

Fred Gates Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/14/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Fred Gates
Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey
Date of Interview: January 14, 1964
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 5 pages

Biographical Note

(1909 - 1971). Member, Post Office Advisory Board, discusses the 1960 presidential campaign against Hubert H. Humphrey, the 1960 Democratic National Convention, and appointment to the Post Office Advisory Board, among other issues.

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Fred Gates, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, January 14, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Fred Gates

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Fred Gates – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

Fred Gates

January 14, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Mr. Gates, we are interested in your relationship to John F. Kennedy and the Kennedy administration. Could you tell me when you first met Mr. Kennedy?

GATES: I first met Mr. Kennedy when he was a congressman, 1949, in New York when I went into the Stork Club with Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] to have dinner one evening. He was all by himself at the time and Senator Humphrey introduced me to Congressman Kennedy. He wasn't feeling too well. He had just got out of the hospital and he was relaxing and having a sandwich. I was very much impressed with him—the way he was so courteous, so humble and so down-to-earth.

I met him on a number of other occasions but the best recollection I have of meeting the then President Kennedy was in October of 1962 when he came to Minneapolis on one of our Democrat fund-raising rallies. It was on a Saturday night. I brought my wife up to his suite; he was very gracious. He got off his rocking chair, which the hotel had for him to use, and mixed my wife a drink. And then Sunday morning, we went to the 9 Mass at the Basilica in St. Paul and that was the last time that I had the pleasure of going to Mass with the president. And then, on another occasion, when my daughter came to Washington with her Regina tour, which consisted of fifty students and three nuns, he was so gracious to have my daughter bring all the students and the nuns to the inner sanctum of the White House and he had a good twenty-minute visit with them.

The hardest part of this assassination was when I went back home from the funeral and there was a letter from one of the nuns from Holy Angels Academy, a very short note saying: “Dear Mr. Gates: (forgive me; I’m starting to choke already) I have had so many calls from the parents of the children that visited the president when your daughter arranged for us to visit with him that I just can’t leave this go unsaid. Thank you, and we want you to know that all our students and nuns will be praying for the president for years and years to come.”

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MORRISSEY: Do you remember any other incidents or anecdotes that characterize the president as the man you remember him to be?

GATES: Oh, many, many times on TV, his actions, even in a group of people, indicated how gracious and how humble he was: the spirit of joy to see people, the willingness to help, to assist. Never, in any time that I’ve been around the president, whether in a group or individually, has he ever acted beyond the fact that he was a human being—kind and generous humble.

MORRISSEY: Did you lend any political support to the senator when he was a candidate for the presidency?

GATES: I voted for the president as a delegate in California. Naturally, I was close to Senator Humphrey. But I would say one thing: it’s wonderful to be in a country like this where you can fight in primaries, and when it’s all over you’re fighting as a unit and as one man. He’s been very very generous to Senator Humphrey and Senator Humphrey’s friends, and I feel that he believed in a good clean fight and after victory, friendship could return.

I do recall one incident during the primary in Wisconsin. I wasn’t there at the time but Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey were on the Senate floor when Senator Kennedy came over to Senator Humphrey and he had a long discussion with him. This was told to me by Senator Humphrey, oh, about three days later. Kennedy, then senator, told Senator Humphrey, “Hubert, there’s only two people that really have the chance to win this election: it’s I, for one, and you for the other one.” There was much more said there. In the meantime, reporters up in the gallery were just gasping, wondering what the two senators were talking about. I’m sure Senator Humphrey, when you interview him, will give you all that detail of what was said.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall anything about the campaigns of Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy for delegates to the convention in Los Angeles?

GATES: A number of different occasions, yes. I do recall the Wisconsin campaign, how hard we worked, both sides, the Kennedys and the Humphreys. But what really is still close in my mind was the night of

election when Kennedy won the delegates of Wisconsin and then Humphrey and Kennedy met in a newspaper office in Milwaukee and how they greeted one another. Humphrey said, "Well, Jack, we'll get together in West Virginia." At that time I remember Jacqueline Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis]. The crowd was so immense that she was pushed way back in the background, oh, I would say, fifty feet away from her husband. Yet, she stayed all by herself until all

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the pictures and interviews were taken and it was over with. You've got to remember the presidential campaign in Wisconsin was really a rough and tough one, but at no time were there any frictions between Humphrey and Kennedy because they're out waging a political campaign. It was not a personal campaign in Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: Were you a Humphrey backer before the West Virginia primary?

GATES: I've been with Senator Humphrey since 1945. I'm very close to him; in fact, we're closer than brothers. He stays at my home; I stay at his home. We traveled during the senatorial campaign in '48 15,000 miles together. We'd make sandwiches in the car. I would drive and he would drive. We were naturally short of funds but we traveled. We cried on one another's shoulder. But traveling with Senator Humphrey, then Mayor Humphrey, was a great deal of enjoyment and hardship, and I would say tears.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me something about the impact of the results of the West Virginia primary on Senator Humphrey's campaign?

GATES: Well, I think the senator himself can speak more for that than I can. But I do know that after the West Virginia primary, he definitely put the presidential race out of his mind and he stayed neutral. He was even neutral when he went to Los Angeles. He then wanted to have Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], but when Kennedy got the endorsement he was the first to move that Kennedy get the unanimous vote from our delegates.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any other recollections of the convention in Los Angeles which we might put on this tape?

GATES: Well, one recollection was when Senator Kennedy came to our caucus meeting and spoke to our group. In fact the Minnesota group was the only delegate that had a mind of their own. They weren't bullied into giving in to any one candidate. Each and every delegate had their own candidate, and they weren't taking orders from nobody. In fact, some were split for Mr. Stevenson, some were split for Mr. Kennedy, some even had Symington [Stuart Symington II], and I think two or three wanted Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. So our delegation was the only one that had every candidate appear in front of their caucus in California. In fact the Minnesota delegation

at that time was the only delegation in which there was fights going on amongst ourselves. Oh yes, I do recall Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] coming and talking to us. I do recall Bill Rivkin [William R. Rivkin], who was with the Kennedy people at that time, trying to intercede. I recall Sarge Shriver when he came to Minnesota before the delegation met in California. He was at a hotel in St. Paul. He was out seeking delegates at that time,

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and he had a very, very good background on each and every delegate and alternate—what they did, who to see, who they support, who he should see to try and swing them over, and a little notation on each and every one of them that they're either for Kennedy, for Stevenson, adamant against religion. They had the background; they were really well-organized.

MORRISSEY: May I ask how you came to be appointed to this Post Office Advisory Board?

GATES: I sometimes wonder myself, to be honest about it. I didn't know anything about this appointment. I didn't seek it. The only time I knew about it was when friends of mine back home called me up and said, "Gates, I understand you're trying to get a presidential appointment. What kind of friend are you?" I said, "What do you mean by that?" I won't say who they were, but there were a number of them. I had a number of calls saying that the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] was out checking me and then, finally, what happened was I said, "To be honest with you, I don't know what they're checking me for." "Oh," they said, "don't give me that." The first thing the FBI men would tell the person they were questioning, "we have a presidential check on Fred Gates who is getting a presidential appointment."

Even then, I didn't know what I was getting until, oh, I'd say two weeks before I got the appointment, they told me it was on the Advisory Board. I feel this came about after I met the president in October '62 in Minnesota. I presume that he realized that I was a hard worker, a conscientious Democrat, and that he wanted to reward me for all the work I had done for Senator Humphrey for fifteen years. You see, like I said, I was Humphrey's coordinator. Right now, I am also Senator McCarthy's [Eugene J. McCarthy] coordinator. So we're blessed with having two good senators in Minnesota and I'm the coordinator for both.

MORRISSEY: Very good. Could you tell me a little bit about the work that this committee does?

GATES: Well, I'm the newest member on this committee. We've gone to California, for instance, and looked at some work that they're doing for mechanizing the Post Office. We are very much interested in assisting the postmaster general who we are duly responsible to only. We report to him and advise him of our findings. We are very conscientious about this job. We take this like it was something to do with our dollars and cents. If we can help save some money for the Post Office Department, that means we are helping our own budget, our own pocket. The few times I have been with these other members, I've been very much impressed with the other

six members for their willingness to go out of their way to use their time and neglect their business to do the work that could help

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the Post Office and postmaster general.

MORRISSEY: Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion?

GATES: The only thing I could add to this discussion is the fact that we lost a great man. I don't think the family lost the president as a great man but I feel the world lost a man. It's not a personal feeling for the family but a personal feeling for the world. What he wanted to do, what he started to do, I think would be in the minds of our great-great-grandchildren. And I hope, I'm sure, what he started is going to preserve the country for the future. The people of the world lost their son. It wasn't the Kennedy family that lost their husband or son or nephew or uncle. The world lost a great person. God bless him for what he done and I hope that he will live in the minds of the people for eternity. We always pray for him and I'm sure what nationality you are, what religion you believe in—you know that President Jack Kennedy was a man for the world, not for an individual, not for his family.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

GATES: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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