

Michael G. Gretchen Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/23/1965
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(1912 - 1983) Board member, district 6, United Mine Workers of America; campaign worker, Kennedy for President campaign, West Virginia (1960), discusses the 1960 campaign in Brooke County, West Virginia, and personal contact with John F. Kennedy, among other issues.

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*Eleven letters, dated from 09/04/1959 – 02/10/1961 from John F. Kennedy to Michael G. Gretchen were donated with the oral history. Copies of these letters can be found with the original transcript.

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Michael G. Gretchen
Michael G. Gretchen

July 23 - 1972
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Michael G. Gretchen – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

With

Michael G. Gretchen

February 23, 1965
Windsor Heights, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with Mr. Michael G. Gretchen of Windsor Heights, West Virginia. The interview is taking place in Mr. Gretchen's home on February 23, 1965. Mr. Gretchen in 1960, as well as today, is a District 6 board member of the United Mine Workers of America. Mike, would you tell me how you first got interested in the candidacy of Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

GRETCHEN: I first met Senator Kennedy in Charleston, West Virginia on May 10, 1959. At that time he impressed me as being—he impressed me that he would make a very good president of the United States, and from that day on I continued to campaign on his behalf.

YOUNG: Mike, what was the official position of the union which you represent as the primary approached?

GRETCHEN: The union, the United Mine Workers of America, took no position. They endorsed no candidate for the presidency at that time.

YOUNG: Well, did you ever find there was any difficulty in being a union representative and also being active in politics, especially on Senator Kennedy's side?

GRETCHEN: No, sir, there was no difficulty. In fact, many of the people in this area were very pleased that I, as a union representative, was supporting Senator Kennedy.

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YOUNG: Mike, you mentioned that you felt from the first time you met the senator that he would be a desirable presidential candidate. As the primary warmed up in West Virginia, could you list the things that you felt helped the senator in this part of West Virginia?

GRETCHEN: First of all, I think it was his personality. It seemed that any time anyone met him they just became close to him. He made friends very easily and he remembered, if he met you once, he remembered you and called you by your first name the next time that he saw you or met you.

YOUNG: Mike, both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] seemed to have a pretty good liberal voting record as far as organized labor was concerned. Did Senator Kennedy seem, in this part of West Virginia, to talk about any particular issues which helped in the primary?

GRETCHEN: Yes. One of the issues that Senator Kennedy was surprised about was that the State of West Virginia, being Democratic for a number of years and having no wage and hour law and a lot of things that he felt that labor should have had and that should have been passed in the legislature of the state of West Virginia. He felt that the state of West Virginia should have passed a minimum wage and hour law and other laws that would be beneficial to labor. He felt that West Virginia was behind in their legislation.

YOUNG: This, of course, was a state matter. Did he indicate that if elected president he might use any of his influence that would naturally come to a Democratic president in West Virginia politics?

GRETCHEN: Yes, he did. He felt that this being a Democratic state, we should have been leading in labor laws, laws for the benefit of the laboring man in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Mike, would you say a few words about the community in which you live, Windsor Heights, and its economic situation in 1960, and then talk for a few minutes about the economic conditions of the miners that you represent in the upper Ohio Valley, that area between Wheeling and the northern tip of the panhandle?

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GRETCHEN: Well, first I worked in the coal mine here for the Windsor Power House Coal Company and in 1932 there was a layoff and the minute that Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] was elected president, the mine began to work five days a week and continued to work five and six days a week until President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] was elected. Then the mine slacked down and there was a great layoff. The minute again that Senator Kennedy was elected president, the mine started to work fulltime and continued to work fulltime to this date.

YOUNG: Mike, this is a mine—I don't know whether the term "captive mine" is correct. Is it, in describing it?

GRETCHEN: Yes, it is.

YOUNG: Would you explain the meaning of this, what the term means, at least?

GRETCHEN: A "captive mine" is a mine where all the coal that is mined is used at the power plant. They sell no coal. All the coal is used at the Beechbottom Power Plant. Of course, some thirty years ago this was the largest steam power plant in the world. Today it is more or less substation.

YOUNG: Windsor Heights is a community then where most of the miners live that work in this mine?

GRETCHEN: At one time this was a so-called coal mining camp. It was owned by the Windsor Power House Coal Company and they rented the homes to the coal miners that worked at this particular mine. But in 1949 they sold the homes to the people that lived in the homes, but since then many of the coal miners have sold the homes and there are people living here that do not work in the coal mine today.

YOUNG: Is the community largely Democratic or Republican? Do you know the precinct registration figures?

GRETCHEN: Yes, the community is about 360 Democrat to about 50 Republicans.

YOUNG: Almost a small enough group to be a minority. [Laughter]

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GRETCHEN: Right.

YOUNG: Mike, you mentioned Senator Kennedy's interest in wage and hour legislation. Could you suggest any of the other issues that seemed to appeal either to the miners or to Democrats in this whole area in 1960?

GRETCHEN: Well, he impressed me and, I believe, also the people in this area that he was interested in the country as a whole first, and some of the things that he was for may not help today or tomorrow but in the long run it was good for the country. And anything that was good for the country, it seems to the people in this area that that's what Kennedy was for.

YOUNG: Well, in 1960, would you have considered the upper Ohio Valley a part of depressed West Virginia? We hear so much about Appalachia today. Do you think this term was relative to this area in 1960?

GRETCHEN: Yes, it was. In 1960 this was known as a distressed area. There was over 7 per cent unemployed in this area.

YOUNG: Mike, I don't remember myself—did Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. come into this area to campaign?

GRETCHEN: Yes, he did. He spoke at the Wellsburg Courthouse in Brooke County in behalf of Senator Kennedy, and I vividly remember, at that meeting, a lot of coal miners from all the surrounding areas were at that meeting and some of the old coal miners asked me that all they would like was to get close to FDR, Jr. just to touch him or just to see him. I mentioned that to Mr. Roosevelt and he made sure that he shook hands with all the coal miners and those coal miners to this day did not forget that.

YOUNG: You would, I gather, then rate him as fairly effective as a campaigner for Senator Kennedy?

GRETCHEN: Yes, I would.

YOUNG: Mike, there's something else that always comes up in any discussion of the 1960 primary and that, of course, is the issue of the president's religion. Since this is a part of West Virginia which contains a greater number of members of the Catholic faith, would you comment on his religion as it affected the campaign in this part of the state?

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GRETCHEN: I don't think that religion affected the campaign one way or the other, but, of course, the majority of the Catholic people in this area were glad to see a man like Kennedy running for the presidency. But there were people in this area who were more or less against Catholics but they were out 100 percent for Kennedy. It seemed like everybody was out for him because Senator Kennedy impressed them that he was a good man and would make a good president, and religion, in my opinion, did not enter into the campaign.

YOUNG: Mike, even though I'm a native of the county, a nearby neighbor, I wasn't here in 1960. I was living in Columbus, Ohio at the time. Do you remember if there were any attacks on Senator Kennedy from the pulpit by any of the clergymen in the area because of his religion?

GRETCHEN: To my knowledge there were not. It was true that also in the Catholic churches that the priests did not campaign or did not say one word either way in behalf or against Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, did anybody ever say anything to you? I'm thinking of an interview I had with another man in this area who said that he occasionally received anonymous phone calls; that he was a Methodist himself and a very active Protestant layman and was attacked rather viciously because he was campaigning for a Catholic. Did you experience anything like this?

GRETCHEN: No, I did not. It seemed to me that in this area they were just all out for Kennedy and it didn't make any difference and religion was never brought out.

YOUNG: Mike, let's stick with the primary and move on with something else then. Would you evaluate the effectiveness of Senator Humphrey's campaign in Brooke County and in the northern panhandle of West Virginia?

GRETCHEN: Well, I have never met Senator Humphrey, but I remember his being in the area, and especially in Wheeling, and I understand that there was a large turnout to see him and to hear him speak. It seemed that the turnout, although they come out to see and hear Mr. Humphrey, the votes show that they voted for Senator Kennedy.

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YOUNG: Mike, was your own campaign mostly in Brooke County or did you work the whole panhandle?

GRETCHEN: I worked the whole panhandle and part of the state of Ohio.

YOUNG: The Ohio campaign would be in the general election then?

GRETCHEN: Yes.

YOUNG: Well, did there seem to be any difference between—as you noticed it, or as the voters noticed it—the two senators and their platform and program? In other words, did Senator Kennedy seem to stand for one set of principles, and Senator Humphrey another, or was there a great similarity?

GRETCHEN: No, I don't think there was too much difference, but what the people in this area felt was that Senator Kennedy could beat the Republican candidate and they felt that Senator Humphrey could not beat the Republican candidate.

YOUNG: What you are saying is that a lot of people were looking beyond the end of their noses to November, is that right?

GRETCHEN: That's true.

YOUNG: Mike, in this series of interviews I have interviewed Marshall West and Bill Jacobs who were, of course, the co-state chairmen for Humphrey. What about the effectiveness or the size of the Humphrey organization in this particular area?

GRETCHEN: Well, in Brooke County, to my knowledge, there was no organization or there was not particularly anybody out working for Humphrey. Every place I went it seems they were more or less solid for Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Mike, did you have any personal contacts with the senator or do you remember any meetings with him, any conversation that might be interesting to some future historian?

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GRETCHEN: Yes, as I mentioned, the first time I met Senator Kennedy was on May 10, 1959, in Charleston and I had breakfast with him. There's a picture on the wall that I had taken with Senator Kennedy right after that breakfast. He spoke at the Elks Country Club, I just don't remember the date, but the Catholic women from Windsor Heights served that luncheon. At that meeting it was overcrowded and at that meeting a coal miner presented Senator Kennedy with a coal miner's hard hat and Senator Kennedy told this coal miner—his name is John Chuciak—that he would cherish that hat and that he would remember the coal miners especially in Brooke County for the rest of his life.

YOUNG: That was the luncheon that was at the Wellsburg Elks Club, wasn't it?

GRETCHEN: Yes, sir.

YOUNG: Were there any other meetings with him that you remember particularly?

GRETCHEN: Yes. When Senator Kennedy was in Wheeling and he had a meeting scheduled for all labor leaders of the area and I happened to be walking past one of the rooms to the meeting when Senator Kennedy hollered at me. He had a press conference and he asked me to wait a moment. He asked me to take him into this room to introduce him to all the labor leaders that he met with that day.

YOUNG: Mike, was this still in the primary?

GRETCHEN: Yes, this was in the primary.

YOUNG: Were there any other contacts that you remember particularly? I was just going to add that I remember I was asked to sit on the platform as the quest of Judge Pryor [Ralph E. Pryor] the night that the president came in Cleveland Bailey's [Cleveland M. Bailey] campaign. I had a cold and couldn't go, and I think it rained pretty hard that night. Were you present at that meeting?

GRETCHEN: Yes, I was, and I will remember that day the rest of my life because it happened to be on my fiftieth birthday. After, the speaking Congressman Bailey asked Adolph Pacifico, who was president of District 6, and myself to come on back to shake hands with President Kennedy. The minute that the president saw me he ignored the rest of the crowd and came over to me and he grabbed my arm

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in a hammerlock and I walked all the way to the car with him. We both got soaking wet. He remembered my wife and he remembered my son and asked me about them, and he invited me to ride to the airport in the car with him.

I also remember the time that he spoke in Bellaire, Ohio, and after the meeting he stopped at the hospital to see Mr. Pacifico, who was in the hospital at that time. Then at the airport Senator Kennedy introduced me to his wife [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] and he told her to sit and talk with me while he sat over and had a sandwich and a bowl of soup. I sat there and talked to his wife about ten minutes and they had the cameras on us and I didn't know it at that time. After it was over Mrs. Kennedy says, "we can relax now." I asked her why. She says, "Well, didn't you know? Look behind you." And here were these huge cameras on us while I was talking to her.

YOUNG: Was that the same night as the Cleveland Bailey rally on Wheeling Island?

GRETCHEN: No, sir. That was the day that he spoke in Bellaire, Ohio, during the primaries—before the primaries.

YOUNG: But, the airport was still the Wheeling airport?

GRETCHEN: Yes, sir.

YOUNG: Mike, as you campaigned for the senator in the primary—this again may be rather repetitious—and as you tried to convert the unconverted to the Kennedy bandwagon, what did you find were some of your best arguments?

GRETCHEN: Well, I didn't have to use much of an argument because everybody had seen or heard Senator Kennedy speak and it seemed like I didn't have to do much convincing. Everybody was of the opinion that what we need is a Democrat president and that they felt that Senator Kennedy was the man to beat the Republican nominee.

YOUNG: Mike, we've talked about your role in the primary and some of the issues in the primary. How did your work change then between May and November as you got ready to campaign for the official Democratic candidate, at least from the Democratic [National] Convention until November?

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GRETCHEN: Well, I found then that all labor and everyone in this area was behind Senator Kennedy. I also saw where he helped the Democrat ticket, especially locally. He helped to sway over many straight Democratic tickets.

YOUNG: Did you find the nature of your arguments or your political convincing changing at all or did you use pretty much the arguments that you've mentioned in connection with the primary?

GRETCHEN: Well, the only arguments we had to use is the unemployment. Look what has happened in the seven or eight years of the Republican administration, and everyone was convinced that we needed a change. They felt that it could not get worse. They had confidence in President Kennedy.

YOUNG: You didn't find the religious issues then being raised in the general election?

GRETCHEN: No, sir.

YOUNG: You're kind of unusual because you live in West Virginia and I think your office is in Ohio, isn't it?

GRETCHEN: Yes.

YOUNG: In Bellaire. Theodore White [Theodore H. White], in his book on the making of a president indicated that Senator Kennedy was most disappointed in the outcome in Ohio—in fact, that Ohio may have disappointed him more than any other state in the general election. People lined the streets and came out to cheer him and yet Ohio didn't support him. Would you make a comment on that since you have one foot in Ohio?

GRETCHEN: Well, that is true. My district embraces the whole state of Ohio and the northern panhandle of West Virginia; therefore, I work quite a bit or spend quite a bit of time in the state of Ohio. The reason, I believe, was that the Democrats were not solidly organized and they were too confident when the right to work issue in 1956 came up in Ohio. All labor got organized, and as a result the state of Ohio went Democratically solid. Then in 1960 they were too confident. They didn't get out and put out work that they should have done. They didn't get out and work as hard as we did in West Virginia.

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YOUNG: I don't remember. Was Ray Bliss [Ray C. Bliss] yet running Ohio politics in 1960? Had he been made the state chairman?

GRETCHEN: I don't remember whether he was state chairman at that time or not.

YOUNG: Or at least the Democrats didn't have a Ray Bliss in Ohio. [Laughter]

GRETCHEN: Right.

YOUNG: Let's move on then to something else and that would be the reaction to the president's program, generally known as the New Frontier, but specific points in it. Do you feel that the people in the northern part of West Virginia who supported President Kennedy were pleased with the president's actions with respect to West Virginia?

GRETCHEN: Yes, they were. They had a great deal of confidence in President Kennedy, and they all felt that he was going to do a good job. We could see, in this area, things picking up. Work started picking up immediately. Things started getting better, and people had a lot of confidence in him and felt that he was going to be one of the greatest presidents that we ever had.

YOUNG: Mike, there's something I left out about a minute ago that I wanted to ask about the general election. That was this: that in West Virginia, as the November election approached, was there any feeling on the part of other Democratic candidates that having a Catholic at the head of the ticket might adversely affect either the United States senator race or the gubernatorial race or even the local races for sheriff and commissioner?

GRETCHEN: No, they all seemed to just accept Senator Kennedy as the winning candidate, and all the candidates, whether they were running for constable or sheriff or state legislature, they all seemed to feel that the senator was going to help the ticket all the way down.

YOUNG: There wasn't then any feeling that he might be a real liability? You think he was regarded as an asset, at least in this part of the state?

GRETCHEN: Yes I do. The only changes, I believe, that were

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made in this area were maybe in Ohio County. Some of the staunch Republicans, the so-called silk stocking area, I understood that many of them went and changed their politics to Democrat just so they could vote for President Kennedy in the primaries.

YOUNG: These then were, you mean, wealthy Catholics that did this?

GRETCHEN: Yes.

YOUNG: Okay. Let's—we're kind of jumping all over the place here, Mike. We want to go back now to something you touched on a minute ago. You mentioned the general improvement of economic conditions following the president's election. Would you comment on the reaction among people you knew to the food stamp program, or the funneling of federal contracts into West Virginia, the Peace Corps, the other domestic programs of President Kennedy? Medicare certainly would be one of them, too, that I'm sure you would get reactions to, since your own union has its own clinic in Bellaire.

GRETCHEN: Yes, Medicare was the big issue the moment that Senator Kennedy was elected president, and all the people in this area—the laboring class of people—were for Medicare. They felt that he was doing right and that he was thinking of the people in West Virginia, especially the needy. The first thing he did when he was elected president, he gave them more food on this surplus food program and gave them a variety of food that they never got before. Then it seemed like all the business in this area had confidence in the president and things just seemed to start picking up all through the area.

YOUNG: Well, Mike, at that time were there members of your union that had been unemployed for some time that were called back to work? Did you notice anything of this sort happening?

GRETCHEN: Yes. Some of the men were called back at this mine. This mine was shut down for a number of months. It started to work and some of the men were called back, but all the rest of the mines in this area started picking up, hiring coal miners, and they began to work five and six days a week and they have been working ever since.

YOUNG: I think this is a local note that we might add. From my observations you can always tell when

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coal is good in the nation because the so-called marginal mines in Brooke County begin to pick up. I think you have a name for these—dog holes, is that right, or what's the term that is used for the small independent operator that may just employ a few workers?

GRETCHEN: Well, they use that term in the southern part of West Virginia, I think, and in Kentucky. But here we have very few of those so-called dog holes, and most of those are non-union. They're not paying the wages and most of those people that work in those mines receive surplus food and relief. They cannot make a living working in those mines, and the conditions are deplorable in those mines.

YOUNG: Well, what percentage of miners in Brooke County would you say fit in this category? Could you make any kind of an estimate?

GRETCHEN: Oh, I would say about fifty miners all together in Brooke County.

YOUNG: Out of a total of how many?

GRETCHEN: Out of a total? Well, in Brooke County we only have one big mine left today, but there are more members in Brooke County receiving pensions than there are actually working miners.

YOUNG: In other words, there are a great many retired miners in the county.

GRETCHEN: That's right.

YOUNG: Mike, there's no question about the fact that for a few brief weeks West Virginia, along with Wisconsin, shared the national stage, and a great deal was made of the level of public services and the poverty of West Virginia. Would you comment on your feelings about this and the feelings of the people you talked to? The national news media?

GRETCHEN: Well, I think the national news media played up West Virginia because they felt that West Virginia was more or less responsible for giving Kennedy the start to being elected president of the United States. West Virginia was no different than many other states

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that had a great deal of unemployment. The coal miners of West Virginia were hard hit. The mines went from hand loading to mechanical and naturally that put a great deal of coal miners out of work. West Virginians are very proud people and they did not like the publicity and the image that they tried to make people believe that West Virginians were.

I think that President Kennedy's educational program has done a great deal to help the people find other jobs. It seems like the slack is taken up. Of course, many of the coal miners went into different areas and a different line of work, and everywhere you go, whether it's in Detroit, Michigan, or in the copper mines, they all say that any time a coal miner comes from West Virginia that he's a very good worker and it doesn't take him long to learn to do other work. And I believe with the educational program that President Kennedy has started and Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] is going to continue, I think that West Virginia is a great state and is going to be one of the greatest states again.

YOUNG: Mike, in the campaign, were there a great many volunteers for Kennedy or people who hadn't been active in politics coming into politics because of Senator Kennedy?

GRETCHEN: Yes, there were. In fact, all of the workers in area were volunteers. There were people who got out and worked and campaigned in this election that were never interested in politics before. They just seemed to embrace and accept Senator Kennedy and they seemed to take a liking to him and loved him and they just wanted to elect him president. And especially the women—many of the women that never were active in politics before were active in the 1960 campaign for President Kennedy.

YOUNG: Mike, you mentioned that the senator attracted more women maybe than most politicians did. Did you notice any other patterns in terms of the volunteers, in terms of occupational groups or religious affiliation or minority group—anything like that?

GRETCHEN: No, it just seemed that all the groups accepted him. I remember the time that he was in Wheeling at the McClure Hotel. That place was so packed that you couldn't even move, and many of the people there, I knew. I will never forget some of the colored people that I met there that I knew for years. They were so impressed with Kennedy and they were all going out and working for Kennedy. They just felt that Kennedy was the people's choice

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and that he would do great things for the people, not only of West Virginia, but for the United States.

YOUNG: Mike, this leads to another question I should have asked some time ago, I guess. Do you think that the Negroes from this area, the colored people who were attracted to the senator, were attracted because they felt that

some action in terms of civil rights was necessary? My own feelings about the area, being a native, would be the Negro population in this area certainly had not received the same kind of discrimination that they had further south. Was civil rights at all an issue in any Negro support of the senator?

GRETCHEN: No, sir. The civil rights issue was not even brought up. The only thing that I remember was that Kennedy in his speech state that all Americans should be treated right and all Americans should have the same opportunity to work and be treated the same, but I don't believe at that time the Negroes knew that Senator Kennedy was going to propose a civil rights bill. But they were all out for him, nevertheless. They just felt he was going to make a good president for everyone.

YOUNG: Mike, I know you can't analyze these things exactly scientifically, but, of the people that volunteered, did many remain active in politics? How did the percentages work out on this?

GRETCHEN: Well, I think that they all remained active. If they didn't get out on the polls, it was a daily talk amongst the women and the men—when they talked to their neighbors, when they went to the store—they talked about Senator Kennedy and felt that he was going to make a great president.

YOUNG: In Brooke County itself, the senator had the support of all of the factions of the Democratic party? Would this be a fair analysis?

GRETCHEN: Yes, I think it would be.

YOUNG: It might remain to be said how many different factions there are, but I think it's safe. Why don't you comment on that.

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GRETCHEN: Well, in Brooke County, I remember some of the people that started being active in politics, but they stayed in the background and did everything they could for President Kennedy. It seemed like that year all the factions were forgotten after the primary, and they all just went out to support President Kennedy. I remember that they all just grouped together and worked together as one unit for the ticket and especially for President Kennedy.

YOUNG: I supposed it would be safe to say that in any county in the country the Democrats and the Republicans both have at least two factions in each county and I would assume the same thing would be true here. But you feel that the hatchet was buried, at least in terms of the presidential candidate in the primaries.

GRETCHEN: Yes, it was. That's true. I don't think it would be a very good election if we didn't have two factions or people running in the primary same as we have the two-party system in the general election.

YOUNG: You need horses to have a horse race. [Laughter]

GRETCHEN: Right.

YOUNG: Mike, you mentioned when they started the interview that you thought you'd had an unusually large number of contacts with President Kennedy. Would you want to review those?

GRETCHEN: Yes, I had dinner about eight different times with the senator. I have about seventeen letters that he has written me, some of them political, some of them of a personal nature. We also still have a Christmas card that the president sent us with his family's picture on it. The thing that impressed me is that every time I met the senator and the people surrounding me that he remembered them all by their first name, remembered where he had first met them. If he met them just once, he remembered where he met them and the people of West Virginia, I don't think, will ever forget President Kennedy. In fact, on that fatal day of November 22 all the people were in tears, and everywhere you went in this area, in Ohio and West Virginia, for days and days the people, and especially the women, cried and they just could not get over it. They just felt that he didn't have a chance; that if he had a chance, that he would be one of the greatest presidents that the United States ever had; that he was not selfish; that he was not working for any

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individual or any clique or any group of people; that he had the interest of the country as a whole at heart and he was going to do what is best for the country as a whole.

YOUNG: Well, Mike, do you have anything more to add?

GRETCHEN: No, I think that's about all.

YOUNG: Well, thanks a lot.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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