

**Francis X. McCormack Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 12/09/1965**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Francis X. McCormack (1912-1994) was a campaign worker for John F. Kennedy for President in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's 1960 Democratic primary campaign in Wisconsin and the workings of John F. Kennedy for President, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

FRANCIS X. McCORMACK

December 9, 1965  
Milwaukee County Courthouse  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

- MORRISSEY: What were you doing in the late fifties when the Kennedy-Humphrey race in the Wisconsin Primary began to take shape?
- MCCORMACK: Well, at that time I was, as I am now, presently, the Clerk of the Circuit Court in Milwaukee County.
- MORRISSEY: Were you active in Democratic Party affairs?
- MCCORMACK: Yes. I participated in all respects.
- MORRISSEY: Did you hold an office?
- MCCORMACK: Yes. I was Clerk of the Circuit Court at that time.
- MORRISSEY: I mean office within the Party apparatus.
- MCCORMACK: I've held various minor offices in the . . . . I never ran for the County Chairman. I always felt that this could be done by so many other of the Party leaders. I participated through the ranks, with the exception of County Chairman, County Treasurer, etc.

MORRISSEY: Had you met Hubert Humphrey and John Kennedy?

MCCORMACK: Yes, I had the opportunity of meeting both of them on the occasions when they came to Wisconsin. Usually I'd get a notice to meet them out at the airport. Either one when they were campaigning originally.

MORRISSEY: How did Kennedy impress you?

MCCORMACK: Kennedy impressed me more so than any person I've ever met in politics. This is one of the chief reasons why I became involved in his campaign. At the time, at least it was tentatively a fact that he was going to be considered for running for the Presidency. We had to make a choice as to--when I say "we" I mean my Chief Deputy, Mr. [Walter D.] Hale and myself--we had to make a choice as to who we were going to support. I felt that after evaluating both particular men, that Kennedy had a peculiar, indefinable, characteristic about him that I felt that he could go right straight through to the Presidency. And it was this particular reason that I made the choice. It was a rather difficult choice being in Wisconsin here and being associated with many of my friends in the Labor Movement. And a great number of fellows, friends of mine had, because of their personal friendship for Humphrey, supported Humphrey. And in the early days it was pretty tough sledding back here in Wisconsin to be supporting a fellow from way off in Boston.

MORRISSEY: Who asked you to work for Kennedy?

MCCORMACK: Well, the first contact that took place in my office was an original meeting. Jimmy Brennan came in and a fellow by the name of Mark Ryan, who is now an Alder man, and an attorney by the name of [Bill] Moser, who is now a County judge. They came into my office and discussed the possibilities of supporting Kennedy, and asked me if it'd be all right if my Chief Deputy could act as County chairman of Milwaukee County. I said, "It certainly is." We had already predetermined that we were going to support Kennedy. And it was certainly with my blessing that he actively engaged in the campaign for Senator Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Many people have told me that organized labor looked very kindly on Hubert Humphrey because he obviously had been favorably disposed towards it for many years. And yet I wonder how important labor support was, to Humphrey, in the Primary campaign.

MCCORMACK: I think it was important to the extent that if we had labor support we could have carried Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: You mean all ten districts?

MCCORMACK: Yes.

MORRISSEY: That made the difference then of four out of ten?

MCCORMACK: Yes.

MORRISSEY: What kind of work did you do during the Primary?

MCCORMACK: Well, I did. . . . When you're in politics you don't take any particular type of a job, you do what you're requested to do. I did everything from setting up, in conjunction with my wife, a meeting or a rally in Wauwatosa civic center. Now, this doesn't normally mean much to somebody who isn't acquainted with the Wauwatosa area. But the Wauwatosa area is predominantly Republican.

MORRISSEY: Is that a suburb of Milwaukee?

MCCORMACK: That's a suburb of Milwaukee. And usually the Democrats run about seventeen to one. [Laughter] That's the proportion, you see? We got it up to practically two to one and we thought we were doing a tremendous job there. But we had quite an argument about getting this here civic center for Kennedy. But I had a discussion with the mayor and I told him that, "You have to realize that Nixon will be coming in here and you'll want to offer the same opportunity in this civic center with your own group. So all we're asking for is a fair shake." And the mayor agreed and we went on with the rally. We had a considerable number of social workers from the

Milwaukee County Hospital, which is in close proximity to the Wauwatosa area. It was a tremendous success with the crowd turnout. Senator Kennedy was very much pleased. I do remember, though, we had this one record going consistently. And it kept going on and on and on. What's this one that we played all the time? "High Hopes."

MORRISSEY: "High Hopes", yes.

McCORMACK: It kept on going and finally he nudged me on the side. I had the pleasure of introducing him as the next President of the United States. By that time, I felt firm in my belief that somehow he was going to make it. I had the confidence. At this time he seemed quite disturbed. He nudged me on the shoulder and said, "Would you kindly get somebody to turn that doggoned thing off?" [Laughter] I would imagine he got pretty sick of going and hearing that in hundreds of places that he visited.

MORRISSEY: Since this is a state where Republicans can cross over and vote in the Democratic Primary, do you think his appearance that night in that Republican area translated into some votes?

McCORMACK: Absolutely. I heard a lot of people after he talked, say that they were going to--this was one time in their life that they were going to switch over and vote for him. And this is very unusual in that particular area.

MORRISSEY: Yes. Is this where your home is?

McCORMACK: Yes. I live in Wauwatosa.

MORRISSEY: How did he do against Nixon in your home town?

McCORMACK: How did Kennedy do against Nixon? Well, he didn't do so good up in the Wauwatosa area. I would say considerably higher than an average Democrat,



though I shouldn't. . . . I should reserve that statement by saying that considering the circumstances he did very well.

**MORRISSEY:** I was wondering how many of these people who voted for him in the Primary had stuck with him in the general election against Nixon.

**MCCORMACK:** I think that that was even greater in that particular area because then some of them were a little reluctant about switching their entire politics and voting the Democratic ticket. Although quite a number of them did that. But I think he did exceptionally well in the regular election because they could cross over and vote for their local preferences.

**MORRISSEY:** Do you know off hand if the Kennedy people had the candidate appear in similar areas like Wauwatosa; Republican areas, on the basis that he could appeal to traditional Republican voters?

**MCCORMACK:** Yes. It seemed that this in that area--it was well organized. One thing I noticed in this campaign it seemed that the left hand never knew what the right hand was doing. There were various adjuncts. . . .

**MORRISSEY:** This was the Primary campaign?

**MCCORMACK:** Yes. At times some people in the local areas got a little discouraged and a little confused. But I felt that this was being done from a higher level and I had the confidence that they knew what they were doing.

**MORRISSEY:** You mean by that, that the people at the top of the campaign organization didn't always get what they wanted done down to the people below.

**MCCORMACK:** That's right.

**MORRISSEY:** Was this true in your own town?

**MCCORMACK:** Yes. Yes, I think it was true there. It caused some confusion by some of the fellows. But if

you're for a candidate, in my opinion, you're all out for him and you disregard the things that you don't understand.

MORRISSEY: This is interesting to me because most people emphasize how well organized the Kennedy campaign was as distinct from the Humphrey campaign which wasn't as well organized.

MCCORMACK: Well, we made mistakes. I know of one particular time when Bob [Robert F.] Kennedy came in up at twelfth and Wisconsin and we were supposed to have a lot of these here circulars out. And they got rid of them in a hurry because they didn't want Bob to know that these circulars weren't completed, because he'd really lashed out, I guess. But I think that must be generally well known. I don't mean to infer anything. But in any campaign there'll be some laxities, and I think we did have some laxities. I think our telephone campaign was a colossal flop.

MORRISSEY: Oh really. Was this a campaign on the eve of the election?

MCCORMACK: It was a campaign where it was supposed to be well organized, according to what we heard. I had one person call me three different times. And I guess I got six calls that same night--with the same message, you know. [Laughter] Well, it's good to have saturation, but I think we were overlapping, missing. . . . I felt that the fourth district in Milwaukee County was much more organized than the fifth district. Of course we had a great leader out there, [Clement] Zablocki.

MORRISSEY: In the fifth district?

MCCORMACK: In the fourth district. And the people in the fourth district are predominantly of Polish extraction. They generally went in the direction that Zablocki would call. And Zablocki supported Kennedy. The Polish people went along with him.

MORRISSEY: Who was running the Kennedy campaign in the fifth district?

MCCORMACK: Well, this was supposed to be operated in this area by [Jerry] Bruno generally. Jerry done a pretty good job, I'd say. It was a tough job. He worked originally on North Water--it isn't very well known that there was an original headquarters on North Water Street. And Walter Hale and myself and Jerry used to work down there. The roof was leaking; and they had to heat the whole building in order to take care of just the first floor, and the rest of the building was empty. So we got out of there in a hurry and we went up to 'Twelfth and the Avenue'. And later on that was too small. When Kenny O'Donnell and the big crowd from Boston came in we went down to 'Fourth and Wisconsin Avenue'. This is where we contacted a fellow by the name of [Arthur] Garrity, who was put in charge. This was an old clothing store, Bond's Department used to have. And they had a fire, so they moved to another quarters. We took over this here area. I remember they sent in--the Kennedy people--sent in a fellow by the name of [Harry] Racine and he and I went up on the roof. This was in the winter. We went up on the roof to check this thing. Racine was afraid that the doggoned roof was going to fall in on us.

MORRISSEY: What else did you do during the campaign?

MCCORMACK: Well, we used to go down to headquarters and check in with Jerry Bruno and Kennedy's assistant, a girl by the name of [Angela] Novello.

MORRISSEY: Oh yes.

MCCORMACK: And she was a very exceptionally capable person.

MORRISSEY: She's with Senator Robert now--in his office.

MCCORMACK: Oh, is she? She struck me as a very capable person. And we'd go down there and check and see if there was anything to do. We'd also got a fellow that used to work in their office as a project worker. They needed somebody to take care of the place down there. And we went over there--to Wisconsin. . . . He had the key to the headquarters on

'Fourth and Wisconsin' and he cleaned up the place and would take care of it in general.

MORRISSEY: You were working up here at the Courthouse full time during the campaign?

MCCORMACK: Right. So we had to do our work after four o'clock in the afternoon or five o'clock when we were through. And then we'd meet with the people and. . . . Whatever had to be done had to be done mostly in the evenings or Saturday or Sunday. And then Kennedy, when he came in during the campaign, Walter used to drive him around quite a bit; take him to the plant gates and show him all the places. Once in a while when Walter would be sick or something he'd call me to substitute. Kennedy always used to get us mixed up. He always used to call Walter "Frank" and he used to call--vica versa--Frank "Walt". And then he'd say, "Hello Walt." And every now and then when we'd see him in a group he'd always give us a special nod. I remember one particular night I got a call from Walter Hale and he asked me if I'd pick up Mr. Kennedy and [Mrs. John F. Kennedy] Jackie at the Pfister Hotel. So I went over there. It was in the afternoon about five o'clock. And he was pretty tired out and was resting. We were supposed to go to the Serbian Hall at 'Fiftieth and Oklahoma'. So, I waited around until he had a sufficient amount of rest. And then Jackie came down and the Senator came down. The instructions from Kenneth O'Donnell were that nobody was supposed to ride in the car but the Senator and Jackie. So there was about five or six other cars that came along--one from the Pathe News--and all these cameras and all that. Kennedy asked me to step on it because we were about an hour late. So I started up Wisconsin Avenue and he asked me if I knew any shortcuts. And I said, "Sure." I went to make an illegal left hand turn. He said, "Well, don't get into any trouble but see where you can turn off." So we got up to as far as 'Sixth and Wisconsin' and there was a great number of sailors coming in from Great Lakes. Kennedy made some kind of remark which I didn't hear or didn't understand, being an old army man. He mentioned something in Navy jargon. Well, that more or less electrified the group. They were just coming in from North Shore. That's from the great naval area about ninety miles from here. And this was the area where they'd all come into Milwaukee. You know it's a great liberty town. So, as soon as he made this remark why they

surrounded the car and they were shaking hands with him. We had traffic tied up for eight blocks in both directions. The police whistles were blowing. And finally when they found out who it was they were a little bit more patient and they got the traffic moving again. And this other group that had this convoy that was with us--they got all confused. Then I cut off left and I went over down past the packing house. It's a ramp leading up the viaduct. And it's a shortcut which I knew. We cut away from the rest of the group and there was a little confusion then. [Laughter] We got out to the Serbian Hall and the County Executive, John Doyne, was there to greet him and shook hands with him. Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy went in and he made his address. After a while Kennedy asked me if I would wait there on the side. Ken O'Donnell came back with Jackie Kennedy and the President, or President to be. And they asked me if I would take them over to a good restaurant. I took them over to Karl Ratzsch's. And then as Mrs. Kennedy got out of the car she handed me a little corsage and she said, "This is for your wife." My wife was real pleased because my wife had been a very, very staunch Kennedy supporter. She was real pleased with this gesture.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any other recollections of conversations with . . . ?

MCCORMACK: Well, I remember one night. . . . It was a blustery, cold wintery night, and you know how it can be in Wisconsin. It can be really rugged. We were going down to Racine; Walter Hale and myself and Kennedy. We met a fellow by the name of Marquis Childs from "Meet the Press" and another fellow by the name of [Max] Freedman from the Washington Post. And we picked those fellows up. Kennedy was discussing the campaign strategy and how it looked throughout the country. And Marquis Childs was giving his viewpoint--how things stood. Kennedy was driving home some very important points that they were obviously missing. We didn't try to get nosy, but you couldn't help but become involved in the conversation. Marquis Childs agreed that the point that Kennedy was trying to get across. . . . He agreed with him and he said something to the effect that they'd give this more notice when they get back.

MORRISSEY: This is a difficult question, but do you recall Kennedy's analysis of how it looked at that time?

MCCORMACK: Yes. He wasn't too pleased about some of the news releases that were going out in certain aspects. He seemed quite well satisfied in some areas of general discussion, but there were several points that he was trying to get across to this Childs and . . .

MORRISSEY: For example?

MCCORMACK: He was mentioning something about an article that was written that he disagreed with vehemently. And then he posed his reasons. This fellow Freedman was pretty quiet about this whole thing. He was in general agreement with Kennedy. I remember I asked him about our Milwaukee Journal. I said, "How does the Milwaukee Journal compare with the other type of newspapers that you see throughout the country?" "Well, he said, in our business it's a must to read your editorial." So I thought that it was a pretty important paper. I had a much greater respect for the Milwaukee Journal after he told me that.

I recall when we'd take Kennedy around he was so full of enthusiasm that he was like a bomb ready to burst. I'd always remember he'd roll a window down and he'd get his hands and he'd always be tapping on top of the car. I'd always wonder if I was going fast enough. He wanted to get to this place. Once in a while we'd get to a place and instead of the crowd that we had anticipated would be there, there'd probably be a handful. And you'd see him kind of disappointed about it. One time somebody mentioned that we should go up to Shuster's at 'Third and Garfield' on a Saturday morning and you'll find a big crowd out there. We got there and there were about three or four people out there. And they started to take stuff off of the car. So we went out to Allis Chalmer's plant gate and there were thousands of people out there. I always felt, when I was in the campaign, all the way through, that nothing would shake us. Even if worse came to worst and we lost, it was an experience to be with this type of a man. I'd rather be losing with a man like him. I never thought of the word "losing". I always had the feeling that he was going to win. As I recall, the last time I saw Kennedy was when we had a big affair down at the Arena. And some of us, like [Mrs. Margaret] Marge Benson, [James] Brennan, Walter Hale and myself accompanied him back to the airport in the bus. It was pretty hard to get on that bus under all that shoving and the noise. It was a wonder that we got in with our lives.

And I remember shaking hands with him. I said, "I hope that the next time that we meet that you'll be President of the United States." I said, "We did everything we could. And I feel that everything that should have been done was done here. And it's up to the good Lord to. . . ." And he kind of smiled. He didn't say anything. He just smiled and kind of shook his head in assent--"We hope that it will all come out all right."

MORRISSEY: Did you expect he'd carry the state against Nixon?

MCCORMACK: I was hoping he would. I thought that we could upset them. This is a pretty tough state up in the northern area--in the outskirts in all directions. I think there was a lot of prejudices going on and I think that had a lot to do with it. Later on that was taken care of by Kennedy himself when he talked to all those ministers and everything. But this was before all that and I think the prejudices were still predominant.

MORRISSEY: Any other occasions when you and he were together here in the city?

MCCORMACK: Well, we were at numerous other occasions where it would be our job to see that things were set up and. . . . Actually we were there to see that he was given as much exposure to people who hadn't met him. We'd more or less stay in the background. He'd wave to us. He knew we were doing our job and that's all we cared about.

MORRISSEY: Did you go out to Los Angeles?

MCCORMACK: No, I didn't. Somebody had to stay here and take care of the shop and Walter went out there. Walter's biggest disappointment was that we felt that he was going to drop the little ball--you know--for Wisconsin. We assumed that Wisconsin was going to be the big carry through for Kennedy in the . . .

MORRISSEY: On the first ballot?

MCCORMACK: Yes.

MORRISSEY: And it just barely missed. It was Wyoming that put him over. Let me go back once again to this talk Kennedy had with Marquis Childs and Freedman. This is difficult, I know, but can you recall specifically what Kennedy was saying in his analysis?

MCCORMACK: No. I tried. I don't recall the specific instance that they were discussing. But it was my feeling that Kennedy felt that things weren't shaping up the way he thought they should be. I guess he felt, at that time, that he was a little bit behind and he had to pick up. This was the feeling that--I think Childs seemed to agree--that he was coming up, but not coming up fast enough. And I think the thing that really did it was when he got on the TV with Nixon. I think that was the ball game because I could tell back here by the reaction of people who said, "Well, I didn't intend to vote for him, but after seeing that first TV debate, we'll vote for him."

MORRISSEY: Well, I think that about covers it unless you have something else?

MCCORMACK: No. I just want to say that the organization that Kennedy had were a wonderful bunch of people. Even his immediate family we had the opportunity to meet--his mother and sisters and Shriver and the rest of them. It was an experience that I'll never forget and will long cherish.

MORRISSEY: Well, thank you very much.

MCCORMACK: Well, in regard to your question about how things were going here in Milwaukee, Walter and I--I mean Walter Hale, who was the County chairman of Milwaukee County. He and I would discuss this at great length daily--how things looked. And we sensed that things weren't going as well as they should. In our estimation, we felt that if we don't do something, and do it fast, we're going to lose the fifth district. So we tried to get this point across but it didn't seem to jell until a fellow by the name of [John] Bailey came in.

MORRISSEY: This was during the Primary?



MCCORMACK: Yes. And Bailey asked Walter Hale, "How do you think this thing is going? I don't think it looks too good." He [Hale] said, "By golly, I believe the same thing." And we told him why. We felt that Zablocki's influence and the people in the fourth district and the general feeling of the people out there for Kennedy--it was a pretty safe area. And they were concentrating too much over there and that we should concentrate more so on the fifth district. O'Donnell came in later on and he got a hall up there at a place called Jefferson Hall. And he put up a big rally. It was a tremendous success. And I think it was due to that particular rally that it was enough to jell the fifth district and bring it over.

MORRISSEY: Did you carry the fifth district by a narrow . . .

MCCORMACK: Carried the fourth and fifth, but the fifth was much more narrower.

MORRISSEY: Was it pretty much taken for granted by the Kennedy people that they might as well write off the Negro vote because of Humphrey's strong and well known civil rights stand?

MCCORMACK: Well, we brought in this "Big Daddy Libscomb" and I think there was some concern in that area. I don't think it was very effective.

MORRISSEY: I get the impression that Kennedy didn't spend much time with these people.

MCCORMACK: That's right.

MORRISSEY: Well, thank you.

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