the time. What form did that take that was noticeable to you as you moved through the years here from Choate to his freshman year at Harvard? How was he maturing and growing?

BILLINGS: I think if I had been at Harvard I

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could probably answer that a lot better than I can, because our relationship was based pretty much on weekends and summer vacations. I do know that the courses he chose at Harvard and the marks he got in the courses show that he was taking a great deal more interest in his studies in college and in what college offered. His interests were greater than they'd been in school. But, again, I cannot answer that as well as perhaps [Torbert H. Macdonald] Torby could because I only saw him, as I say, when he was away from college.

SOHIER: Did he talk with you about different sorts of things during these periods than at Choate? What kinds of things did you talk about? What sort of conversation was it? Was it about college studies? It seems unlikely that it got very much into it.

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BILLINGS: No, I don't think it was. I think it was always pretty much about what we were doing with our lives in general and what was happening currently. Again, as I say, we were meeting on weekends, and I don't think we probably talked too much about the subjects each of us were studying in college.

SOHIER: Where would he stay? Did his father have an apartment here then?

BILLINGS: No, actually he didn't have an apartment and during the weekends we very carefully made sure that we got out to Bronxville, which is a little way out of New York, because we didn't, or at least I didn't, have enough money to stay in New York. So we drove out to Bronxville for the night every time.

SOHIER: Jack Kennedy had a car, didn't he? He

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went in for convertibles, didn't he, at this point? I think he always liked a convertible.

BILLINGS: Yes, I think, as I remember, he had a car. Were they allowed to have cars at Harvard? I can't remember. They certainly weren't allowed to have them

at Princeton. I assume he had a car. There always was a car available anyway.

SOHIER: As I recall, from the chronology here, in the summer of 1937, which was the end of his freshman year and of your sophomore year, you two went to Europe and I think you covered that to a considerable extent in your first interview. I wonder are there any pieces of this that you'd like to pick up? I think you talked about being at St. Jean de Luz on the Spanish border, being in Italy during Benito Mussolini's regime, and about

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the Nazis in Germany. I wonder if there are some other points you'd like to bring out.

BILLINGS: I think that this is probably a better chance to say how he had grown since Choate. Certainly, when he was over there, he was extremely interested in what was going on in every country we visited. I probably covered this before, but he really did make this his major assignment on the trip. It wasn't just all pleasure. He felt that he really had to find out what was going on in Europe in this very, very important period. He wrote a great deal of this down in letters to his father. I hope they exist.

SOHIER: Was this an intellectual interest of his, or was it partly motivated by the fact that he figured his father was going to grill him?

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BILLINGS: No, I think that again, one of the good things about Joe Kennedy in raising his kids was that he did like to hear from them and he did like to have interesting letters, just as he liked to stimulate interesting conversations at the table. I think there's no question about it, his father was one of the motivating forces, but, his own keen interest was important. As I think I've said before, with his terribly inquisitive mind, he was very excited about this period and very eager to find out what was in the minds of the French people and whether they felt Germany was as tremendous a threat as it was in World War I. I think he satisfied himself that they felt completely secure behind their Maginot Line.

SOHIER: Take St. Jean de Luz for example, with which I'm a little familiar. It's got a terrific beach.

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Would you spend the day at the beach, or would you be doing other things in terms of finding out what people thought? Can you remember?

BILLINGS: As I said before, we met one of his classmates at college there. His name was Alec Portalis, whose family had a house in St. Jean de Luz. We stayed with them the week

we were there and we pretty well followed whatever schedule they had. Both Jack and I always liked swimming and the beach so I'm sure we spent a lot of time there. I know also during that period we saw our first bullfight. I think they were Spanish bullfighters but, since Spain was at war, the bullfight was held in the arena in Biarritz. Both of us were pretty well disgusted with the whole thing because we didn't like the cruelty of the sport. I don't know whether this is

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the same impression that all people have of bullfighting. I remember very clearly it was ours. We felt the bull didn't have a prayer. Of course, maybe we didn't understand the finer points of the sport. I remember Jack's drawing my attention to a French woman and her child, a little boy, sitting beside us. When one of the horses was badly gored with his guts spilled out over the arena, and they led him out with his guts dragging behind, the mother made a great issue out of making sure her child saw this very exciting episode. Of course, we didn't understand this temperament at all and we were disgusted by it.

SOHIER: Did you do any touring of churches, or museums? Was he interested in this sort of thing at this point in his life?

BILLINGS: I don't think I did cover that in the

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last interview and I think that it's terribly interesting because he did enjoy seeing the cultural side of Europe. Having been a sophomore at Princeton, I had taken my first architectural course there and my interests were in that direction anyway. I enjoyed seeing the Gothic cathedrals and other architectural treasures — buildings which I had actually studied in college. I felt very much at home seeing them and I was very excited about it. He hadn't taken an architectural course at that time, and yet, he was just as interested as I was. He never complained when I asked to go to all the different cathedrals around Paris. We started at Le Havre and we went to every single cathedral around Paris before we went to Paris. This used up a lot of our time, but as I said, he never complained. He was very interested in seeing them, too.

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SOHIER: You went to the Louvre, for example?

BILLINGS: Of course. We covered all the regular points of interest in Paris. We spent a lot of time in Notre Dame and, as a matter of fact, that brings up an amusing side of Jack Kennedy. He was always very good at getting into places which were closed to the public. I remember when we were in Paris that Cardinal Pacelli was there to celebrate Mass at Notre Dame. We went there and there was a most fantastic crowd surrounding the entire cathedral. Of course, the number of people who could go into the cathedral was very limited. I think it was probably by ticket only. Jack went up to the VIP

entrance used by President [Albert] LeBrun — in he went and I was stopped. How he did it, I don't know. I was right behind him. I never got in the cathedral at all.

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Later Jack told me that he sat about five seats from the French President. Jack was always able to get into any place he wanted — I guess it was just gall.

SOHIER: I guess we know that it wasn't through his mastery of the French language.

BILLINGS: No, because he didn't speak French actually as well as I did, which was nil.

SOHIER: Now, for instance, in Rome did you go to the Vatican and to the museum?

BILLINGS: The Vatican, yes. Of course, we had introductions to everybody in the Vatican because Cardinal Pacelli was friendly with Mr. and Mrs.

Kennedy. In fact, when he was in America, he visited the Kennedys at their house in Bronxville. Also, Count Galeazzi, the chief layman for the Catholic Church, was a close friend

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of the Kenendy's. So we had all the entrees into the Vatican that was necessary, and we were treated very well.

SOHIER: Did Jack Kennedy at this point ever make any comments about his attitude toward, let's say, the pomp and the trappings of the Vatican? Did he make any remarks of this sort about the Catholic hierarchy? Was there this kind of discussion?

BILLINGS: Well, I think it was a bit difficult for Jack to buy a lot of the miracles which we were shown in Rome, for instance, Veronica's veil or the steps down which St. Peter's head is supposed to have fallen. You know a fountain is supposed to have burst forth wherever the head bounced. I think these things were all very difficult for him to believe. He assured me that it wasn't necessary to believe this in order to be a good Catholic. During all

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my experiences with Jack Kennedy, he never really discussed religion much. I think he was a good Catholic. I don't think he was a dedicated Catholic like his mother and his sisters, but he was a good Catholic. I cannot remember anytime in my life when Jack Kennedy didn't go to

church on Sunday, nor can I remember anytime he didn't say his prayers on his knees before he went to bed.

SOHIER: Do you remember whether he used a rosary when he said his prayers?

BILLINGS: Yes, he had rosaries. I don't know whether he always had one, but an interesting thing is that I never, never, never remember in my life Jack's missing his prayers at night on his knees. He always went to confession when he was supposed to. But I know he just wasn't as tied up with his religion as the girls in his

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family were.

SOHIER: What about art, painting, sculpture, museums in general, music; what was his interest at this point in this field? We'll get to this later on because I think you had a very special relationship with him in this particular field, but what was interest then in the college years?

BILLINGS: At the time we were in Europe, neither of us had had courses in painting or sculpture. As I said before, I had had a course in architecture. So we both really had no knowledge of any of the other forms of art, but we did go to every museum of importance. For instance, we went all through the Vatican and, although I don't think we understood too much about what we were seeing at that time, I remember neither of us were bored. Certainly

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Jack Kennedy was just as interested in it as I was. Actually this is true of our entire trip. We spent all our daytime hours, as tourists, going to museums of every kind and seeing all the antiquities of Europe.

SOHIER: Were there pretty girls along from time to time who met you in Europe on this trip, or how did that work out?

BILLINGS: We had to find our own at night.

SOHIER: And where did you find your own at night? Was this this around at nightclubs?

BILLINGS: How does one find girls at night when you don't know any girls in Europe?

SOHIER: You hit places like nightclubs?

BILLINGS: Wherever the girls were — we went. [Laughter]

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SOHIER: I think it was after you had headed back to the United States, at the end of 1937, that Mr. Kennedy was appointed Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. I guess, at this point anyway, you and Jack Kenendy didn't go to London. You weren't involved in the Embassy at that point, were you?

BILLINGS: Jack and I did go to London, but we weren't involved with the Embassy, even though Mr. Kennedy went to his post in the fall of that year, when we were there, we didn't know one single soul. In fact, we didn't even have any introductions to anybody in London. I think I covered before that we stayed in a little boarding house on Talbot Square, off Hyde Park, where a lot of Oxford boys usually stayed. It was very inexpensive. I remember we listened to the Joe Louis-Tommy Farr fight over the radio

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at that boarding house. (August 30, 1937). Everybody in that boarding house was Welsh and there was tremendous excitement because we were routing for Louis against the majority. Later we left London and went up to Scotland to visit a man named Sir James Caler, a business associate of Mr. Kennedy. He had an enormous house near Kinross-shire — a gigantic, as only houses in England can be. I think this was probably Jack's first experience with English living. It was a great shock to us both that, in this enormous house, which probably had twenty to thirty bedrooms, there was only one bathroom. We had a terribly difficult time with our old Scotch host. As a matter of fact, he was a terribly rich man. He owned Haig and Haig whiskey. The one bathroom was difficult to find because it was so far from your room. Sir James had the Scottish

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habit of turning off all the lights with a master switch at 10 o'clock at night. If you didn't get to the bathroom by that time you were in deep trouble. Jack and I had one hell of a time getting to the bathroom during our whole visit. Sir James had about 1,000 acres of heather. At the time of our visit, it was rather late in the grouse season. Sir James sent us out with his gamekeeper on a very rainy day. Neither Jack nor I were good shots. In fact, I don't think either of us had ever really used a shotgun before. I'm sure this was a new experience for the gamekeeper. Jack was determined that he would get more grouse than I did. We spent the entire, wet, rainy day tramping through the heather. I had a particularly hard time because of my glasses. I couldn't see anything; Jack did get two grouse. I was very upset about that

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but I did finally get one with my very last shell at the end.

SOHIER: What happened to the grouse?

BILLINGS: That was an interesting story in itself. We were determined to bring the grouse back to the United States, even though we had at least another week in England. The gamekeeper hung our grouse in the kitchen ice box. When we left I'm sure they gave us grouse much older than ours. We carried them all the way to London. We stayed another week in London and we tried to keep them on ice. We turned them over to the ship's refrigerator on the way home. They had become old friends and we were anxious to eat them when we got home. In New York we were met by Jack's sister Kathleen. We carefully turned our grouse over to her for safekeeping while we went through customs — I remember they weren't looking too good. When we next saw

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Kathleen, she didn't have the grouse. She said the odor was more than she could stand and had thrown them off the dock, much to our disappointment.

As for the boat trip home, the top professional wrestler of the world, whose name I can't remember, was aboard. He had beaten Jim Londos of South Africa. This man was a Dutch wrestler, an enormous man. He worked out everyday in the ship's gymnasium. Jack and I used to go down there every day to do little work ourselves. Jack became acquainted with this fellow. I had wrestled on the Choate wrestling team and I had also wrestled on the freshman team at Princeton. I guess I weighed about 175 pounds and wasn't in too bad shape. This man had some trouble finding anybody to wrestle with him. He had been wrestling one of the ship's cooks, but apparently he wasn't very satisfied. Unbeknown

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to me, Jack gave him a greatly exaggerated account of my wrestling career, and arranged to have me wrestle him. When I went to the gym the next day I had no choice but to wrestle him. From then on, I wrestled this guy every day and, thank God, the crossing wasn't very long. I couldn't move him. I mean, when we got in a wrestling position on the mat, I couldn't move him at all. However, he could do whatever he wanted with me. It was just not a wrestling match, the guy must have weighed 280 pounds. Nothing gave Jack more pleasure than these matches.

SOHIER: Going back to this enormous house in England and the gentleman whom I think you said owned Haig and Haig — I was brought up in Boston on the story that Ambassador Kennedy had swung the Haig and Haig concession in the United States while he was Ambassador and

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this was cited, by people not very friendly to Irish Catholics, as being a sort of typical thing the Ambassador did. It sounds as if he knew the man who owned Haig and Haig long before he was Ambassador.

BILLINGS: Mr. Kennedy already owned Somerset Importers [Ltd.] of Haig and Haig long before we went to Europe. He certainly did not make the Haig deal when he was Ambassador.

SOHIER: In other words, he already owned the concession.

BILLINGS: Yes. He already owned Somerset Importers and that's why Mr. Kennedy knew Sir James.

SOHIER: I'm certain the record is established on this, but I think this raised another thing, which is perhaps a slight digression, and that is the kind of

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hostile things that were said about Mr. Kennedy. Did you run into any particularly memorable hostility toward him during this period?

BILLINGS: Mr. Kennedy wasn't really very well known then in Europe because he hadn't been Ambassador, and so I don't think anybody had even heard of us over there. I don't remember anybody ever having discussed Mr. Kennedy during the whole time in Europe, with, of course, the exception of his friend, Sir James.

SOHIER: Except I guess in Rome....

BILLINGS: Except there, yes. Aside from that we had very few entrees. We didn't have them certainly anywhere else except in Rome, and Ambassador Kenedy did know Ambassador [William C] Bullitt, who wasn't in Paris during our visit.

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SOHIER: While we're talking about Mr. Kennedy as Ambassador, I guess you never visited there while he was Ambassador. Have you some comments about the whole era?

BILLINGS: I do only because I, of course, talked with Jack a lot about it. I certainly heard a lot of what was going on over there. Actually, it was a period during which I would guess any ambassador would have been popular in London, because they obviously needed our help during this period and knew they were going to need it more. Mr. Kennedy, although being probably the first American of Irish descent who had been Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, was exceedingly popular in the beginning and he became a very close and fast friend, for instance, of the King [George V] and Queen [Elizabeth]. He was a great admirer of Queen Elizabeth (the present Queen

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Mother) and thought she was one of the most capable, charming women whom he'd ever met. I heard him say this time and time again. I know that until the time had the differences with [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, he was a very popular ambassador. I think later on he wasn't popular because obviously he did tell what his views were and his views, of course, were not popular with the English. They were views that did not go along with what the English wanted, so obviously, he became unpopular. But in the beginning he was exceedingly popular.

SOHIER: Did he have a lack of tact in this?

BILLINGS: No, I don't think I really should get into this because this is sort of historical knowledge. What Mr. Kennedy did and didn't do at the end of his career as Ambassador, and how he felt about going to war

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and everything else, is something that everybody knows and it's on record. I think that he was very sincere and very forthright in his feelings and they weren't feelings that would be popular in England.

SOHIER: From the point of view of Jack Kennedy, was there any interesting reaction or discussion that you had with him on this?

BILLINGS: It is my feeling, and I'm sure I am right, that Jack absolutely disagreed with his father 100 percent.

SOHIER: On the major issue?

BILLINGS: Yes, on the major issue of isolationism.

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TAPE 2 of 3

SOHIER: At the end of the last tape, we were discussing Mr. Kennedy in London. That was probably, and still is, the highest prestige post you can get as ambassador. Was this an important thing to Mr. Kennedy? What did this do for Jack Kennedy, for example, at this point in his life?

BILLINGS: We have already discussed that Mr. Kennedy had felt it was important to move his family out of Boston where there were prejudices against Catholic families. Boston Brahmin families did, even up to the period that we're talking about, show prejudices toward Catholic boys and girls. Mr. Kennedy had certainly experienced this in his day, (it was much more so in his day). He didn't want his children exposed to this.

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He wanted to build as high a platform as possible from which his children could be launched. He wanted them to start out with every possible advantage, advantages that he himself hadn't had. I don't think there's any question about it, the post of the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James's couldn't do anything but help build prestige for the Kennedy family. This might not have been the only reason Mr. Kennedy took it, but I think this was the primary reason. As I've said before, his consideration of his family was always his first thought.

SOHIER: In terms of planning one's life, did Jack Kennedy during this period discuss, even if it was in little bits and pieces, what he thought he was going to do in the future? What was he looking forward to? I realize that he had only finished his freshman year at

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at Harvard, but what was his future in his own eyes at this point?

BILLINGS: This is something that everybody asks and it's awfully hard to answer. Probably Jack didn't know what he was going to do then. I think he did feel very strongly that he was going to go to law school and I think he felt that with a legal education he could move in many directions. I don't really think he had worked out what he was going to do. Certainly, at this period, I know he hadn't.

SOHIER: Let's move through the chronology a bit here. He returned to Harvard in September, 1937, in the spring of 1938 had finished his sophomore year at Harvard, and then in the summer of 1938, he and Joe went to London and I think you went along on that trip. Isn't that so?

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BILLINGS: No, I didn't go. The whole family was over in London then. By that I mean, the younger children were all going to school in Europe and the older children, probably from Eunice on, were attending school in the United States visiting Europe during their summer vacations. Of course, I continued to see Jack throughout that year until he went over to Europe in the summer. He spent Christmas in Palm Beach. He was the only member of the family there, so he had the house to himself. He asked me down. Again, there was the money situation which always plagued me — I couldn't afford to go so he said I could bring any friend along who had a car and could drive me down. Two Princeton friends of mine, Sandy Osborn and Eben Pyne, went down with me — neither of them had met Jack at that time. From that trip they became very close friends.

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As a matter of fact, Jack was an usher in Eben's wedding later.

SOHIER: They closed up the house in Bronxville, did they, during this period and just kept the Palm Beach one going? How did that work, as you remember?

BILLINGS: Well, the Palm Beach one always had a caretaker, so you could go there whenever you wanted to have it opened up. As I recall, I don't think we ever went back to Bronxville after Mr. Kennedy was Ambassador. I think it was sold.

SOHIER: During the 1937-1938 period when he was a sophomore, I presume that, in addition to the Palm Beach visit, you were seeing him as you had before, in other words, on weekends and things of this sort. I think some of the stories you told were perhaps sophomore

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BILLINGS: No, they were his whole college career stories really.

SOHIER: Then, after the summer of 1938, during which he was abroad, he started his junior year at college in September of 1938, and then you may recall he spent the second half of his junior year in Europe. Now I presume again, you weren't along with him on that second half of the year, and I presume, you have nothing in particular to fill in on the story.

BILLINGS: No.

SOHIER: And then, you may recall, in the summer of 1939 he toured a lot of countries, including Poland, Russia, Turkey, and so on; [Torbert H.] Torby Macdonald was along. They lived at the summer house in Cannes;

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the Nazis invaded Poland; and then there was the British liner Athenia business, (sunk by submarine on September 1, 1939). I presume again, that you weren't there and you have nothing specific to add to that.

BILLINGS: No.

SOHIER: And then, in September 1939, he started his senior year at Harvard. One of the notable things, of course, was his thesis — *Appeasement at Munich*, which was published as a book entitled — *Why England Slept*. Maybe we could talk about that a little bit. Why do you think he published it as a book?

BILLINGS: I think we discussed that a little bit before when we got into Arthur Krock. He wrote his thesis, as you know, he graduated, cum laude from Harvard. His thesis had been very well received. Arthur Krock, as we

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discussed, read it and was very impressed with it. He encouraged Jack to rewrite it in book form, which he did. I think this is one of the areas where Arthur Krock was very helpful because he did encourage Jack to do this.

SOHIER: I don't think I asked you last time, but I was thinking of it at the last interview. Was there some feeling on the part of Mr. Kennedy that, if you want to get ahead, you ought to write a book because this is a good way to help you to get into politics, it's good to have a book. I notice Bob Kennedy has written a book. It's something that they've done. Is this a sort of calculated thing?

BILLINGS: To my knowledge, it doesn't come from Mr. Kennedy. I think, perhaps, it came from *Why England Slept*, because *Why England Slept* was a tremendous success

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and certainly put the twenty-one year old boy on the map. I think it is just happenstance. I don't think Mr. Kennedy particularly picked this as something that was part of a formula for success. I don't think Mr. Kennedy worked that way at all. I think he encouraged his children to do the best they could and he didn't have any particular answer as to how this should be done. Jack did write a book, Jack's book was received very favorably, and obviously, Jack got to be better known as a result. From then on, whenever he felt he had something to say he did write a book. I think that Bobby drew from Jack's experience.

SOHIER: Then he graduated in June of 1940, and during this period there were some other rather important things happening. For one, Ambassador Kennedy resigned. Then, Franklin D. Roosevelt's third term issue

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was before the public and young Joe Kennedy took a strong position against that. I guess we've covered this to some extent already. Maybe we'd better move on.

BILLINGS: I don't think I have anything to add there at all.

SOHIER: And then there was the summer at Hyannis Port that has been referred to in one book as being sort of the last summer when they were all together because then there was the war and Joe was killed. I guess [Rosemary Kennedy] Rosemary had already left the family at this point. Is there anything about the summer

of 1940 that you want to fill in? Does it stand out any differently than a lot of the summers that you spent?

BILLINGS: No. I'm sure I was there and it doesn't. It doesn't stand out at all differently,

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because obviously we didn't know that this was our last summer.

SOHIER: Then he went to Stanford, having considered the Yale Law School. Maybe we could talk about this a little bit. Why Stanford? Why Yale Law School?
Joe Junior, I guess, had gone to law school. What did Jack want to be a lawyer?

BILLINGS: First of all, I never knew he considered Yale Law School. It was my understanding he was always all set to go to Harvard Law. I think that he felt that legal training would prepare him for many, many different areas. I think actually, up to the time that President Kennedy died, he regretted very much that he did not have that legal training. I think he felt that it would have stood him in good stead all during his political career.

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SOHIER: Was he thinking of politics at this point? After all, there was a strong strain of politics in the family, with his grandfather [John F. Fitzgerald] Honey Fitz and all. It must have been in his blood wasn't it?

BILLINGS: I think there is only one way to answer that. We know Joe had stated he was going into politics. He was older than Jack when he went into the service and he had had more time to decide what he was going to do. You remember that Jack had only just finished college. All of us were thinking of little else but the war and what part we would play in it. Nobody our age was thinking too much of anything else. I think it's not too difficult to say, knowing Jack Kennedy, that he had all the qualities of a politician. Probably there was nobody

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more suited for political life than he was. That's why I feel strongly as I can feel that, whether Joe had lived or died, Jack Kennedy would've been in politics and would have gone just as far as he went.

SOHIER: You say he had all the qualities of a politician and yet, at that age, one thinks of being political in college or at school as being concerned about

popularity and running for something or another. He wasn't involved in that kind of effort at that age, was he?

BILLINGS: No, he never was and I don't think that's something that is necessary at all at that age. I think what is necessary in a top political career is personality, which he certainly had; intellect, which he certainly had; patience, which goes along with judgement,

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which he certainly had; an understanding of human nature, which he certainly had; and an inquisitive mind, and certainly, there's nobody with a more inquisitive mind than him. He had all the necessary qualifications. There is somebody I know now who has them — that is his brother Teddy, who had the same kind of abilities that Jack Kennedy had in those years. Of course, Teddy's are more matured now. I don't see how these two men could possibly have missed going into political careers.

SOHIER: Didn't he always say that Teddy really had it the most in the family? He's been quoted as having said that.

BILLINGS: Yes, I think he said that from the President's chair, which is rather easy to say. [Laughter]

SOHIER: Then he went off to Stanford after the

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summer of 1940 and you weren't involved in any of that, were you?

BILLINGS: No.

SOHIER: Are there any stories about that? Who was there that would know about the Stanford period? Do you know any of his close friends? Was [Paul B., Jr.] Red Fay involved?

BILLINGS: No, he didn't even know Red Fay at that time. He met him later during the war.

SOHIER: That was after the war, I think.

BILLINGS: I don't know but maybe Torb would know a little bit about it. I know why he went to Stanford, it was because he was trying to fill in his time until he went into the service because he knew, as we all knew, that it was a matter of time before we got into the war.

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SOHIER: Did he like Stanford?

BILLINGS: He was crazy about Stanford.

SOHIER: Why?

BILLINGS: He liked the life at Stanford and he felt he could learn a lot there. He liked the courses. He liked the whole general atmosphere. Again, I can't remember anymore than that. He left Stanford with a feeling that it was a great university and that the short period he spent there was important to him.

SOHIER: I guess the cloud of military service was sort of hovering over all of you at this point, wasn't it?

BILLINGS: It certainly was. I think the thing is that there was certainly no question in our minds in 1940 that we were going to be in war, and we were just

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the age to go.

SOHIER: It was a little difficult to do anything with any degree of commitment....

BILLINGS: Everything was temporary.

SOHIER: Now, I believe, in 1941, after some six months at Stanford, he took a long trip through South America. You were not along on that, were you?

BILLINGS: No.

SOHIER: I guess you have no particular recollection of remarks about that trip?

BILLINGS: No, except he had a good time.

SOHIER: I guess he had a good time about all the time, didn't he, whether he was on a trip or....

BILLINGS: He had the ability of enjoying life.

SOHIER: Was he a moody guy in any way?

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BILLINGS: He certainly wasn't. He wasn't moody in any way and he couldn't bear anybody around who was moody. The one thing Jack Kennedy could not abide, was anybody who was moody. And that doesn't mean that he disliked people who were moody because, God only knows, all his life he was surrounded by moody people. If somebody was moody around him, he'd go to every extreme to get them out of that mood. He'd really work at it. This seems a terribly unselfish thing to do but maybe it wasn't, because he couldn't bear moody people; he worked hard to help them overcome it.

SOHIER: Relate this to yourself because I'm told that you can be moody. Would you get into sort of moods where he'd say, "For God's sake, I'll see you after you're through....?"

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BILLINGS: No, when I might get in moods he wouldn't say, "I'll see you after you're through." He'd get you out of the mood, and he would do it very successfully, by taking your mind off yourself. Certainly, to answer your question, I never remember him being moody himself.

SOHIER: We've discussed a little that you're moody and he snapped you out of it.

BILLINGS: I'm not that moody, but the thing is, through my thirty years with Jack, I suppose, I had moods. Anytime that I was in those moods and had to be around him, instead of just walking off, Jack Kenendy would get me out of these moods. Now, probably through the years, I understood this and, so, I may have taken advantage of him a little. I don't know that I did or didn't, but I always knew Jack would get me out of my moods. I think this was

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an interesting side of his character. Of course, I don't know if he did this with anybody but myself. I suppose he did it with the members of his family, too. I know certain members of his family get moody, and I'm sure he talked them out of it because he knew how to do it.

SOHIER: Jackie was a moody person.

BILLINGS: Well, I was going to say that but don't think right now we should get into his whole marriage. But I think this is important. He did marry a girl who had these ups and downs, and certainly here it was probably more important than any other time in his life. He was living with her and to have her moody really drove him out of his mind. He couldn't stand it. It was the worst thing that could happen to him. He spent a great deal of his time, when she was in these moods, cheering

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her up — and he worked very hard at it.

SOHIER: I think particularly the post-baby period was a very tough time for her, where she really had a reason for her ups and downs.

BILLINGS: And he worked very hard all the time. This was a wonderful thing because, instead of leaving her alone, Jack really worked hard, and I saw him do it and he was awfully good at it.

SOHIER: What would he do? How would he work at it?

BILLINGS: He would change the subject. He'd explain. He understood that she was in a mood. He wouldn't just talk to her about why she was in a mood and wouldn't just talk to her about why she was in a mood and all that. He's been understanding about it. He'd try to think of all the things that were fun. He was bright and

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he knew how to get her mind on others than herself. At least, he always talked me out of it and I saw him talk Jackie out of it many, many times.

SOHIER: Did you ever see him lose his temper on petty things, on sort of personal things, when someone was irritating? He was pretty impatient, wasn't he?

BILLINGS: Yes, I've seen him lose his temper, but it was a very quick temper and one that never was lasting and he never held any grudges and he never sulked. There is nothing wrong with a relationship with somebody who loses his temper fast and a couple of seconds later isn't sore anymore and who, usually, is sorry he lost his temper.

SOHIER: Did he lose his temper a lot or was that sort of a rare thing? I'm making a difference between losing his temper and impatience. He was pretty impatient,

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wasn't he?

BILLINGS: He was impatient and could get irritable about something he felt was irritating. He'd show his irritation. Like his father, he hated anyone do anything he considered stupid.

SOHIER: How would he show it? By tapping his teeth, at meetings, was one way mentioned.

BILLINGS: He could hide his irritation when he had to — but when he didn't have to, his irritation was very obvious. But that was different from losing his temper. I think that you're right. The thing is, he probably was irritated more than he really lost his temper. I remember very seldom in my long life with Jack ever having him really sore and really sore to the point where he would be out of control. In fact, if you asked me when that

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happened, I'd be pressed because I'm not actually sure that he ever was completely out of control that way.

SOHIER: I think this is sort of interesting — these sorts of emotions. I think you go from impatience, maybe, to irritation to loss of temper.

BILLINGS: But I'm not sure that I ever saw him lose his temper. Now that's an incredible thing for me to say, but I cannot put my finger on any time when I can remember him really losing his temper and losing control of himself.

SOHIER: Have you seen Mr. Kennedy, for example, lose his temper?

BILLINGS: Very seldom.

SOHIER: His was what?

BILLINGS: Again, really showing terrific

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withering scorn or irritation.

SOHIER: There wasn't a scene in any sense?

BILLINGS: No. I don't remember Mr. Kennedy losing his temper or raising his voice in temper.

SOHIER: What about emotion? For example, did you ever see him cry about....

BILLINGS: Who, Jack?

SOHIER: Yes. You know some people cry when the "Star Spangled Banner" is played.

BILLINGS: I never saw him cry in my life.

SOHIER: What about his sleeping habits? Was he a nervous sleeper?

BILLINGS: He was a horrible sleeper. I remember the first time that I ever stayed with Jack back during the early days at Choate — we were staying at the

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Cape. I don't know what I did but I remember something woke him up and he screamed, "God damn you, Billings, shut up." Well, I didn't know him so well then and I was furious. I was even considering leaving, because I couldn't stay in the house with anybody who talked to me that way. [Laughter] I was really fed up but this was just his way and then he went back to sleep and that was the end of it. He just hated being wakened during the night, and he didn't like to have people in the room who made noises, like snoring, which would wake him up. I think he probably had a hard time getting to sleep.

SOHIER: One gets the impression, from all one reads during the campaign and so on, that he'd get on the plane and "cork-off."

BILLINGS: Naturally, he was terribly tired in

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those days since he was going from dawn to midnight — he certainly slept whenever he had the opportunity. On the plane he'd go to his room and go to bed whenever he could — but usually, he'd have to keep alert and prepare for the next stop.

SOHIER: You know there are people who call themselves day people and people who call themselves night people. Did he get up in the morning and be a bear for activity, or did he start slow and end strong? What sort of a guy was he in that sense?

BILLINGS: I don't remember ever lying in bed in the daytime. So, I'd say he was up as early as was necessary. I can never remember him lying in bed, ever. On the other hand, he wasn't an early-to-bed guy at night in his whole life. When he became

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President, I remember very well that he went to bed pretty early. I mean at 10 o'clock or 10:30. If you ever went to the White House for dinner, you'd find that, on a normal evening, the President would go to bed at 10 o'clock or 10:30, but I also know that, when he went to bed, he didn't really go to sleep. He would lay in bed and read and watch television.

SOHIER: I was wondering about that.

BILLINGS: But he wasn't asleep. He was reading or he was playing the victrola or he was just relaxing. I'm talking about when he was President now.

SOHIER: That's all right. Let's take this particular thing all the way through.

BILLINGS: I'm sure that when he was married, he and Jackie were playing the victrola, but before he was

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married, he wasn't an early-to-bed guy. I never remember him that way, and he wasn't a late-to-bed guy. I think he was just a guy who got as much sleep as a normal man needs. But he wasn't terribly excited about bed.

SOHIER: There are guys who say they only get five or six hours of sleep....

BILLINGS: No, it wasn't that. I think he got whatever sleep is needed by the normal human body.

SOHIER: Now we're through with a trip he took to South America, looking at this chronologically, and then in 1941, he, as I guess you, with this cloud of military service over you, entered the military service. I read a book the other day that indicated that he tried to get in the Air Corps and then he thought of getting in the Army infantry, but that his back, at this point, was

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a real problem, and that he took five months of exercise and ultimately got a Navy commission. What about all of this?

BILLINGS: I don't remember all of this, but my feeling would be that Jack Kennedy always wanted to go in the Navy. He was strictly a Navy man. I don't think he would ever have wanted to go in the infantry and I don't remember his ever talking about that. He could have possibly wanted to go into the Air Corps but it would have been the Navy Air Corps. He was strictly a Navy man. There would be no question in my mind that there was no other service in which he would have had any interest in whatsoever.

SOHIER: Why is that?

BILLINGS: Because of his tremendous interest in

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the sea which goes back to his childhood. He was an exceptionally good sailor. He was raised on boats in Hyannis Port. He was very successful in his sailing of three different kinds of boats owned by the Kennedy family — the junior one-designed, the senior one-designed, and the Star Boat. He had a great feeling for the sea, and I think that this was reflected in his different collections gathered together while he was in the White House. One was scrimshaw, which, of course, is the creative work done by whalers during the many, many months they spend at sea. It's a very substantial collection. Another was his collection of ship models of famous ships. Another was his great interest in nautical paintings. Jack Kennedy was a man of the sea. I can't conceive of Jack Kennedy going into any other branch of service. It's

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possible that his first choice might have been the Navy Air Corps, but he never would have gone into another service.

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END OF TAPE 3 OF 3

SOHIER: Jack Kennedy got a Navy commission. How did this come about? I read that, in order to be able to get into the Navy and so on a lot of influence was required.

BILLINGS: Well, I don't think that Jack Kennedy actually needed influence to get into the Navy because they were looking for Navy officers in 1941. They certainly didn't have enough from the regular Navy, and they needed reserve officers. Those who volunteered and asked for commissions were screened carefully and those who qualified were given commissions. I don't think there was any question that Jack Kennedy qualified. He had a terrific background in boat experience. He had

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only one problem of his bad back, which probably made it difficult to pass his physical examination. He wasn't happy with the branch of the Navy in which he first found himself. He had a desk job in intelligence. He certainly didn't ask for that branch. Presumably, he was not able to get into [Patrol Torpedo boats] P.T.s at first because of his back.

SOHIER: The story that has been written up is that, first of all he had difficulty getting into the service...

BILLINGS: Because of his back.

SOHIER: ...because of his back, and that he worked at his back for sometime. I guess this is all something you don't have any personal knowledge about?

BILLINGS: No, I really don't, or I just don't

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remember, except I know his draft number was one of the first to come up — and this was when he was still at Stanford. He had to hurry to apply for a Navy commission.

SOHIER: Do you remember whether his back was causing trouble at this time?

BILLINGS: Well, not the kind of trouble that you'd remember. Possibly it was, but it was not important enough to remember.

SOHIER: He got a commission and he got a desk job in Washington in naval intelligence and you, I think, were down there, weren't you, at the same time?

BILLINGS: I'll have to give a little bit of my background as to why I spent some time in Washington. I was working for the Coca-Cola Company after my graduation from Princeton. Of course, I graduated a year earlier

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than Jack did and I had worked for the Coca-Cola Co. through 1941. I had bad eyes so I was not even able to be drafted. At that time they were very strict about eyes. I was, like everybody else our age, terribly concerned about getting into the service. Jack did get in and all the rest of my close friends got in before Pearl Harbor, I was terribly upset. I did leave my job with Coca-Cola, and I spent a great deal of time trying to find out what I could do. During this period, since I lived in Baltimore, I spent a lot of time in Washington. I even tried to get into the government — anything to feel that I was doing something for the war effort. It was a bad period for me.

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BILLINGS: He understood and sympathized about my problem, but at the time, he was pretty much concerned about his own in that he wasn't happy at all in what he was doing.

SOHIER: Where did he live at this point?

BILLINGS: He had a very nice apartment in a brand new building — The Dorchester House on 16th Street. I was down all the time trying to find out what I could do, so I spent a lot of time with him during this period.

SOHIER: What was his feeling then? Was he frustrated? Was he having a good time?

BILLINGS: He was very frustrated. Remember, this was before Pearl Harbor and he had a desk job in the Navy Department building. I mean it just seemed to him a

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waste of time. He wasn't happy at all.

SOHIER: Did he talk about the job at all?

BILLINGS: No, he didn't really. He covered the whole thing by saying he wasn't interested in it. At the time, there was nothing he could do about it. He was very frustrated and unhappy. So was I, so I wasn't listening to his problems, and so I don't really remember them.

SOHIER: I suppose there are a certain number of events that have happened in your lifetime that you remember exactly where you were when they happened. Certainly, President Kennedy's death was one and, I think, certainly in my experience, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death was another; also the Pearl Harbor business was a third and our declaration of war was another. Were you with him

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at that time?

BILLINGS: Yes I was with him on December 7th. I recall it was a Sunday. We had gone down in the morning to find a touch football game and we found one near the Washington Monument. If I may digress a moment, he was a very good, natural athlete with exceptionally fine coordination. Even though he might not have been very strong, he certainly was well-coordinated. He was a good touch football player. On the other hand, I have always been very big and strong. I've been best at such sports as wrestling, crew, football as a lineman. I had never been well-coordinated and was a poor athlete in all sports concerned with the handling of a ball. For instance, I was a bad touch football player. This was often a bone of contention. He wanted to play touch and soft-

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ball, etc., all the time while I didn't. This is an area where we really weren't congenial, although I usually gave in on it. I remember how I particularly disliked to play touch with people I didn't know. On the other hand, there is nothing he liked better on a Sunday than to find a touch game and ask if we could play. One team, of course, would get me — and I wasn't half as good as he was. It didn't take them long to figure this out — I hated that. Anyway, on that particular Sunday

we'd just finished a game and were driving back to his apartment. All of a sudden the news came over his car radio that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

SOHIER: What happened there? Do you remember any reactions, statements, emotions that were shown?

BILLINGS: I just remember it was a terribly
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exciting experience. He was already in the service. I can't remember whether he said he wanted to get into something more active. Again, I was probably thinking of myself so I did not know what he was thinking about. I knew what I wanted to do. I was really upset. So I remember my own feelings, but I don't remember his.

SOHIER: Was he wearing a uniform all the time at this point?

BILLINGS: At that point, of course, he was in clothes to play touch, but as a rule, during this period, Navy men wore their uniforms all around the clock.

SOHIER: How did he like a uniform? He liked good clothes. Did he like that? Was there something in the uniform that appealed to him?

BILLINGS: He looked pretty well in the uniform.

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You know in those days he was very thin and, yes, I think he probably liked it.

SOHIER: He cared how he looked. He cared about clothes, didn't he?

BILLINGS: We did care a lot about clothes and he made a great effort over clothes all his life. He had good taste in clothes. In fact, he had good taste in everything. This may have originated from his deep interest in everything, which included clothes. His keen inquisitiveness, doubtlessly helped his ability to choose well. He was always cultivating his tastes and was willing to change. I often argued with him because I always felt I had better taste than he did. Just as I always felt that I had a better voice than he did, and I did, because Jack Kennedy could never carry a tune. He

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He had absolutely no idea how to keep a tune and, if he'd sing a song, you wouldn't even know what the song was. This is true of the entire Kennedy family. There isn't anybody in the whole family who can carry a tune, and he was like the rest.

SOHIER: Mr. Kennedy loves music. He used to listen to symphonies by the hour, didn't he?

BILLINGS: I've heard this, but I've never seen a great collection of recordings at any of the houses. Mrs. Kennedy can play the piano — but none of them can keep a tune. I don't want to get into it now but later I do want to talk about his ability to paint.

SOHIER: We were on the subject of clothes. For example, you couldn't afford the sort of tailored clothes that I guess he had, could you?

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BILLINGS: I always felt that Jack had good taste. He was always a very conservative dresser, even when he was at Choate. Actually, it wasn't until he was out of college that he purchased expensive clothes. I remember through the years most of his clothes were bought at a haberdasher who had stores in both Hyannis and Cambridge. I can't think of the name of that store. Unlike so many of the boys at Choate, he seldom bought custom made clothes. Later when he went to Harvard, instead of going to J. Press or Chipp or some of those, he went to a tailor named Riccio. This was a sort of off-beat tailor in Cambridge who was cheaper. In other words, he wasn't interested in going to popular tailors just because everybody else did.

SOHIER: He didn't buy a shirt with just plain old buttons like you and I have on today. I mean weren't

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there cufflinks....

BILLINGS: Are you kidding? It wasn't until he was President of the United States that he began worrying about custom made shirts. He never even had a custom made shirt before that. I think Peter Lawford got him started on it by buying him a whole lot of custom shirts at Dellons in New York. This is 1961.

SOHIER: And the little monogram....

BILLINGS: That was all Peter Lawford. It had nothing to do with Jack Kennedy. He got him on that kick. He never did that before. He wore the same kind of ready-made shirts we all wear. I remember, after we got older, he'd try to tell me how I should dress. He said we should never wear button-downs. I had always worn button-downs and he'd always work button-downs, but there

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was a certain time when suddenly he told me it was juvenile and we looked stupid in button-downs and we shouldn't wear them anymore.

SOHIER: Well, didn't you give him a hard time on that? You don't have one on today.

BILLINGS: Yes, but I'm forty-seven. I'm talking about when we were...I don't know what age. It was at a certain age when he felt that button-downs were juvenile and we shouldn't wear them anymore. What arguments I gave him are not important. He felt that coats should never have a split vent in the back — this also was juvenile. Two side vents were beyond belief, but even a split vent in the back was absolutely out with him and he tried to convince me on that. If you were to look at my clothes now, probably half of them are one way and half are another.

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SOHIER: I don't think any of the Kennedys ever wore a white dinner jacket, did they, in the evening? Was there a real antipathy to that?

BILLINGS: There was an antipathy toward white evening coats, but I thought everybody had that! I didn't think it was just Jack Kennedy. [Laughter]

SOHIER: What other things about clothes stand out? This isn't a big thing but it's interesting.

BILLINGS: I remember that he had very strong feelings about clothes, particularly where friends he knew well were concerned. If I ever dressed any way that he thought was not as it should be, he'd tell me. I remember in Nashville, where I spent the period 1948 through 1951, everyone down there wore a rather wide necktie knot — I think it's called a Duke of Kent knot.

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I began tying my neckties that way. As soon as he saw this he raised hell about it.

SOHIER: Was this humor or was this strong feeling?

BILLINGS: No, it wasn't humor. It was strong feeling. He thought this was very corny. He felt strongly about clothes, at least with me. If I wore things that he really thought were corny, he'd be very quick to tell me.

SOHIER: Why do you think he was? Was this because he thought you weren't making a very good picture of yourself?

BILLINGS: Perhaps — but I think he was just trying to be helpful. I don't know. If you have a very strong feeling about something like that, don't you tell your friends and want them to do the same thing? I don't

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know, but I suppose that was it.

SOHIER: What about women's clothes? Did he have any feelings about that?
BILLINGS: Well, I was surprised at how much he knew about women's clothes. Of course, this was only after he was married — before his marriage he never had any interest in women's clothes. He did have something to say about every single thing that Jackie wore and I think he had an awful lot of influence on Jackie's clothes. You know, it's a funny thing, he really had definite ideas about what she should wear and I'd say that a hell of a lot of the time he was right. He really was, and I think Jackie will say the same thing. He was just terribly good in his judgement on what was right for Jackie. The thing is that Jack just developed very good taste some-

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where along the line.

SOHIER: While we're on Jackie's clothes, we might as well stay with it. There was the [Oleg] Cassini style, which she liked....

BILLINGS: Well, it wasn't Cassini at all, as everybody knows — it was Jackie. Cassini happened to be somebody whom Jackie knew and somebody who was perfectly happy to have Jackie tell him exactly how she wanted things. Also, he liked the same simple lines which she liked. The clothes that Cassini made for Jackie were Jackie's concept of what she wanted to wear. She would go through the fashion magazines for ideas. She knew what she wanted. She'd draw things. She'd ask for cloth, and he'd send her hundreds and hundreds of swatches. I don't know why we're getting on the subject of Jackie.

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SOHIER: Well, I think it's sort of interesting.

BILLINGS: To sum it up Jackie actually designed her own clothes.

SOHIER: What I'm leading up to is that the Cassini relationship caused a certain embarrassment in that his brother had some real difficulties with the law. Did the President get involved in this? Was he embarrassed over this phase of the thing?

BILLINGS: The President had a tremendous feeling of loyalty. Cassini was somebody the President liked. I'm talking about Oleg. Oleg was very entertaining. I'm talking about the White House period now. The President was not able to go out and see people himself as he had in the years before the White House. There, by necessity, his friendships and contacts were limited. His periods

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of relaxation were hard to come by. He liked to know what was going on in the world — all the gossip about people in general. Oleg Cassini happens to be a very entertaining fellow who knows everything that's going on in cafe society, etc. The President found his stories amusing, and Oleg told them well.

SOHIER: He's a very funny guy. And he always had a terrific looking babe along.

BILLINGS: He always had a pretty girl. Jackie and Jack always had him down and it was fun for the President as well as Jackie. This was an acquaintance of long standing whom the President had known rather vaguely through the years. He was around a lot during the White House years because of his ability to tell entertaining stories and because he helped Jackie with her clothes.

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However, it was even more than that, I've seen Oleg Cassini with the President's father, after Mr. Kennedy had his stroke. Oleg was one of the few people who had the talent to keep him amused.

SOHIER: I raise this because we were talking about clothes and he was a man who turned out in a certain way to be problem to have around because of his brother's difficulties. His brother ran at first what I guess you'd call a gossip column or a society column; secondly, he was indicted and convicted. How did the President react to this?

BILLINGS: I think Oleg was very good about it. He never asked the President to get involved with it and the President never did.

SOHIER: In other words, there was no effort to

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intercede, or any of that sort of thing?

BILLINGS: Even had Oleg asked — the President would not have interceded, but it wasn't asked of him.

SOHIER: Did you note that the President's relationship to Oleg Cassini changed because of the difficulties his brother was having?

BILLINGS: There was no reason for the relationship to change.

SOHIER: We've wandered a long way from 1941 and 1942 in Washington when Jack Kennedy was in Navy intelligence at a desk job in Washington, and you were there a lot of the time. We have just talked about Pearl Harbor, as you remember. Then I think he went down to Charleston, West Virginia for a while. Isn't that so?

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BILLINGS: Charleston, South Carolina.

SOHIER: Oh, Charleston, South Carolina. What's interesting about that? I think you went down there.

BILLINGS: Again, I had left my job and was trying to find an outlet for my militaristic ambitions. I had finally found what I wanted to do — the American Field Service, which, at that time, seemed to answer my problem. However, there was a period of mch waiting to go overseas. I was constantly on the alert to be shipped out. My brother was married in Nashville in 1942 so I went over to visit Jack in Charleston after my brother's wedding. I saw his life down there. It was the same kind of frustrating life he had led in Washington with just a different locale. He wasn't happy at all. His job, as I remember, was still Navy intelligence, but now he was

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working with the defense factories, etc. While I was visiting him he had to make a speech to factory workers on the subject of incendiary bombs. He wasn't overly thrilled about the incendiary bomb and I don't think he had much knowledge regarding the subject, but he was supposed to be the pro on it. There were about 400 people attending his lecture. This is the first speech, in my memory, that he ever made. He may have made others before but this was the first one I heard.

SOHIER: You didn't have sort of a public speaking class in school?

BILLINGS: Yes, we did, but we both avoided it at Choate. Public speaking was compulsory but not if you joined the Dramatic Club. In my case it was to avoid public speaking. I don't know whether that was the reason

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he joined.

SOHIER: Did he have some dramatic roles in the play?

BILLINGS: Very unimportant ones. We both were in sort of choruses and things like that. In those days it was always Gilbert and Sullivan. We would be the “gentlemen from Japan” or the “beefeaters” standing in the background with spears, etc.

SOHIER: So, he really did avoid public speaking entirely at school and did the Gilbert and Sullivan kind of thing?

BILLINGS: Back to his speech in Charleston, he gave a very acceptable talk about incendiary bombs. As I recall, there were two kinds of incendiary bombs and he was sort of talking about how to extinguish each. When

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he was all finished, I was very pleased and proud and I thought he had done a terrific job, but I think he then made a rather bad mistake. I'm sure he learned at that meeting that one doesn't ask if there are any questions if one doesn't know one's subject better than he knew that one — with great confidence he asked his audience if they had any questions. The first question was: “Ensign Kennedy, I don't quite understand how we, if we're in the factory, can know the difference between one kind of incendiary bomb versus another.” Without any hesitation, Jack immediately said, “That's the most intelligent kind of question and I'm so glad that you are giving the whole subject a lot of thought. We are bringing down in two weeks a specialist who is looking forward to answering that kind of question.”

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SOHIER: Which, of course, was a complete fabrication?

BILLINGS: Yes. But that was quick thinking, [Laughter] and then he moved right out of the meeting. [Laughter]

SOHIER: Was there anything else about his time at Charleston that sticks in your memory? I guess you spent a couple of weekends there?

BILLINGS: Yes, I made two visits down there, but I don't recall the circumstances of the second trip. Anyways, I remember clearly he hated his duty there. Of course, this was after Pearl Harbor. Very shortly afterwards he did get assigned to PT boats, in which he did so well. His background in the water and everything made him one of the truly great PT boat skippers. He very

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quickly showed that this was the area in which he could excel.

SOHIER: Let's cover the chronology again a little bit. Late in 1942, I believe, he went to PT boat school. He got out of Navy intelligence, and I think, at that point, there was some use of the influence of his father and so on to get into a combat unit of the Navy. Do you know anything about that?

BILLINGS: That's probably true. I'm sure he used whatever it took to get him into PTs.

SOHIER: But you don't have any personal knowledge of this because I think in June of 1942 you went off to Africa in the Field Service.

BILLINGS: That's right, and I don't actually know when he got into PTs. I did go off and then, of

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course, I just have letters as to what was going on from then on.

SOHIER: You did write each other quite often during the war years, didn't you?

BILLINGS: Yes. As a matter of fact, we wrote each other a lot during our younger days. Of course, Jack never wrote any personal letters in his later years. He always used the telephone. I have about 175 letters from Jack. I don't know why, but for some reason, I kept them all. They are all in my safe deposit. I intend to leave them to the [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] J.F.K. Library.

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