

Vel R. Phillips Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 1/13/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Vel R. Phillips

Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey

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Biographical Note

Vel R. Phillips was a member of the Milwaukee Common Council from 1956 to 1961, a member of the Democratic National Committee from 1958 to 1964, and a worker for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in Wisconsin. This interview focuses on the 1960 primary campaign in Wisconsin and Phillips attending a NAACP meeting with John F. Kennedy, among other topics.

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Interviewed by: Charles Morrissey

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Vel R. Phillips– JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Discussing the Jury Trial Amendment with JFK
2	Deciding to support JFK's campaign
3	Pushback from Hubert Humphrey's supporters
4	Hosting a tea for Rose Kennedy
5	Work on JFK's campaign
6	Having the same suit as Jacqueline Kennedy
7	Going to an NAACP meeting with JFK
9	JFK's speech at a NAACP meeting

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. VEL PHILLIPS

January 13, 1966
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: I know that you campaigned for John Kennedy in 1960, but I don't know how you happened to become a supporter of John Kennedy. Could you tell me?

PHILLIPS: Well, as it turns out, I had occasion to tell this story as recently as last evening. Senator John Kennedy came to our state to help out now Senator Proxmire [William Proxmire] in the election... Well, that was the election, of course, the seat that was vacated by Senator McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy]. This was in 1956. I had just been elected a member of the Milwaukee city council. And Marge Benson [Margaret Benson] called and asked if I would come to the luncheon. I told her I didn't think so simply because I had been such a real fan of John Kennedy's -- I thought he was just a vibrant, wonderful new face, and I had been so disappointed when he had failed to get the vice presidential nomination -- but I was very disappointed at his vote on the Jury Trial Amendment. And so I said to Mrs. Benson, "I don't think so." I said, "He let me down on that vote on the Jury Trial Amendment. I just don't think I want to come." She said, "Well, anyway, you're still for 'Prox.'" And I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I think you ought to come." I said, "Well, I'll think about it."

So then, of course, I came. As it turned out, I sat at the speaker's table. It wasn't a big luncheon, and there weren't many of us at the speaker's table. But he had a habit of calling everyone's name, you know, at the speaker's table and that sort of thing. And afterwards, I

was going to leave, and he spoke. I turned and I said, "You know, I have been a great fan of yours, and I was extremely disappointed that you did not get the vice presidential nomination, but I might as well tell you frankly I was very disappointed at your vote on the Jury Trial Amendment. I just couldn't understand it; I didn't like it." And there were many people around. And he said, "Oh, Mrs. Phillips" -- because he remembered, he had to have these names before him when he got up and addressed the group. So he said, "Well, Mrs. Phillips, if you have a moment I'd like to explain that to you." So I said, "Well, yes, I'll take a moment." So we went away, sort of stepped aside there at the hotel. There were a couple of chairs there. We must

[-1 -]

have sat there for all fifteen minutes, I think. And people were rushing about, and they were telling him the plane had to go and different things like that. And with all of that hustle and bustle, he sat down and he never tried to make any excuse for doing what he did or fix it up in any way. He just told me openly and pointedly that he had taken the advice of, and he named the people at the time, and that they were Harvard professors, that he did not have a great deal of experience in the whole minority problem but he was learning; and that, quite frankly, he did have to go on the advice given to him by others, and if he had erred, it was in this way.

And I'll be very honest with you; he was so forthright and so sincere in his statement that it really wouldn't have mattered much, almost, what he said. He said precisely what was, and he said that he would try never again to have to depend on others to advise him in this area. He hoped, by his own experience, he would be able to come up with the right answers and that sort of thing. So I thought, "Well, what can you say when someone is that forthright." So then we parted and all, and after that he sent me a little note which I still have. And we became kind of friends. This was, say, like in the fall, I would imagine, or summer.

But then after that, of course, he sent me his *Profiles in Courage*. Now, of course, many people in Wisconsin who came to know him during the primary -- but mine I really received Christmas of 1956. This was way before. Or '57. Whatever year this was that he came to our state, whether it was '56 or '57. I'm not sure, but whatever it was that he came to the state to help Proxmire campaign for that vacancy, the late Senator McCarthy's vacancy, this is when it was. It seems to me it had to be either late '56 or late '57.

MORRISSEY: I think it was 1957.

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes, because it was before I was elected to the National Committee. And you see, we got to know each other. We talked on the phone a couple of times. So by the time I was elected to the National Committee, which was in June, 1958, I think he thought, "Well, I have a friend. That's one person I have some contact with," because after that we...

MORRISSEY: Had any of Hubert Humphrey's [Hubert H. Humphrey] supporters asked you to campaign for him?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes, because you see, I have known Hubert Humphrey longer, in a sense. He has sort of been like our Senator, you know, next door. And, of course, he has been at the forefront of liberal causes for a good many years. So, therefore, all the people who are knowledgeable in government and political affairs and civil rights knew and had known for many years that Hubert Humphrey

[-2-]

was our friend.

It was a very difficult thing, to be honest with you. Because, as I said, when I came home from that luncheon, I told my husband about and how... And he teased me for a bit. He said he wasn't sure that the answer was -- he thought the answer was forthright and the whole thing was very wonderful, but he also felt that the way he combed his hair had a great deal to do with it. [Laughter] So in any event we did -- we got to be good friends. This is, say, between '57 and '60. But I had, you know -- as soon as I was elected to the city council, it seems to me, and even before that, I knew Hubert Humphrey and that sort of thing. So when the time came for me actually to make a choice, I must say, it was a difficult one, and not because Senator Kennedy wasn't all the things that he was, but it was because I had known Hubert Humphrey for so long and had such great respect for him. However, I felt that if we could get the White House back, you know, if we Democrats were fortunate, could be that fortunate, it would have to be with someone that had the vibrant and, well, the Kennedy flavor. It's a hard thing to describe. But I thought we needed all of that to do it.

The interesting thing was when Frank Wallick [Franklin Wallick] was chosen or asked, I think by the state chairman, who was Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey] at the time, to head the drive for Humphrey, to gather the forces, and to, you know, do everything for Humphrey. And Frank Wallick and his wife, Ruth [Ruth Wallick], were very dear friends -- and still are -- of ours, Dale [Dale Phillips] and myself. And Frank had played a very big role in my election to the National Committee in 1958. It was tremendous to have to, you know, in view of his allegiance there, to come out for John F. Kennedy, but I did so. [And I never shall forget at Christmas time I ran into Frank Wallick at the bookstore, and he wouldn't speak to me. He sent me a telegram which was not a nice telegram, and he wouldn't speak to me.] It was a rather trying time. And then when President Kennedy, well, Senator Kennedy then, came to Wisconsin to make the announcement that he would enter the primary in January, I sent -- I'll just never forget because I wasn't able to be there. Oh, something was happening at City Hall and at the time, well, people were thinking that maybe I spent more time with partisan politics and that sort of thing, so I couldn't give up whatever it was at City Hall, and I couldn't be at the Pfister. But, in any event, when I did get there, the announcement had been made and most of the hullabaloo and shouting and all was over. And the strangest thing, I felt so depressed because I wasn't able to be there and wanted so much to be there.

And the first person who said any word to me in that lobby was Senator Kennedy. He saw me when I came in, and he walked right over, and he said, "Oh, Vel, it is so good to see

you.” He said, “I’m so glad you were able to come.” And I said, “Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t have been here sooner.” He

[-3-]

said, “I just want you to know how very much I appreciate what you’ve done in your coming out and endorsing my candidacy. I know that you have done so under a great deal of pressure and strain, and Pat has told me some of the things, personally, that you have had to go through. And I want you to know how much I appreciate it.” And I felt like, oh, just like really -- you know how it is when you’re feeling blue, and you come home, and your mother says, “What happened? What’s the matter?” Well, you feel just like sobbing. And I said, “Well, think nothing of it. I know that you’re going to do all that we all know that you can do.” And so he said, “Why don’t you go up.” He said, “Jackie’s upstairs in room such and such, and they’re just sort of, you know, girl talk.” I said, “Yes, girl talk.” He said, “Go up and see them.” And I said, “All right” so I went up and joined Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and Mrs. Lucey, and we had a lot of fun, talked back and forth. He was always such a gentleman at all times and so really aware of all the things that you would expect a gentleman to be aware of but maybe but not someone like himself who had so many things on his mind.

The interesting thing is I suppose Pat had told him about Frank and the fact that he wouldn’t speak to me and that he sent me the telegram. But, even worse, Humphrey had a friend, Newman -- he’s a newspaperman -- who lived in Minneapolis, who I saw not too long ago. He had him to call me, and several other people to call me and said, “What happened and why? We need your help. Do you think Dale then will be on the Humphrey...?” and that sort of thing, and “Maybe that would help.” And Dale and I talked about it, and he felt that, since I was the one who was in the forefront in partisan politics and I was a National Committeewoman and I had made a decision, that he wasn’t going to water it down by being on some other side because that would be not altogether cricket. So we just felt that we wouldn’t do that. That was the way we had made the decision.

My mother was a little upset, you know, during that whole thing. It was a most upsetting time. It was my first time, my second time around, my first time coming up for reelection. And many people thought that I had perhaps just been elected on kind of a, you know, quirk, and that because I was a lawyer, perhaps people had thought that I was a boy, a man, or something, and the name, Vel, doesn’t really say. So they thought it was all a big accident. And I was really, I’d say, a nervous campaigner. Then Jackie Robinson came to the state and campaigned for Hubert Humphrey, and my mother puts Jackie Robinson just about next to God. So then she was very disgusted with me.

But meanwhile we kept right on keeping on, and it was a wonderful experience. As I was saying to you on the way over, I had a breakfast for Mrs. Kennedy [Rose Kennedy], and she came to my home. I’ll never forget it, as a matter of fact, because we couldn’t -- I was supposed not to host it, but

[-4-]

Hubert Humphrey had cleaned up just about everybody. And we felt that a certain -- well, I don't know how to put it, but we wanted someone to have it who had real respect in the community. We just didn't want, you know -- it wasn't that we were being snobbish, but we wanted someone who was held in high esteem in the community to host this brunch. And most of those people had been snared, you see, by either -- if they hadn't been gotten by Hubert himself, they were certainly taken by Jackie Robinson. And so we didn't want me, not because -- I hope not because -- I wasn't held in high esteem, but because I'm so partisan, you see. I was -- what would you call it? -- so close to it politically. We were hoping to take it out of that, but when we couldn't, I said, well, I would do it because they didn't want to get someone who didn't have any right -- whatever.

So I had it at my small apartment. And there were loads of people there, and Mrs. Kennedy talked to all of us and told everybody what he was like when he was a little boy. I remember she said she didn't have to spank him much and things like that that made everyone -- they were all glad they came. Of course, after he got to be president, then there were those people who would call me and say, "Oh, and just think, I didn't get to that breakfast that day," you know, but that's always the way it is. In any event, we talked and we took pictures, and there was a nice picture in the local paper of Mrs. Rose Kennedy and myself. And then, after that, I received a very nice note, personal note, from Jack Kennedy thanking me for having his mother and that sort of thing, which I thought was very nice. He never forgot those little things. Of course, even if you knew, maybe, that Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] remembered it, it was just the same.

MORRISSEY: What else did you do on his behalf during that campaign?

PHILLIPS: Oh, we did many things. We had, oh, all kinds of rallies. I remember Ralph Metcalfe came up from Chicago and, of course, Mrs. Lawson [Marjorie McKenzie Lawson] came and helped get things going. And we went door to door. Oh, we had all kinds of.... As a matter of fact, he came once to a hotel -- I can't remember exactly when this was, but the reason I remember it so vividly.... Oh, no, this was before he announced in January, so this would, say, be sometime in December. Now he announced in January of '60. Right?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

PHILLIPS: So this would be some time in December or November when he was in Milwaukee, in December or November, or sometime in '59. And the people wanted some pictures of the two of us together. So I took a picture with

[-5-]

him, and I shan't forget this because I had on a suit that was kind of a black and white, a very nice suit. It was one of those suits that I had thought, "Well, it may cost a little more, but I'll probably get a lot of good wear out of it and make up for it," and I just went ahead and

bought it. But when we sat down (you know how photographers are), he said, "Well, you have to get closer together." Now, he told me -- the Senator, he hadn't even announced. So we got closer together. Of course, always -- at least I am and I am sure the other person is, too, they're somewhat embarrassed because you have to be so close to a person that you aren't really -- you know, and all. So he said to me at the time, he said, "I like that suit, Vel. You look very nice in it." So, of course, you think that he is saying that because what else are you going to say. And I said, "Well, thank you." He said, "You know, Jackie has one just like that." And I said, "Oh, really?" And he said, "Exactly like that, with the same black whatever-you-call-that around there." I said, "Well, thank you very much. I hope she enjoys it." But deep down in, I thought, "Well, I'm sure she hasn't."

And when we went home -- I was with Pat and Jean Lucey because they were with him, of course -- and we went home and I said to Pat, I said, "You know, Pat, he said that he liked this suit, and that Jackie has one like it." And I said, "I'm sure he just said that." So Pat, being a man, of course, said, "Yes, he probably just said that." But Jean said, "Well, I don't know. I don't know. With all the money you pay for your clothes, you're so extravagant." And I'm not really extravagant at all. But she was just using that to give me a hard time. In any event, I didn't think any more of it until in January, when I came to the Pfister Hotel and after he thanked me and told me to go up to -- he said, "Jackie's upstairs," -- well, when I went upstairs to their room, she said to me, "Well, I understand that we have a suit alike." And I said, "Yes." I said, "I didn't really believe..." She said, "You know, I had a feeling you wouldn't, so therefore I brought mine." She went into the closet and brought this suit out, and it was the same suit, designed by the same designer. And I said, "Well, I'll be..." And of course, I still have mine; she's probably has long since thrown hers away. But I'm still getting all the money out of it, seeing as I can't throw it away. But, of course, it has a special kind of -- every time I see it, I think about that. You know, I can't help but think about it. And he liked it, he said, "I like that suit." So, I guess he just didn't bother to say things that he didn't really mean.

There're so many things. One thing in particular that I'd like to tell you about when he came here, but I don't know if you want to get into the time yet when he came back to Wisconsin as President when there are still things that happened in Los Angeles, too.

[-6-]

MORRISSEY: Well, let's take Los Angeles and then maybe we'll have time to get that visit to Milwaukee.

PHILLIPS: I think, if I had to count three times, three things, that I treasure most, this would be one of them. There are three times: this thing that happened in Los Angeles when he was still not president; then the thing that happened the last time I saw him, the thing he said to me the last time I saw him; and then the thing that happened to me when we saw each other when he came to Milwaukee; and maybe the thing that happened when I was at the White House. Four things that, you know, were to me even more meaningful than, even what he said when he thanked me for coming to his, you, endorsing him, or when he told me it was a good-looking suit, or any of those things. They

are all nice little things, but one of the things that kind of gave me a deep insight into him as a person was when we were in Los Angeles. He asked if I would go with him to the meeting, a huge NAACP meeting. He had been briefed on it and he had been invited, along with Lyndon B. Johnson, who was at the time campaigning for president, and all these other people. And he had been kept, shall I say, abreast of what was happening at the meeting. So he asked -- I'm trying to figure out who else he asked. Could it have been Frank Reeves? Was Frank Reeves then the....

MORRISSEY: I think he was a delegate from the District of Columbia.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Had he been elected to the National Committee?

MORRISSEY: I can't recall.

PHILLIPS: He might have been elected already to the National Committee. In any event, he asked if I would go along. I'm sure Frank Reeves was in that car also, but, in any event, I thought it was rather nice to go. There were always been so many people around him, that it was really quite something just to get an opportunity to talk to him along because there were always.... Even when he was a senator, the very first time I came to his office -- oh, by the way, I had to go back to his office for a special trip to make pictures that he used in a brochure that went all over the United States. I was quite proud of it. But there were always a great many people around him. People were always sort of pulling on him and that sort of thing. But in any event, I went down. I was told exactly where and what, his private rooms and everything. And so they still were meeting, and there was a lot going on and it was just hustle and bustle. But I waited very patiently until we were ready to go and it was time to go.

[-7-]

We got in the car; it was a special car. Now I can't remember any other person. There may have been another person with us. Maybe even Mrs. Lawson was with us; I don't think so, though. But in any event, I remember, while we were in the car, he had talked with someone, I think by phone from the car, and they had told him that they had sent for LBJ. LBJ did not come, but a representative of LBJ had come, and they had been just booed right off the stage. And I saw a look come across his face, sort of like.... And then he said, "I'm still not sure," he said out loud, "that it is wise to go." And I said, "Well, we can't ever really be sure, but I would say that we should go." He said, "Well, I think so too. I'm not sure, but I'm going to chance it."

So then when we get there, oh, there were just so many people. Really and truly, I have never seen that many people in one room as in this place, and certainly not that many people, the majority Negroes, together under one roof. And people were trying to pull on what you had. Someone grabbed my shoe to keep it as a souvenir, and oh, it was just like a melee. I've never seen anything like it.

So then he said to me, just before we got in, we were still talking about it, and he said to me, "It would be a very bad thing, Vel...." this was very private. He just looked right at me and he said, "Vel, it would be a very bad thing at this point if I too had to suffer what this -- and they just booed me right out." And I said, "Oh, I know it would," but I couldn't conceive of them doing it. So I said, "They wouldn't do that to you." And he looked at me like, "Well, you would say that because we're friends, and you like me and all, but that's not the same." And you could tell it was a chance.

And when we got in the building, and then we could hear Clarence Mitchell, who was the head of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] addressing this huge audience, and he was telling them, "For God's sake, let your good manners rule," and that "We have invited all of these people here so you can hear them and go away better informed for the good not only of you, but this being covered all over, and we want this to be for everyone's benefit. And we will never be able ever to get them here again if you don't treat.... You don't do that to someone that you've invited to your home, so to speak. He was pleading with them, and Roy Wilkins and all.

And at that moment, Jack Kennedy looked at me and he said, "Vel," and I was still right there, and he said, "I'm afraid." And I just felt like, oh, dear, you know, if you're afraid, and you're maybe going to be the president, you know, I'm afraid too, because there were so many people there. But he said, "I'm afraid." And I just felt, well, I've got to reassure him, so I just gave him a little look and I said, "It's going to be fine, you see. I's going to be alright." And there wasn't any time anyway to do anything else.

[-8 -]

The next thing we knew we were in it. Do you know that the audience started to boo. You could just get like a whisper of it, just like a beginning, just like -- just the first "b." Then he appeared, and it died as though it had never been said. And I always thought to myself later, in recapitulating that, that it's because of how he is and was, that he stood so straight, and he had such real assurance himself, that it was very difficult -- his whole face and expression and everything was always so open -- that it was just difficult to boo a person like that. And so they must have thought to themselves, "Well, LBJ didn't come, he sent someone else. But JFK came and we're not going to do it." And it was just as though it started, then it didn't. And he stood there and started to talk and it was just -- went over like a charm. And then he said to me afterwards, he insisted -- people were pushing and photographers, and he just would always be right there and bring me right up front and seat me and be sure that I was.... He always was just so marvelous like that. Then he gave me a little wink, you know, like, "Everything is going to be fine," afterwards, you know.

MORRISSEY: We're running out of time, but could you tell me about the White House meeting?

PHILLIPS: Now, which one, the one I....

MORRISSEY: You just mentioned one.

PHILLIPS: Well, there were two times, three times really, but the one when I saw him for the last time was the time when another small act of courtesy kind of, to me, showed the makings of how he was which.... Why don't we save them both until when I see you again?

MORRISSEY: Okay. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-9-]