

Wilbur F. Daniels Oral History Interview – 6/27/1967
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Daniels, Missouri political figure, state chairman of the Democratic Party (1955-1958), and delegate to the Democratic National Convention (1960), discusses the 1956 Democratic National Convention, the Missouri delegation's support for Stuart Symington II's 1960 presidential bid and John F. Kennedy's relationship with Missouri, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Wilbur F. Daniels

June 27, 1967
Lafayette, Missouri

By Larry Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Mr. Daniels, when did you first come in contact with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] or some facet of his career?

DANIELS: I think it was maybe 1956, early in the campaign. He visited Kansas City, Missouri, and was a guest of former President Truman [Harry S. Truman], who gave a dinner party for him at the Muehlebach Hotel, at which time there was some forty or fifty local Missouri politicians in attendance. My acquaintance was very superficial and brief at the time, but he and Mr. O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]—and O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]...

HACKMAN: Kenny O'Donnell.

DANIELS: ... Kenny O'Donnell were both in the party with Kennedy and also his brother.

HACKMAN: His brother Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]?

DANIELS: Yes.

HACKMAN: Now was this before the '56 Convention [Democratic National Convention],

or was this during the...

DANIELS: I think this was after, after the Convention had been held. It was early in the campaign; it was a one-day stint that he made in Jackson County.

HACKMAN: Now, you had attended the '56 Convention?

DANIELS: Yes.

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HACKMAN: Do you have any recollections of the Missouri delegation in relation to Kennedy's efforts for the vice presidency? Missouri was...

[Interruption]

DANIELS: ... they ever got sidetracked, I don't know.

HACKMAN: These were mostly Catholics from St. Louis?

DANIELS: Delegates. Let's just not say Catholics. Let's just say delegates from St. Louis, and leave...

HACKMAN: In '56 this was the part of the delegation that was pro-Kennedy.

DANIELS: Right.

HACKMAN: I know I had heard some discussion of that before. I was trying to recall, I thought I heard some people say the Catholics in the delegation were reluctant to back Kennedy.

DANIELS: Well, they were, namely one, Dick Nacy [Richard R. Nacy], who was a Catholic. He just thought it was too much of a load to carry. But rank and file Catholics from St. Louis, and the big city people, I mean, they weren't that disturbed about it. But Nacy, in fact he made a floor speech in the committee, a meeting of the delegates, at which he brought this very point up and laid it on the line. It probably had some influence.

HACKMAN: As far as you can remember, that was the only source of Kennedy support in the delegation at that time?

DANIELS: Right, right. I would say not only the Catholics, but he tended to have the support of the big city politicians.

HACKMAN: Moving on, let's say between '56 and '60, did you have any other contacts

with Senator Kennedy during that period?

DANIELS: No, I think not, because he made a point to stay out of Missouri due to the fact that Symington [Stuart Symington II] was in the picture. I know I heard this from some people close to him and his party, that he deliberately and particularly stayed away from Missouri and did not campaign in Missouri like he had done in so many other states out of deference to Symington.

HACKMAN: To what extent were you involved in Symington's plans on the national level for his '60 campaign?

DANIELS: Well, not too much, except we were using the Democratic State Committee in any way we could for and on behalf of Symington. We had attended a conference or two back in Washington when his candidacy was in its infancy, and I had been assigned a couple of states to

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go to to try to whip up delegate support.

HACKMAN: Would this have been in '59, or would this have been in early '60, or approximately what period?

DANIELS: Oh, during that period of '59 and early '60.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what states you visited?

DANIELS: I didn't go.

HACKMAN: Oh, you didn't go. Why?

DANIELS: Well, I thought it was an amateurish, silly thing to be doing.

HACKMAN: I see. Did other people feel like this, too?

DANIELS: I don't know. They felt like it after they'd gone. Some did go.

HACKMAN: Who were some of the other people involved at this point?

DANIELS: Oh, I don't know. Stanley Fike [Stanley R. Fike] and Jim Davis [James A. Davis]; they allocated certain people to go to certain states. Ed Houx [Edwin C. Houx], a banker in Warrensburg, went to Pennsylvania, Governor Lawrence's [David Leo Lawrence] balliwick. Jim Meredith [James H. Meredith] went certain places. Bill Brown over in Sedalia went certain places. [Interruption] But I had.... And Carpenter [Cell Carpenter] with the M.F.A. [Missouri Farmers Association] who was a

former commissioner of agriculture. Now, that's some of them, but for the life of me, I've lost track of the entire group, and who went to what states.

HACKMAN: Do you remember at that time what the opinions of most of these people were when they came back, or did they have much success at all, or were you talking to them about it?

DANIELS: Well, I don't recall particularly. They weren't in a position to know whether they were successful or not. They came back with various optimistic reports that, I think, the hard core politicians would have realized were very illusory.

HACKMAN: What were your own feelings at that time concerning Senator Symington's chances for the nomination?

DANIELS: Well, I really didn't know enough about the consensus of feeling in the other states to have a judgment. There was some thought among some of us that this was not the way to do it, to send a couple of strangers into a big state and a big city and start maneuvering. The people who went were nobodies. Would you run for the Presidency that way? I'll pose the question, but don't profess to answer it.

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HACKMAN: Did you have any conferences or meetings during this period with Symington?

DANIELS: Well, yes. He was in constant touch with both the state committee and other people who were active in this effort.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what his response was, especially after the primaries that Kennedy won in West Virginia and Wisconsin? Did the approach change at all, do you recall?

DANIELS: I don't think the approach changed. It seemed that whoever was making the decisions seemed to feel and think that this is the way this campaign should be run for the presidency, both in its inauguration and in the conduct of it.

HACKMAN: Did you try to make your own feelings apparent at the time, that you disagreed with this approach?

DANIELS: Oh, I didn't think I knew enough about it to be having any opinions. I was more or less sitting at the feet of the smart boys.

HACKMAN: Going back to the state party convention in Jeff [Jefferson] City in May of '60, if you can recall former President Truman's role there and his failure to

endorse Symington at that time. Some people were upset about that, if you recall. He finally came out later during the campaign for Symington. Was it possible that the announcement at a later date was done to dramatize his efforts on Symington's behalf for this endorsement?

DANIELS: No, I don't think it was done.... I don't think anybody could do it. I think President Truman at the beginning of this campaign was very dubious about the success of it and, therefore, was treading with considerable reluctance and caution. And he made this endorsement in his own due time, perhaps reluctantly then, but being a fellow Missourian felt it was the thing to do. In short, what I'm trying to say is, I think that when the endorsement came, he was aware of the most difficult odds that the Missouri candidate was facing.

HACKMAN: There was some feeling at the time, I believe, on the part of the people at the state convention that Truman should be dropped as a delegate. Do you recall how this worked out? Who would have...

DANIELS: I have no recollection of any such feeling at that. If there was any such talk or feeling or movement, it was not discernible.

HACKMAN: What about people's attitude toward the unit rule, some of the people possibly who would not have wanted to be bound by the unit rule? Did this problem come up at the state convention?

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DANIELS: Yes.

HACKMAN: Do you recall who the various people were that were involved and what your own role was in relation to this?

DANIELS: No, I can't recall the particular names of who was involved, but I think it would be fair to state that some of, particularly, the St. Louis politicians and delegates did not want to be bound by the unit rule. The reason therefore was the fact that they wanted to have an escape route to go where they wanted to go, realizing that it's important to be on a winner, and not be bound by unit rule and thereby continually to vote for a loser and go down the drain.

HACKMAN: What was your feeling about this?

DANIELS: Well, I felt that the unit rule was apropos up to a point, and then that the delegates should be released. It doesn't make sense to perform a useless act, namely, keep voting for somebody we all sense or know doesn't have a chance, that it's neither good politics or any part of wisdom to back.

HACKMAN: Did you make efforts, let's say at the pint of the state convention, to try to establish this point, or to try...

DANIELS: Well, no. I didn't know the futility of it at that point. The futility of the unit rule became obvious at a later date.

HACKMAN: At the Convention, let's say?

DANIELS: Sometime during the course of the Convention.

HACKMAN: Did these people from St. Louis, primarily—I would assume they had no alternate candidate that they were clearly committed to then. It was just the fact that they wanted to be able to go in any direction.

DANIELS: Well, yes. They wanted to have that latitude, but I think many of them were inclined to be for Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Do you recall having an opinion at the time before the Convention when former President Truman made his speech about the Convention being fixed and his reasoning not to attend the Convention because of this claim?

DANIELS: What are you asking me? I've lost the question. Do I recall that conversation? Yes.

HACKMAN: Did you feel that these were his reasons for not going?

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DANIELS: Well, I don't know. I have no way of knowing what his reasons were for not going. I don't think that—he surely was not serious about it being rigged and fixed because anyone that had been to one would know that is extremely difficult to do. And I will always think that that utterance was a tongue-in-cheek proclamation. Why he saw fit to make it, I wouldn't know.

HACKMAN: This had not been at all anticipated by Symington people, let's say, as far as you know? Truman's decision not to go.

DANIELS: I don't think that anybody knew. I don't think they could anticipate. I don't think they had any way of knowing, but that's hazarding an educated guess. I have no way of knowing the facts.

HACKMAN: What were you mainly involved in at the Convention itself? Were there specific things that you spent most of your time on, as far as working on behalf of Symington, specific states or something like this at that point?

DANIELS: Well, theoretically we were supposed to be associated with and working on the delegates of the states that we had contacted earlier, previously. That was the format. The organizational part of it was nebulous. When asked, “What were you specifically doing?” the answer would be hard to come by.

HACKMAN: Who at the Convention was in charge of this effort?

DANIELS: Well, I don’t know who the titular head was, but Stanley Fike and those people who had worked for Symington stick in my mind as being the ones that seemed to be....

HACKMAN: Do you have recollections of the disputes that came up at the Convention as far as this unit rule dispute went, and what your role was at that point? You had talked about this earlier coming up at the Convention.

DANIELS: Well, I don’t recall except that in the caucuses of the Missouri delegation, as time wore on and as the futility of this campaign for Symington became more apparent, the delegates became more restless—well, perhaps I shouldn’t say restless—and became more reluctant to follow the unit rule and wanted out from under it.

HACKMAN: What was Governor Blair’s [James T. Blair, Jr.] role in this controversy?

DANIELS: Well, I can’t very well speak for him except that he went along with what the delegation wanted to do, and very extremely well satisfied with it up to a point. Then when the utter futility of it became apparent, he, like others, felt that there’s no point in committing yourself to perform a useless act. That’s a summation.

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HACKMAN: Did you ever have any knowledge that Symington would have withdrawn if he had been offered the vice presidency, or do you know if the Kennedy people were in contact with the Missouri delegates, or with the Symington people, on the vice presidency?

DANIELS: I have reason to believe that he was not offered any vice presidency. And as to what he would have done if he had been, who knows? But I am certain that there were no arrangements, approaches, or deals made.

HACKMAN: Were the Kennedy people at all in contact with the Missouri delegation? Any appearances or anything like this?

DANIELS: No. They did the same thing at the Convention that they’d done previously. They adopted more or less a hands off.

HACKMAN: All right. Then after the Convention and in the campaign—and you’ve talked a little bit about this before—up to the time you left, what were you primarily involved in after the Convention? It wouldn’t have been a very long period.

DANIELS: Well, at that stage of any campaign in any state, in other words through July and August, there’s very little, if any, campaigning being done for the very reason that the officers of the state committee who are responsible for the fall campaign do not know until the latter part of August whether they’re going to be. So commitments, activity is at a lull naturally because no one starts making arrangements and commitments unless he knows he’s going to be in office. So I answer you by saying there was practically no campaign activity in the ensuing summer up to the first of September.

HACKMAN: From your contacts at that time with the various people running on the state level, what problems did the Kennedy-Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] ticket create for them?

DANIELS: Oh, no problems other than the religious issue that no one knew the impact of that, or what effect it would have except in the rural areas. It was of some concern.

HACKMAN: Was there ever any, that you know of, overall approach to this developed on how to handle it in, specifically, the rural areas?

DANIELS: No. I know of no solution that was offered then, or now, or ever would be. It’s something that you hoped did not exist and you trust could be minimized, but it is something that you could not attack or plan for without perhaps aggravating it or accentuating it. So really it’s an issue, but it’s left dormant more or less.

HACKMAN: Do you recall anything other than the religious issue that was

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of specific importance? Any attitudes, say, toward Kennedy on agriculture which would have been very important to Missouri? I know in the ’56 Convention a lot of the Midwestern delegations objected to Kennedy strongly on this ground.

DANIELS: Well, there may have been some reluctance or reaction on specific issues as far as Kennedy was concerned, but I don’t recall if it were true. I’m not saying it wasn’t true.

HACKMAN: Do you know if any of the disagreements that may have developed during the Convention as far as being bound by the unit rule on the part of some

delegates had any effect on the campaign as far as various people working for Kennedy or as far as the Democratic organization being united for him?

DANIELS: Oh, as a practical matter, no. I think there was some grumbling, as there naturally would be, among the delegates as to why they had to be held by this unit rule until the death knell was cast, so to speak. They felt like they should have been released earlier, but I'm sure that was soon forgotten upon return home.

HACKMAN: Was there any organization set up especially during the campaign in connection with the presidential campaign or was the whole thing done through the regular Democratic organization that existed in the state?

DANIELS: Oh, I think there were some volunteer organizations, as I recall. There certainly was one or two for Kennedy in St. Louis that had been active through all this when the official delegation and the official Democratic Party were tied to Symington. They remained active.

HACKMAN: What about action on the part of some of the delegates at the Convention who may have wanted to set up something on their own? Was there any problem like this at the time?

DANIELS: Oh, there may have been conversations about it, but no concrete activity or objective steps being taken.

HACKMAN: As far as you know, the Kennedy people never went outside the organization in the state to try to get anything done?

DANIELS: No. No, no.

HACKMAN: Do you remember dealing at all with a fellow named Phil Des Marais [Philip H. DesMarais], who was the Kennedy coordinator for the area from the Kennedy organization in D.C. during the campaign? I believe he worked out of St. Louis.

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DANIELS: If I've met the gentleman, I don't recall it.

HACKMAN: Did you have any meetings with Kennedy during the campaign, or were you there when he came into the state? Any recollections of these visits?

DANIELS: Well, we had one meeting in St. Louis at the Jefferson Hotel, which was more or less an organizational meeting that encompassed five or six states,

that Bobby Kennedy attended and O'Brien, but the President wasn't there. I think about the only time he came into this state was with Truman, and perhaps the speech in St. Louis, if my memory serves me right.

HACKMAN: He was in for a Machinist Convention in St. Louis one time, and then he came through again and started at St. Louis. I remember being at a football game at Columbia where he was supposed—the Tiger-Iowa State football game, and he couldn't land at the field so he went to Joplin.

DANIELS: I think he was only in the state perhaps three times.

HACKMAN: I think that's what it was. It was three. Do you remember having impressions about how effective the Kennedy people were in working with Missouri or any specific problems or lack of understanding on their part did you think?

DANIELS: Well, they were very cooperative, certainly up to September 1, 1960. Now what transpired after that, during the heat of the campaign, I don't know.

HACKMAN: That's when you left. Well, that's about all I have. The rest of it is on the rest of the campaign, unless you would have some thoughts on how the election came out and Kennedy's carrying the state by a very small margin, much less than most of the state candidates.

DANIELS: Well, I don't think there's any mystery to that. That hearkens back to what we were concerned about, the religious issue, and it obviously took its toll. There's no other way to explain his running behind the ticket. As fine a campaign and as attractive a personality as he was, there's no rationale that can be offered.

HACKMAN: Going on into the Administration, from the people you talked to who you'd been involved with when you were active, did Missouri's failure to back Kennedy ever create any problems for Missouri politically or in relations with the Administration?

DANIELS: From what I know, I would certainly say no. The Kennedy people that we had contact with evidenced a tremendous amount of understanding in regards to the position that the Missouri delegates

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were in, as well as the politician, as well as the state organization. This speaker, meaning myself, at no time noticed any rancor or ill feeling of any sort. The attitude was excellent.

HACKMAN: Did you ever personally have any meetings, or meet the President after he went to the White House?

DANIELS: No.

HACKMAN: I think that's about all I have, unless you have anything you want to add.
Any general recollections or anything like that?

DANIELS: No.

HACKMAN: Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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