

**Frank E. Dobie Oral History Interview – 5/19/1964**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Dobie, Massachusetts political figure and Kennedy campaign worker (1946), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1946 congressional campaign, JFK's decision to run for the Senate in 1952, and his visits with JFK in the hospital, among other issues.

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# Frank E. Dobie Oral History Transcript

## Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1946 campaign for Congress
4	Election night 1946
6	JFK's decision to run for Senate and subsequent campaign
7	Dobie's visits to JFK in the hospital
9	JFK's bid for presidency
9	Dinner at Sheraton Plaza with President Truman
10	President-elect visit to the Massachusetts State House
11	Dobie's visit to the White House
12	JFK's admirable qualities

Oral History Interview

with

Frank E. Dobie

Boston, Massachusetts

May 19, 1964

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Frank, you had a long association with President Kennedy. It began, I believe on the streets of Charlestown. Could you tell us when you first met him?

DOBIE: Well, I can tell you that in the early spring of '46, I think it was, Billy Sutton [William J. Sutton] invited my wife and me to have breakfast with him on Sunday morning at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. Bill and I had been friends in Charlestown for years. I'd say that's the first time I met him.

MARTIN: Can you tell us a little bit about that breakfast, Frank? Who else was there? Was he alone at the time?

DOBIE: He was alone at the time, and we as I said, my wife and myself and Billy Sutton, talked about the future of the Congressman-to-be. He asked us if we'd get out and sort of do a little campaigning for him.

MARTIN: Did he, at that time, indicate to you that he was going for that particular district over where you were? I mean the Eleventh Congressional District.

DOBIE: Well, all indications showed that he was going to go over there. Being a little bit in politics myself as a young fellow, I hated to give an answer right away. But this

[-1-]

fellow was so charming and sincere and outlined his platform and so forth. I guess it was all over in a minute.

MARTIN: Well, didn't it run across your mind at the time, Frank, that here's a guy, a Harvard-trained war veteran, that had no visible connection with the district coming over there? Do you think it would be pretty difficult to put him across in Charlestown?

DOBIE: Well, I'll tell you the story. Billy and I had campaigned for John Cotter for a couple of years prior to that, and we felt that John wasn't going far after two cracks at it. We thought that we'd get another, a new face, as it were.

MARTIN: And you certainly had a new face in John Kennedy. Did he set up a new type of campaign over there, Frank, something that was apart from how the old pols used to operate? What style was he? Was he a hand-shaker? Was he going to house parties and things like that?

DOBIE: Well, it's a funny thing you brought that up, because when we did get rolling, we had the first house parties in Charlestown. I was very fortunate in being one of the first few. But Jack had, I would say, 90 per cent amateurs.

MARTIN: You mean the people around him?

DOBIE: The people around him: 90 per cent amateurs, and probably the rest of the old pros. This is just my guess.

MARTIN: And yet he was more or less of a neophyte himself. He had to depend on the advice from these amateurs, Frank?

DOBIE: Oh, he did. He did, yes. There was many a meeting we had, plus the fact that we had just organized a VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] Post, a Kennedy post, up there.

MARTIN: Oh, you were a member of that?

DOBIE: Oh, yes, I'm an original member of that. After the meeting of the Post, we used to meet once every two weeks

[-2-]

or so, then the politics would start.

MARTIN: Now, Frank, can you tell us the people that you recall, the names of the people that were in with him in that first Congressional fight, those you'd call close associates? I know there was yourself, you mentioned Billy Sutton.

DOBIE: Billy Sutton and Dave Powers [David F. Powers]. Naturally, Frankie Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey], and ...

MARTIN: Do you remember who was with him, who worked for him, over in the East Boston area?

DOBIE: Joe Rosetti was one fellow member that I remember. But it's been so long ago, and I wouldn't like to slight anybody. I just don't seem to recall.

MARTIN: Well, Frank, you mentioned these house parties, and of course, there was the usual going from door to door and apparently greeting workers coming in and out of that Navy Yard. How about parades now? During his campaign there was the parade over in South Boston on March 17<sup>th</sup> as well as the one in Charlestown on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June.

DOBIE: I'll never be able to forget the parade in South Boston, St. Patrick's Day! I think that was Jack's first parade, I'm not too sure. I'll never forget it due to the fact that the fellow never had a green necktie, and he had to borrow mine. And I'll let you know that I still have that tie.

MARTIN: That's a good memento.

DOBIE: It still makes a good memento is right! Between the 17<sup>th</sup> of June Parades in Charlestown, 17<sup>th</sup> of March in South Boston, the 12<sup>th</sup> of October in East Boston, I was alongside of Jack, one way or the other, with Dave Powers on the other side.

MARTIN: Well, now Frank, do you have any memories of the night that he was elected for his first term in Congress? Was there any kind of celebration then?

[-3-]

DOBIE: Well, I was with Jack riding around to the various offices or stores, headquarters as they were. The big one, as I said, was in Charlestown. His father [Joseph P. Kennedy], and I think Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] were there. It was quite a big celebration, believe me.

MARTIN: What did he do, Frank? Did he come in and personally thank each of the volunteers?

DOBIE: Every one, every one.

MARTIN: Well now, when he went down to Congress that first term, did you have any occasion to become associated with him? Did you go down there at all to visit him?

DOBIE: Well, I was down once to see him. He was quite busy, but I had a very good visit, for, he did take time out, showing me the operation and so forth. But each weekend that he'd come home, he was on the go checking, telephoning, as if he were running the following week.

MARTIN: Was he speaking throughout the State at that time?

DOBIE: Well, then he started to move, yes. He spoke during Communion Breakfasts and to various other organizations at banquets and at labor parties. He was always on the go!

MARTIN: Frank, besides these speeches and other activities when he came up to Boston, was there any occasion when he'd relax?

DOBIE: Well, if he had a little time off, we would go over and watch Bob [Robert F. Kennedy] practice at Harvard. He used to like to throw the football around with Dave Powers and Billy Sutton. That was his biggest relaxation, I'd say. He was quite a football bug, and I should know very well, because throughout the years I'd have to say that he's beaten me in practically every bet we ever had.

MARTIN: He was quite a prognosticator on games, you mean?

DOBIE: Oh, he loved football. I'd say football was his favorite sport.

[-4-]

MARTIN: Did you ever go down to New York with him to see any football?

DOBIE: Oh, yes, I was very fortunate. I used to go down and take in the Army Notre Dame game and the Notre Dame-North Carolina game. I'd be guest of Jack and his family. I would say something about the family: they were very nice to me, and I really appreciate it.

MARTIN: What else do you recall about those visits down to New York, Frank?

DOBIE: Well, after the game we were guests of the Ambassador and Mrs. Kennedy [Rose F. Kennedy] and the entire family. I was down one particular weekend with Johnny Galvin. We were their guests down there. We had



dinner and a night club afterward, the Stork Club and La Pavilion Restaurant. It was quite a thrill from my point of view.

MARTIN: You met the father at this particular dinner you're speaking about, at the Stork Club?

DOBIE: Well, I had met Mr. Kennedy at the start of the campaign, when Jack was first running. A very gracious person, I must say, as well as a very rigorous campaigner. He was a tireless, tireless worker. You'd think he was putting too much in it.

MARTIN: Frank, tell me, as he moved along in his career and announced for the Senate, did you play any prominent role in his Senate fight?

DOBIE: Well, I would say that I was probably with the Kennedys more than I was with my own family because he used to go out every night in the week. Like his father, he too, was a tireless campaigner. And I can recall, because I heard them so often, I used to have many of his speeches memorized.

MARTIN: But in the Senate fight when he announced against Lodge, how did you think he was going to do? Did you think he was tackling a pretty strong opponent?

[-5-]

DOBIE: Well, we had a meeting one night up at the Ritz Carlton. It was up to Jack to decide, and he chose. Quite a few of us wanted him to run for governor figuring that, I think it was, Governor Dever [Paul A. Dever], at that time, was going to step down. But now, he had made up his mind. And, incidentally, I'll put this in, because I just happened to think of it: I have at home his last and big campaign speech against Henry Cabot Lodge, which was given at station WBZ over in Cambridge. I have that at home. I thought I'd just put that in, because I came across that the other night.

MARTIN: Frank, during that Senate fight you traveled around with him. Did he travel by automobile around the state mostly?

DOBIE: I would say almost every night in the week. And I really mean every night in the week. There would be Bob Morey [Robert F. Morey] and...

MARTIN: Bob did the driving?

DOBIE: Bob did the driving, yes. Bob was one of the original men. Bob and Jack would be in the front seat, and there would be Dave Powers, Frank Morrissey and myself in the back seat. And we went from one end of the state to the other.

MARTIN: Well, somebody apparently had to sort of advance these schedules. Do you remember anybody who was out ahead of these trips?

DOBIE: Well, most of that work was done by Morrissey. Many a time, when we'd get there, Morrissey wouldn't be with us, he naturally would be there ahead of us. He was liaison man for all the work.

MARTIN: Frank, after he won that Senate fight, do you recall any incidents about the election night? Was there any celebration then? That was probably his most significant victory, defeating the Lodge family.

[-6-]

DOBIE: Well, they had quite a headquarters, as you know, down there. I think it was in Batterymarch Street. They also had the apartment on Beacon Street. And Jack was there at Beacon Street until he was almost sure of election, and then he made the swing around to all of these different places, especially down to Batterymarch Street where there were hundreds and hundreds of people waiting to greet him.

MARTIN: Frank, after the Senate fight when he went back down to Washington, I would imagine your association remained as close as ever. Did you go down there to meet him, and did he often come up here and look you up?

DOBIE: Of course, in the meantime, as you know, Jack had married, and being down in the Senate, most of his time was spent in Washington. But on each occasion that he returned here, he'd always give us a call, "Let's go." And off we'd go to some sort of speaking engagement.

MARTIN: It was during that period too, Frank, that he took sick; he was sick for some time. Was he ever up hospitalized up around here?

DOBIE: Well, he was quite sick as you know. The biggest time was down in New York. I recall one night that I had called down there, and Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had answered the phone at the hospital. She said it was a touch and go proposition, but that it looked favorable, and thank the Lord, it was.

MARTIN: Well, there were many occasions when his back bothered him during those years.

DOBIE: Well, I can recall one night sitting at home watching television Jack was down in Washington, oh, I'd say around 9:30 in the evening, when I get a call from Jack and he was in the New England Baptist Hospital. Of course, no one knew at the time that he was in town; everyone figured he was down in

Washington. He asked me to come over for a couple of hours and swap a few stories. He used to think that I was quite a storyteller. Let me say that he used to say that. It was then that I first realized

[-7-]

that Jack was in tough shape. I'll say we stayed there, at least I stayed there, until around 4:00 in the morning. The head nurse and myself were cooking up scrambled eggs at 3:30 in the morning. A friend of mine was staying at the hospital at that time, Theresa Murphy, and she was quite sick at the same time in the hospital. When I told Jack that she was there, he arranged to have the nurse take a beautiful vase of roses down to her. Later on she thought it was a gag until she talked with Jack.

MARTIN: Frank, what did you talk about all that time?

DOBIE: Well, Jack would ask a million questions. And whether you knew the answer or not, he always loved to have you give him some sort of opinion. At that time, he was deciding on a title for his book, *Profiles in Courage*. He would give me about seven or eight different titles, and he would ask which one I would think was the best.

MARTIN: Do you remember some of them?

DOBIE: Oh, it's been so long. No, I wouldn't know.

MARTIN: How was his appearance then? Was he obviously in pain?

DOBIE: Well, I would say so although he was the type of fellow that would never let you know. He was in bad shape, but never complained. Never, as long as I knew him, did I ever hear him complain once.

MARTIN: Frank, can you recall anything as the months moved ahead in your association with him? How about traveling with him? What kind of food did he like to eat? What kind of clothes did he like to wear?

DOBIE: Jack was always a very conservative dresser. I recall the time when his father sent over three or four beautiful ties from England, and Jack asked me if I liked one of them. I picked out one and he gave it to me. Later on we were going up to, I think it was Manchester, New Hampshire, and he just couldn't pick out one of his ties. He spotted the one I had on, and he asked me if I would loan it to him. I can say I never saw

[-8-]

that tie again.

MARTIN: Did he ever indicate to you back when you were traveling with him as a Congressman and then as a Senator that he was interested in some day becoming President?

DOBIE: Well, I can say that it was in the back of the head. He never said it; he never said it. But we used to all sort of hint it one way or the other. We would say, this is probably when we were riding to Fitchburg or someplace, "Someday when you're up there, don't forget I'd like a ride with you some day."

MARTIN: Frank, about this time he began to move around nationally.

DOBIE: Well, it was then that we knew he was really starting to move to the presidency. He was traveling all over the country. Occasionally he'd hit back here in Boston. I managed to get in touch with him one time, one weekend, and I asked him if there was a possible chance of his squeezing in the Fourth of July at Wakefield. We have a big parade up there, and all the adjoining towns turn out to see the parade. It's quite a thing. He not only came up, because he loved a parade, but he insisted that I ride with him in the back seat of a big car all through the parade. You can believe me it was quite a thrill. After about, oh, let me say about three quarters of the route in riding, we then decided to go down the main street on foot. We were joined by his brother, Ted [Edward M. Kennedy], and his constant companion, Dave Powers.

MARTIN: Now, Frank, of course that was somewhere around in 1960. Also during that campaign he came back into Massachusetts. Wasn't there some sort of a big affair at the Sheraton Plaza? Do you recall that?

DOBIE: It was one of my memorable nights. I'll never forget it. The Democratic Party was running a \$100 a plate dinner to raise funds, and the guest of the evening was former President Harry Truman. This I bring up because I shall never forget it. Just before we started to eat, he beckoned me to the head table and asked me if I would journey down to the church with him while he went to confession. He introduced me to the President, who jokingly said to the both of us, "While you're down there, you can both

[-9-]

say a prayer for an old Baptist." I thought that was quite a thrill. President Truman, at that time, I mean that particular night, was in one of his rare moods, and he kept us there for a couple of minutes telling us jokes and said to hurry back from confession, because he didn't want to sit at the table all alone.

MARTIN: About that time were there any other occasions when he did come up to Boston when you contacted him, or he contacted him, or he contacted you?

DOBIE: No, just that if he were in town, he would call and say, "Let's go to Springfield," or Worcester, or down on the Cape, or some place, any place that he had a speaking engagement. And off we'd go. No matter what the weather we'd get in the car, and off we'd go.

MARTIN: Do you recall, Frank, when he was President-elect, I believe it was in December 1960, that he came up to Boston? Do you recall that occasion?

DOBIE: Yes, he came up. He was going to speak up at the State House to the Legislature and the Senate. He arrived at the airport, I'll never forget it it, it was a cold bitter night. And with the Secret Service and the State Troopers and the local police and guards, I couldn't get anywhere near the airport. So we were standing in line outside there; it was really cold. He spotted us going by.

MARTIN: You were with your wife?

DOBIE: I was with my wife that night. We went in to see him but couldn't get anywhere near him. As he was driving by he made a gesture of a telephone, and I said to my wife, "I think he wants me to call him when we get home." So I called him at the apartment at 122 Bowdoin after I got home, and he was there. Mostly everyone thought he was going to the Statler, I think. So we chatted on the phone for about five minutes or so. He was really, really pleased by our going over to the airport on such a cold night he asked us if we were all set for the Inaugural, and we told him we'd be thrilled to go there.

[-10-]

MARTIN: And you were invited to the Inaugural?

DOBIE: I'm very happy to say that I received an invitation personally from the President with all the fixings, as it were, from the second row at the swearing-in ceremony to a first row seat exactly opposite him at the parade and the ball well, let's say everything that went with it as his guest.

MARTIN: After he became President and was in the White House, did you have occasion ever to go down and visit him in his office down there?

DOBIE: That was the biggest thrill that I ever had in my life.

MARTIN: Can you tell us about the circumstances, the occasion of that?

DOBIE: Well, my wife, my two boys and daughter, we went down to visit him at the White House, and we were down there around 8:30 in the morning. Dave Powers ushered us in and out to the lawn where the President was arriving by helicopter. The greeting he gave us I shall never forget. He asked a photographer to come over and take our pictures with him. One of the most pleasing

things that I can remember is that he had my two boys sit on the White House chair, his seat, and have their pictures taken. Well, he spent more than a half hour with us, and we knew how terribly busy he was. At one time his secretary, Pierre Salinger, came in and told him he wanted to brief him on a little story before he met the press. And as we were leaving, the President turned to Salinger and put his arm around my wife and myself and said, "These are very good friends of mine. And speaking of stories, you have never heard a story until Frank tells one."

MARTIN: Did you see him again after that, Frank?

DOBIE: No, I never saw him again, but I did talk with him over the phone when he was here at the Democratic dinner. I went up to see him but with all the guards and hubbub and meetings and so forth...But Dave Powers called me later on after the dinner, and I talked with the President for a few minutes.

[-11-]

MARTIN: Frank, in your long association with him, what single quality of character would you say he possessed that made him apart from many?

DOBIE: Well, first of all, I'd have to say his courage, then his personality and his ability to make a decision. He would make a decision on the spur of the moment.

MARTIN: Frank, throughout his career, you mentioned that he loved parades, were there any other parades?

DOBIE: Well, besides the local parades that he had here when he was running for office and when he was in office as a Congressman and a Senator...I followed him later on in years in his parades in Ireland and in Berlin and Germany and Rome and all over the world. I can truthfully say that if any fellow ever loved a parade, it was the President. I can recall one time a few years back when he was running for Senate, he marched in a night parade, a torchlight parade, down in Nantasket. I was staying down there at the time. He was quite thrilled with all the torchlight and the bands and so forth. I say that, because after the parade up at my home, he admitted that the parade was terrific, and there was always a weak spot for him about a parade. The reason that I keep bringing up this parade business is that when the President left us, he had probably the biggest parade any man in this world ever had.

MARTIN: This has been an interview of Frank Dobie of Charlestown and Wakefield. The interviewer is Ed Martin. The place is Boston, the date is May 19, 1964.

[-12-]

Frank E. Dobie Oral History Transcript  
Name List

**C**

Cotter, John F., 2

**D**

Dever, Paul A., 6

**G**

Galvin, Johnny, 5

**K**

Kennedy, Edward M., 9  
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 7  
Kennedy, John F., 1-12  
Kennedy, Joseph P., 4-5, 8  
Kennedy, Robert F., 4  
Kennedy, Rose F., 5

**L**

Lodge, Henry Cabot, 6

**M**

Morey, Robert F., 6  
Morrissey, Francis X., 3, 6  
Murphy, Theresa, 8

**P**

Powers, David F., 3-4, 6, 9, 11

**R**

Rosetti, Joe, 3

**S**

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 11  
Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 4  
Sutton, William J., 1-4

**T**

Truman, Harry S., 9-10