

Gaylord A. Nelson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 7/01/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Gaylord A. Nelson

Interviewer: Edwin R. Bayley

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Biographical Note

Gaylord A. Nelson (1916-2005) was the Governor of Wisconsin from 1959-1963 and a Senator from Wisconsin from 1963 to 1981. This interview covers the 1960 Democratic primary campaign and the issue of environmental conservation during the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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This is Edwin R. Bayley, interviewing Senator Gaylord A. Nelson for the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964.

BAYLEY: Gaylord, I think your first real experience with President Kennedy was at the time of the 1960 primary in Wisconsin. Would you explain your own position in the Kennedy-Humphrey contest that year?

NELSON: I was elected Governor in 1958. The Presidential Preference Primary in Wisconsin was in April of 1960. Senator Kennedy came into the state for speeches a number of times, as I recall it, in 1957, and very intensively in 1958. Hubert Humphrey also came into the state a number of times. They were contesting for the nomination. Because of the political situation in our state, I decided to be neutral in that primary race although I owed, politically, support to Hubert Humphrey because he had been coming into our state for some ten years when we had neither a Governor nor a United States Senator, campaigning for our candidates, speaking at our dinners. As a matter of fact, in December of 1959 I made a decision to announce my support for Hubert Humphrey and was dissuaded from doing so by Miles McMillin, chief editorial writer of the Capital Times. I subsequently decided that the best role I could play would be the role of mediator because I could see a serious division developing in our political party. The state chairman, Pat Lucey, had announced his support of Mr. Kennedy. The lieutenant governor, Philleo Nash, had announced his support for Senator Humphrey. Sides were being taken and lines sharply drawn. I was concerned about the possibility of a knock-down, drag-out battle which would mean that we couldn't get the pieces back together soon enough to mount a successful campaign for our own ticket in 1960. So I decided to play the

role of arbitrator and announced that decision. Neither representatives from Humphrey's staff, although I had many long standing friends among them, nor representatives from Kennedy's campaign staff solicited my support. That might have been because I announced that I was going to act as an umpire early in the game. During the campaign, I criticized the Kennedy side once and the Humphrey side once and on each occasion my criticism received substantial publicity in the newspapers. I took the position that it was perfectly all right for these candidates in our state to campaign on the issues without indulging in personalities and on the one occasion on the part of each, I pointed out that they were violating the rule I hoped that they would abide by.

BAYLEY: Gaylord, as I remember it, what you say is probably right, that no one approached you directly seeking support. But I was aware of the fact that both sides were actually hoping for your support, put off by your neutrality position, but both of them were quite bitter about the fact that you were not on their side.

NELSON: Well, I think that is correct. Humphrey supporters and friends of mine in Wisconsin, who knew how much work Governor Freeman, Hubert Humphrey and others from their state had done in behalf of our party, thought that I owed them that support, and I think they had a perfectly legitimate complaint. On the Kennedy side, supporters of his out in the state were quite cool toward me because I had not announced for Senator Kennedy. As a matter of fact, LeMoyné Billings raised a fuss

when I had my annual Governor's Day dinner to raise funds for my campaign (this has always been a non-partisan dinner). He was very critical because (this was after Kennedy had won the primary) I didn't have Kennedy's pictures up around the dining hall. He wouldn't accept the explanation that we had never posted any other candidate's pictures at previous dinners and since both Republicans and Democrats participated, we didn't intend to. This sort of thing went on for quite some time and at a later time I explained to the Attorney General, Bob Kennedy, that the fact was the Kennedy people didn't have any cause to be upset or critical because I didn't endorse Kennedy. The only people who did have cause to complain were the Humphrey people and Senator Humphrey, because our state owed them quite a political debt for all their help the prior 10 years. I pointed out that we owed nothing to the Kennedy forces and that most of our people in our state didn't know Senator Kennedy. I think that for the first time Bob Kennedy understood the reason for my position in the primary and the fact that the only one who had a legitimate complaint was really Humphrey.

BAYLEY: Gaylord, in 1960, at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, there were two incidents, I believe, in which you were involved in the nomination process that are probably worthy of noting. One was a call that you received at 8 o'clock on a Wednesday morning, the day that Presidential candidates were to be nominated, from Robert Kennedy, asking if you would not place Senator Kennedy's name in nomination. I

remember this came as quite a surprise because you had continued to maintain your neutrality. You had made no endorsement of any candidate.

NELSON: That's correct. I was at the convention as an alternate, selected after the slate of delegates had been elected in the Spring election. As I recall it, you answered the phone in the hotel room --

BAYLEY: that's right --

NELSON: at 8 o'clock in the morning. I don't remember the exact language of our conversation except that I was invited to come over to Bob Kennedy's room and discuss --

BAYLEY: There actually wasn't a definite commitment on either side --

NELSON: putting the name in nomination or seconding, I'm not, actually sure.

BAYLEY: It was the actual nomination.

NELSON: And so I had agreed to go over to his office at 9 o'clock. About the time we were ready to go to his hotel room, Pat Lucey came running into the room --

BAYLEY: puffing into the room --

NELSON: and cancelled the arrangements. Is that right?

BAYLEY: That's correct.

NELSON: Then the only other experience related to the President that I had there was the call I received, I believe it was about --

BAYLEY: four in the afternoon on Thursday --

NELSON: the day the announcement was made that Lyndon Johnson was the selection --

BAYLEY: the word was just getting around --

NELSON: so I received a call and had not, as a matter of fact, been notified that Lyndon Johnson had been selected, I don't believe.

BAYLEY: No. His name was going to be placed in nomination that evening.

NELSON: So I went over to President Kennedy's suite of rooms and when I went into the room with him, he said that he wanted to tell me personally that Lyndon --

BAYLEY: Who was there in the room with him?

NELSON: There was no one there except the President and me. There were a lot of people in the outer rooms -- there were several rooms there -- but I was in the room alone with him. The background for his belief, I suppose, that he should notify me personally was that in the '58 campaign I had given a speech that was critical of the Democratic leadership on the grounds that it wasn't liberal enough and this criticism involved Lyndon Johnson who, of course, was the majority leader. Senator Proxmire had criticized the leadership of Lyndon Johnson --

BAYLEY: As I recall it, he made almost a campaign out of that -- his campaign for re-election in 1958.

NELSON: Yes. Well, my criticism is a matter of record in the Capital Times. I simply said that although Lyndon Johnson was perhaps the most

skillful majority leader in the history of the Senate, the problem was that the Democratic party was trying to occupy the middle of the road. I said that we needed a different kind of leadership. In any event, the President thought it was important to notify us. He didn't want to talk directly to Senator Proxmire. I said I would be willing to tell Senator Proxmire and he said he would be pleased if I would. He went on to say then that he had agreed to Lyndon Johnson because Speaker Sam Rayburn had come over to see him and that Sam Rayburn had said that he wanted Lyndon and that Lyndon Johnson wanted the nomination for Vice President. His question to me was: "How successful could I be as President of the United States if I had Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House, and Lyndon Johnson, the majority leader of the Senate, against me?" I always assumed that this was a skillful and logical explanation to me as a person who might not be favorably disposed toward that selection.

BAYLEY: Well, I remember that he asked you particularly -- I think he regarded Senator Proxmire as even more of an opponent or critic of Lyndon Johnson.

NELSON: I'm sure he did.

BAYLEY: And he asked you to intercede with him to prevent him from taking the convention floor to denounce this choice.

NELSON: Well, before he had a chance to ask me, I said I would be happy to tell Senator Proxmire of this selection and he said, well, I'll appreciate it very much if you will. I said I thought Senator Proxmire would be all right on it, which he was.

BAYLEY: Your most significant legislative experience with President Kennedy covered quite a long period of time -- your conversations with him and your communications to him -- on the subject of conservation. Where did that start?

NELSON: My first conversation with him about it occurred on the occasion of his visit to speak at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Milwaukee in the spring, May of 1962. I met him at the airport and I believe Attorney General Reynolds was in the President's car with us. While riding in from the airport to the hotel, we were visiting about politics and issues and the President expressed the view that unfortunately the issues -- international affairs and national affairs -- all the issues, had become so complicated the public had great trouble understanding them. As he stated it, there were no simple issues to explain to the people any more with, he said, the possible exception of medicare. It was at that point that I said I thought there was one other significant, important, appealing issue that was simple and that the people did understand and I said that was the field of conservation of our natural resources. I went into an explanation of the breadth of the concern of our people -- whether farmers, for conservation of our soil, or fishermen or hunters or bird-watchers or people interested in scenic beauty -- that the concern with conservation cuts across all walks of life and that every person has some concern about conservation. And when I concluded my little speech (I was interested in promoting the idea that he make a major issue out of conservation), he responded by saying that maybe it was important, but since

he had been born and raised in the city he hadn't really given much thought to that matter. Later, I went to see Bob Kennedy on this issue or, rather, I went in to see him on another matter and talked to him on this issue and told him how important it was on its merits and how important it was politically. When I concluded my pitch to Bob on how important an issue this was, he walked out of his office with me and said, "I think probably we haven't given enough consideration to the conservation issue." Then I arranged, after I came down here as Senator, to have lunch with a couple of the people from the Executive side, one of them Mr. White, I believe. Isn't that right?

BAYLEY: Lee White.

NELSON: One was Lee White and the other was a gentleman whose name I've forgotten. They were sort of consultants in this field for the President. I talked to them about the question of promoting a major policy statement and a national tour to see the problem areas and to discuss the conservation of our natural resources. Secretary Udall was interested in this, too, and so was Senator Anderson. I also talked to people over at "Resources for the Future." In any event, at some stage, the President made a decision that he would make a conservation tour. At that point, I dictated a four-and-a-half page typewritten letter in which I explained the importance of this issue and suggested that on his tour he should make four, five or six major speeches. The first one, I said, should be in the East because of the tremendous population increase and the lack

of recreation facilities, pointing out that in a few years there will just be no place for anyone on the East Coast to enjoy nature or have recreation. I suggested major speeches on water, on all aspects of conservation, explaining that every magazine in the country concerned about these issues, whether it's boating or fresh water or fishing or hunting, would run extensive pieces about the President's interest and that it would arouse great and needed public concern about this matter.

BAYLEY: Gaylord, I think we should put that letter in the record.

NELSON: I'll have it put into the record. [Letter attached] Then, subsequent to that, I had occasion to see the President about another matter and Mr. Ted Sorensen commented that they had received the letter, appreciated it, and thought it was very good. That made me hopeful that the President actually would do a series of major speeches covering all aspects of conservation. I think this would have been a great thing. On another occasion, I told the President that once the public was aroused and concerned about this, he ought to launch a \$500 million to a billion dollar annual program for the preservation of our natural resources. Well, unfortunately, this conservation trip was not treated by the President's advisors as a conservation trip at all, but rather, I think, as an excuse to get out onto the political hustings because so far as I can tell the only conservation speech he gave was at Ashland, which was a very brief one because his stop there was very brief.

The brief speech at Ashland was prepared by our office [Bill Bechtel] and modified at the White House.

BAYLEY: Wasn't it true that at the last minute the plans were changed so that he would skip the Wisconsin-Minnesota portion of his trip in which you were particularly interested?

NELSON: Well, the Wisconsin portion was skipped and then they put it back in the schedule with the President saying to me on this occasion, when I was over there, that he thought it ought to be in the schedule since I was the one who had suggested the trip in the first place.

BAYLEY: It was on that trip that you visited the Apostle Islands, I believe.

NELSON: Yes, that's right. We left here by helicopter from the White House with Senator Gene McCarthy, Senator Humphrey and Senator Clark. The first stop was in Pennsylvania and the next was in Duluth. We then flew by helicopter over to Ashland. In the helicopter were Martin Hanson and two or three others. Martin explained the Apostle Islands as we flew over them. The President seemed impressed with their beauty and made a fine and impressive speech in Ashland. It was very well received. This speech was exclusively devoted to conservation. The background for that speech was prepared by my office. So far as I can tell from the press, that was about the last speech he gave which was really devoted to conservation on the whole trip. I think that was a tragic mistake. He would have gotten as much publicity -- he had the front page anyway -- and he would have had a tremendous impact on all conservation groups in

the country. I have the feeling that at no time did those advising him really understand the significance and importance of this matter as an issue on the merits nor the importance of this conservation issue politically.

BAYLEY: Did anything else ever occur as a result of this? Were there any further talks about possible legislation or anything of that nature?

NELSON: No, this trip was in August, as I recall it, and I had hoped to pursue it myself with some suggestion that they put together a comprehensive conservation program -- that the President do that and present it to the Congress, because I think it would be very persuasive.

BAYLEY: What other personal experiences with the President did you have?

NELSON: I took Louis Hanson over to introduce him to the President shortly after Louis was elected the Wisconsin Democratic Chairman. We had a very interesting 35 minutes, just the President, Louis and I, and we talked about his campaign in Wisconsin and he asked Louis how it looked, politically, around the state now. I recall that Louis told him that he thought it looked very fine, that the President would carry Louis' district, the 10th, very substantially. We discussed various Presidential candidates and Goldwater's name came up. The President said, and I think this is an almost exact quote, (it's also the way Louis Hanson remembers it), "well, the Republicans couldn't possibly nominate Goldwater, could they? He's too damn dumb."

BAYLEY: I remember you were standing in the rain with the President at the airport in Chicago -- a rather historic occasion -- when he returned to Washington very suddenly with a cold.

NELSON: Yes, we had him scheduled in Milwaukee. That was the time of the Cuban confrontation -- this must have been a Monday although I'm not positive about that -- somewhere around there, but it might have been a little later, but we had a --

BAYLEY: I think you should start with your earlier conversation that leads up to that.

NELSON: About three weeks before, in October, we flew in a private plane (Attorney General Bob Kennedy, Attorney General John Reynolds and myself) to the Green Bay Packer-Detroit Lions football game in Green Bay. On the way up Bob Kennedy asked me what I thought about the Cuban situation. I said I gathered from my trips and from visiting around the state that the President was just barely keeping abreast of the public opinion. He had announced an economic boycott which didn't really amount to much. This was just a matter of a few days before this trip. I then said to the Attorney General that in my judgment the time was coming when the President was probably going to have to declare a belligerent blockade of Cuba. At that stage, Bob Kennedy said, no, no, that would be the worst possible thing to do. He said that once we put up a belligerent blockade the Russians would start to run it and test it at one place or another and we would get into a very explosive and dangerous situation and he

didn't think that was the best alternative at all. What we really ought to do, he said, if it came to that, rather than a belligerent blockade, we ought to launch an all-out attack on Cuba and clean the matter up -- invade them and clean it up in a matter of days. Then it was after that, that we were in Chicago and we went down to meet the President to come to the Milwaukee airport where he was to make a speech. It was then announced that he had a slight fever and cold, or something or other, and he had to go back to Washington. So I met him -- I went out to the airport, shook hands with him briefly and exchanged a word or two at the entrance to the plane. As I observed to whoever was with us on the way back to Milwaukee, the President looked pretty healthy to me and it seemed rather clear that some kind of crisis was on.

BAYLEY: All right, we just have one other item in our outline here and that's the matter of the appointment of John Gronouski as Postmaster General. I believe you had some words with the White House and the President on that.

NELSON: Well, I had a call from Ralph Dungan who asked me what I thought of John Gronouski, who was my appointment as state tax commissioner. I told him we hadn't gotten along very well and that, as a matter of fact, I had appointed him -- he had been an Assistant Professor over in Michigan -- and then in the first political dispute I had with the State Chairman, John Gronouski joined up in an all-out battle against me. I was attempting to replace the State Chairman and, therefore, my personal relationship hadn't been very good. But, I said, that if you ask

me about his ability, he is a very able, a hard worker, that he has lots of capacity and if the President was thinking of him for any appointment, I was sure he would be very able and would be faithful to the President. Dungan made the comment that that was the first time he had had anybody make this kind of objective observation about one who has opposed him politically. I asked him what he was being considered for. Dungan said he wasn't being considered for anything but that he was in the business of recruiting talent and this just involved plans for the future. Well, this was probably about a Thursday afternoon and on Sunday, at home, I received a call from Mike Manatos at the White House to tell me that Gronouski had been appointed Postmaster General --

BAYLEY: would be appointed --

NELSON: would be appointed and it would be announced the next morning.

And I just told him --

BAYLEY: Congressman Zablocki, I remember, announced it in Wisconsin on Sunday at a picnic --

NELSON: so I just told him they could take that appointment and go jump in the lake, as this was about the third time in a row I hadn't been consulted on appointments affecting Wisconsin. Then the next morning, early, I got a call to come over to see the President. It was Monday morning and the announcement was not made Monday morning. I talked to the President and he said to me that he thought that the consultation Thursday with Dungan had cleared it and so forth and so on, and that he hoped this would be all right. I guess they announced it the next day.

BAYLEY: I think that's right.

NELSON: It was on this occasion that the President told me he had altered his conservation trip plans and would come to Wisconsin. The two things may very well have been connected.

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D. C.

August 29, 1963

The Honorable John F. Kennedy
President of the United States
The White House

Dear Mr. President:

Some time ago you suggested I might send you some ideas respecting your proposed resources and conservation tour. Along with this letter I have enclosed several pages of quotations some of which may be fitting for your speeches.

Though it is likely most everything I might suggest has been considered, I will toss in all that occurs to me in the hope some of it might be useful.

The fact that you are going on a nation-wide tour will command great attention for several reasons including the fact that no President has done exactly this before. The question is how to maximize the effect -- how to hit the issue hard enough to leave a permanent impression after the headlines have faded away -- how to shake people, organizations and legislators hard enough to gain strong support for a comprehensive national, state and local long-range plan for our resources.

In the very first speech of your tour I think it is important to dramatize the whole issue by stating that you are leaving the Capital to make a nation-wide appeal for the preservation of our vital resources because this is America's last chance. That the next decade or so is in fact our last chance can be documented with a mass of bone chilling statistics -- these statistics and what they mean will paint a picture with a compelling force understandable to everyone. Rachel Carson's book on pesticides is a perfect example of the kind of impact that can be made with specifics. The situation is even worse in this country respecting water pollution, soil erosion, wildlife habitat destruction, vanishing open spaces, shortage of parks etc.

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As you well know, for more than a half century conservationists have been writing, speaking and pleading for the preservation of our resources. Though the public is dimly aware that all around them, here and there, outdoor assets are disappearing, they really don't see the awful dimension of the catastrophe. The real failure has been in political leadership. This is a political issue to be settled at the political level but strangely politicians seldom talk about it. Now for the first time in fifty years, conservationists have the President speaking for them. Since your voice will be heard, I think you should tell the whole story in your series of speeches.

The public should be told:

That there is no domestic issue more important to America in the long run than the conservation and proper use of our natural resources, including fresh water, clean air, tillable soil, forests, wilderness, habitat for wildlife, minerals and recreational assets.

That, in fact, our destruction of the landscape, the pollution of our air and waters, the overuse and abuse of our outdoor resources has proceeded at a pace in excess of any other culture in history.

That we need only look to the Middle East, China and India to see what happens to a culture and economy when it destroys its resources.

That the urgency of the issue right now is that the pace of our destruction has accelerated in the past 20 years, and we have only another 10 or 15 years in which to take steps to conserve what is left.

Theodore Roosevelt said 50 years ago:

"...There is no question now before the nation of equal gravity with the question of the conservation of our natural resources."

There have been many other similar warnings before and since. But day in and day out, America has been too preoccupied with other problems to retain a sense of urgency about the crisis

in our natural resources.

Recently, Brooks Atkinson, in the New York Times, reported: "No doubt, the history of American civilization could be written in terms of our changing attitudes toward nature. In 300 years we have passed through three significant stages: (1) Indifference or hostility to nature; (2) romantic delight in nature, and now (3) fear that man, the great predator, may destroy nature and civilization at the same time." In the same review he states: "Lois and Louis Darling conclude a study of the evolution and anatomy of birds ('Bird' is their title) with a chapter in the same somber key: 'We squander in a few years the fossil fuel, coal and oil, which are the accumulation of untold ages. We poison the water and the air.'"

"In 'Face of North America' Peter Farb makes a similar conclusion: 'The whole web of inter-relations developed in the wilderness over millions of years has been irretrievably lost.'"

"If there is a fourth stage in American nature writing, it will portray a world short of food, cramped for space and bereft of beauty.'"

Americans in all walks of life are interested in natural resources. However, up to now there has not been any sustaining strong, central organization or leadership. Nevertheless, this interest is amazingly widespread. It cuts across political party lines, economic classes and geographical barriers.

The members of this vast interest group include all people in one way or another from ladies with a flower box in the window to the deer hunters with high powered rifles; the boaters, who range from kids with flat bottomed scows to the wealthy yachtsmen; family campers, whose numbers are growing rapidly; bird watchers; skin-divers; wilderness crusaders; farmers; soil conservationists; fishermen; insect collectors; foresters; just plain Sunday drivers etc.

Most of these people have their own organizations, some of them national as well as local, and they fight with a fury to advance and protect the phase of conservation in which they are interested. They will rally behind your leadership in this field in which most interested participants have the feeling that their personal interest is not sufficiently matched by official interest at the governmental level. Most of these groups also have their own national and local

publications and their specialized news reporters and columnists, all of whom are hungry for material and will be greatly stimulated by any demonstration of Presidential interest in their specialty.

The projected population growth gives one a frightening picture of the kind of pressure we will be putting against our resource base a few years from now. It is estimated that if our current population of 190 million persons continues to grow for only one century at its present rate, the population of the United States would be about 1 billion persons. This is equivalent to one third of the world's present inhabitants, and would be roughly equivalent to moving all of the population of Europe, Latin America and Africa into the territory of the 50 states. The whole populous Eastern part of the United States is already in desperate circumstances for lack of recreational opportunity for the ordinary citizen, and the crisis grows worse each year.

I think it is most important that your series of speeches cover the widest possible range of resource preservation, beginning with a major speech in the East on the crisis in our densely populated areas. Then, it seems to me, all of the issues involved should be touched upon as you move across the country; hydro-electric power, recreation, reclamation, pollution of air and water, scenic beauty (or, scenic pollution), wilderness, seashore access, and the recreational issues including fishing, hunting, skiing, hiking, and camping. In other words, I am suggesting that your series of speeches constitute a total presentation of the whole problem in both its broadest and its most specific aspects.

I also think that it is important to say something on the issue of comprehensive national, state and local planning of long term recreation needs, and the need for cooperation among all levels of government and all conservation groups. The Congress has already made a long step toward comprehensive planning by providing planning grants to states and localities for long range planning, including recreational planning. It is an unfortunate fact that no state in the nation has a comprehensive long range recreation plan, and will not have one until Wisconsin completes its plan with the use of Federal money, within one year from now. The same is true for all practical purposes of the Federal government.

We have grown very rapidly. As the frontier pushed West, we failed to act every step of the way until it was too late -- recreation areas are gone, the lands are drained, the water is polluted.

Only when our resources have been destroyed do we begin to worry and think and frantically search for some area to acquire and protect for the public to use.

I have rather rambled all over the lot in this letter, but the subject matter rambles that way too -- into everyone's life in a thousand ways.

In summary, I think it is important that you spell out the crisis in its broadest terms, and that every aspect of resource management and conservation be touched upon. This is necessary for public understanding. It is important also that every one of the hundreds of specialized magazines and newspapers be able to quote something from your speeches that is important to their field of interest and to their readers.

Sincerely,

GAYLORD NELSON
U. S. Senator