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Biographical Note

Bailey, a Baptist minister and Kennedy for President Campaign worker in Wood County, West Virginia (1960), discusses the 1960 Democratic primary and general elections in West Virginia, the Catholic issue in that state, and John F. Kennedy's legacy in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Harley E. Bailey
Harley E. Bailey
August 1, 1972
Date

James B. Rhoads
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Oral History Interview

with

Reverend Harley Evan Bailey

December 5, 1964
Parkersburg, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Would you tell me, Mr. Bailey, what your first reaction was to the possible presidential candidacy in the West Virginia primary of a member of the Roman Catholic faith?

BAILEY: Well, I felt at first that perhaps his religion would have some effect on him in this state of West Virginia. However, as time proceeded I found that the issue wasn't as great as it seemed to be at the beginning, that people began to think of him as a man and forgot somewhat about his religion.

YOUNG: Why did you feel at the beginning...? What aspects of Catholicism did you think the West Virginia voters might object to?

BAILEY: Well, predominantly because West Virginia is not a Roman Catholic section. It's more Protestant. I felt that since a former president was defeated because he was a Catholic, this might have a great bearing on Mr. Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] being nominated.

YOUNG: You're referring to Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] in the election of 1928?

BAILEY: Yes, that's right.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, would you tell me about your particular role in the primary campaign? How were you related to the candidacy of President Kennedy?

BAILEY: Well, I had known him before and was a friend of his.

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YOUNG: Where did you first meet the late President?

BAILEY: I met him in 1958 when he was here in Parkersburg, West Virginia to lead a parade down Market Street for the candidates to be elected in the November general election.

YOUNG: In the off-year congressional election?

BAILEY: That's right. At that time he was a senator. Of course, he led the parade—he and his wife, Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]—and afterwards he gave the speech at the noon hour at the Chancellor Hotel.

YOUNG: Do you remember any particular impressions in 1958 that stand out in your mind?

BAILEY: Yes, I remember meeting him. He gave a marvelous speech. At that time it was stated that he would become the president one day, that he would perhaps be the next president.

YOUNG: Well, could you go then to the primary in 1960 and describe your reactions after it was known that President Kennedy would be a candidate in the West Virginia primary?

BAILEY: At that time Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was also a candidate here in the state of West Virginia for the nomination for president. However, after hearing both men and feeling out some of the people, I knew then that Mr. Kennedy had the better chance of being nominated in this state. And also I knew that if he was nominated here perhaps he would become the president of the United States.

YOUNG: What were your reasons for believing that Senator Kennedy had the edge over Senator Humphrey?

BAILEY: Well, I thought that he was a much better speaker, that he had just a bit more on the ball, and that he knew the issues a little bit better. And I think he had a world-wide vision or insight into the affairs that faced the world, more so than Mr. Humphrey at that moment.

YOUNG: And that these factors would overcome any religious prejudice that might exist?

BAILEY: Yes, because I felt that the people in the state of West Virginia would base their decision in voting, on the knowledge that the man had and

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what he could do after he became president, rather than on the religious side of it.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, would you go ahead, then? I asked you a minute ago to explain in detail your participation in the primary and I think we got sidetracked. Could we go back to your activity in the primary campaign itself?

BAILEY: Yes. I worked for Mr. Kennedy in the primary. In fact, I worked day and night for him, because, although I knew both men, Mr. Humphrey and also Mr. Kennedy, I felt that Mr. Kennedy was the man. He was my choice. Of course, I worked for him in the primary to help him become nominated, and I was glad to do so because I did feel at that time that he would become one of the greatest leaders that America ever had.

YOUNG: Well, I believe before this interview started you showed me a clipping from the *New York Times* which described your participation in—was it an ox roast? A political rally?

BAILEY: Yes.

YOUNG: What was the date of that clipping in the *New York Times*? Do you have that right there?

BAILEY: Yes, it was dated Monday, May 2, 1960. Of course, the ox roast took place on May 1, 1960, on Sunday afternoon here in the city park in Parkersburg, West Virginia. We had attendance at that time estimated at four thousand people or better.

YOUNG: Would you describe your role in that political affair?

BAILEY: Yes. I was asked by the chairman of our Democratic Party here in Parkersburg, West Virginia, Wood County, to give the invocation or prayer at this meeting. Of course, I was thrilled to have this opportunity to say the prayer that day, because I thought it was a great honor and I was glad that I was asked to do so. Part of the prayer which I gave that day was recorded in the *New York Times* on Monday, May 2, 1960. In that prayer that I gave, this is part of it: "We pray, dear God, that thy blessing may rest upon our speaker today, Senator John F. Kennedy, and give him wisdom

and strength as he seeks to lead our nation in the years ahead. Give to us the constant aid of thy Holy Spirit that true democracy may be established in this our land. Uphold us in high resolve that both government and industry shall

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faithfully serve the people. Enable us to maintain the freedom won by our fathers. Set us firmly against racial prejudices and against cruel and humiliating discriminations. Lead us to seek the just distribution of wealth and of the means of education that all the people may be free to fulfill Thy good purpose for them.” Then, of course, in closing the prayer I stated: “Oh, God of the nations, who desires that all men shall come to fullness of life, give us grace to seek thy kingdom and righteousness that thou mayest bless our nation abundantly and make it to be a blessing in the midst of the earth. In God our Father, we pray. Amen.”

YOUNG: Thank you, Mr. Bailey. Parkersburg is the county seat of Wood County. That’s correct, isn’t it?

BAILEY: That’s right.

YOUNG: Now, as a member of the clergy in this county, could you describe the issue of religion in the county in general? In other words, Parkersburg and the county—those that felt that religion was important and perhaps preached from the pulpit against the President, and then on the other hand, members of the ministry that felt that religion was not an issue—could you comment on both sides?

BAILEY: I think I can. I know that we had quite a few of our Baptist ministers who were much against Mr. Kennedy because of his religion. However, as a Baptist minister, I felt that religion had nothing to do with it, because our Constitution gives everybody the same right to run for office regardless of his religion—or even his color and so forth. But there were some of our men here in Parkersburg, some of the clergymen, who really stood out for the Senator. They disregarded religion because they knew that he was a man who was qualified to lead this nation to victory and to help to bring peace to the world. Does that pretty well...?

YOUNG: Yes, Mr. Bailey. I was going to ask you to further define it this way: Among the members of the clergy that objected to a Catholic president, were their objections specific, or rather of a vague general nature?

BAILEY: I think it was more of a vague general nature than specific.

YOUNG: Well, did such issues as birth control and parochial schools and that sort of thing come up? Were they mentioned from the pulpit? Pulpits, I should say.

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BAILEY: Well, the schools didn't have so much to do with it. They did feel that should he be elected, perhaps he would have the Pope to run things; I mean that was the knowledge they had of things. But they thought that he shouldn't be in there because he was a Catholic—those that opposed him. Others were for him because they knew he had a keen mind and was alert, that he had the knowledge of the world at his fingertips, and that he was able to make the decisions and make them at the right time. Of course, he proved himself, when he later became president, that he did just that. And these men who opposed him so much before his election got onto the bandwagon pretty quickly afterwards when they saw that he was not a man for a particular group but that he was for all the people of the world and for all groups, not any particular segment. And, of course, the statement that he made, "Ask not what the country can do for you but rather what can you do for your country." I think that probably helped these people see that he was a man who was going to work for the benefit of the poor, the rich, all the people of the world.

YOUNG: You say that this lessening of tension came after the general election, in other words, after President Kennedy became an occupant of the White House?

BAILEY: Yes, I think so. I think that it then began to clear away or to dissolve.

YOUNG: What about religion as an issue between the primary and the general election? In other words, did the people who opposed the Senator in the primary continue this opposition through the November election?

BAILEY: Yes, I believe they did. I think the people who were opposed to him in the primary fought him even harder between the primary and the general election. But as I mentioned a few moments ago, after the general election—after he was elected—well, then they began to come back on the other side.

YOUNG: In other words, the President did not do anything as president that stirred up additional fears about religion as an issue?

BAILEY: That's right. That's right.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, if you were to summarize the reasons for Senator Kennedy's victory in both the primary and the general.... Well, I suppose we must sort them out, of course, because in the primary he was running

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against Senator Humphrey and in the general election against Vice President Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon]. Let's take the primary first. What do you think the most important reasons were for his victory in West Virginia in the primary?

BAILEY: I think it was because he went around to the factories and coal mines and places like that and shook hands with the workingmen. This is something that

had never been done before. He got right down to where the common man lived, and they appreciated that. They felt then that he was concerned and was interested in them. I think that was a reason why he got such a tremendous vote here in the state of West Virginia, because even the very commonest man and woman in our state felt that he was for them and that he would be their president.

YOUNG: Well, how did this compare, then, with Senator Humphrey? In other words, what disadvantages did Senator Humphrey have, or what real differences seemed to separate the two primary candidates?

BAILEY: Well, I think it was because Senator Kennedy was able to meet the people more on their common ground than Senator Humphrey. I mean Senator Humphrey was a little bit more distant than Senator Kennedy. I believe Senator Kennedy had a unique way of getting acquainted with people, and people liked the way that he did that. If he met you once, he never forgot you. He wouldn't even have to ask your name next time. He had a great mind to remember the names of people that he had met.

YOUNG: Do you think there were any ideological differences between the two men in the primary? In other words, were they presenting different platforms, or was it largely a question of personality and manner?

BAILEY: I believe it was personality and manner more than anything else. As I mentioned, Kennedy was able to meet everybody on their own ground where Mr. Humphrey was somewhat shy. I mean he couldn't quite do this as well as Mr. Kennedy.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, as old West Virginians, both of us, if my memory serves me correctly, the Democratic presidents carried the state in every presidential election since 1932, except in 1956. Senator Kennedy's victory in 1960—do you think this was just because the state was traditionally Democratic, or were there some special Kennedy features about that presidential election, in November 1960?

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BAILEY: I think that perhaps there were some Kennedy features that entered into that, the fact that the whole Kennedy family came into this state and worked with the people and showed us that they were for us. I think that that had a lot to do with it.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, do you think that the Democratic politicians running on the Democratic ticket in the general election felt that a Catholic at the head of the ticket might pull votes away from them? Was there any reluctance on the part of the gubernatorial or senatorial candidates to be associated with the national ticket in the general election, because of the President's religion?

BAILEY: There was a little shyness there but I don't think it amounted to a whole lot. I think that on the part of some there was the fact that they wanted to just pull away, but as a whole I don't think that was too noticeable.

YOUNG: Let's go on then. As a minister, what would be your general summary of the importance of the Kennedy primary to West Virginia? Did the Kennedy primary leave any long lasting results in West Virginia, or was it simply a newspaper story for the moment and little beyond that?

BAILEY: No, I think he left some results that will be here, well, as long as there's a state, because not just the fact that he came into the state and met the people and was with the people, but also because he did things for the state that had never been done before. In fact, he mentioned time and time again that it was West Virginia that made it possible for him to become president of the United States, because we seemed to be the key state at that time that gave him the nomination. From then on he went on to become nominated for the presidency and then, of course, elected. I would say that he did things here in the state that the people will never forget. I mean you can talk to people here in Parkersburg, now, and they say that they had never met a man just like him before. He could go down one side of the street and yell to the other side and call you by name because he knew you that well. He left some memories here that will never be forgotten.

YOUNG: Can you think of any Kennedy policies as president that West Virginians felt very strongly about? I'm thinking, for instance, of the Food Stamp plan, the North-South highway, any other programs which directly or indirectly benefited West Virginians, that West

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Virginians were most concerned about?

BAILEY: Well, I think increasing this welfare work, making it possible for more people to be taken care of, I think that was one of the big things, because down in the southern part of the state people were in desperate condition. They needed help and they needed it now, and, of course, immediately after he got into office he started doing something to give relief to these people. He didn't wait until after he was in there a few months, but right after he took office immediately began to do something that would really be an uplift to our state. People still remember that.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, did you hear any unfavorable reactions to the New Frontier with respect to West Virginia?

BAILEY: No. According to my knowledge, I think the people were well pleased with what he did and with the New Frontier program that he had in operation in the United States.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, would you tell me of any personal contacts with the President that you think might be of interest?

BAILEY: Well, in 1958, at the time that he led the parade down Market Street in Parkersburg, my wife [Helen Catherine Bailey] and two children [Carolyn Bailey; Lynn Bailey] were also in that parade—we were in convertibles. At that time I was candidate for county commissioner for Wood County. That was my first time for becoming a candidate for public office. Then the other time I was talking to him was when I gave a prayer for him at the Wood County ox roast in Parkersburg. At that time my little girl, Carolyn, was nine years of age. She was on the platform with me and she talked with the Senator. And just, I believe, about two months prior to his assassination, the President of the United States sent me a personal letter, and in that letter he remembered my oldest daughter's name: he called her Carolyn. Of course, I suppose perhaps he associated her name with his own daughter, Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy]. But every time I had a chance to be in his presence I took the opportunity, because I thought I was in the presence of one of the greatest Americans that ever lived. Because I met Sam Rayburn [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn] and talked to him personally and other great Americans. But I think that John F. Kennedy was perhaps the greatest of all Americans we have had.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, I know it's always difficult to assess your own role in politics, but do you think that as a Baptist clergyman your identification with the Kennedy campaign helped swing any votes to the

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Senator in the primary? In other words, were you able to convert voters that might be anti-Catholic and help show them that the President's religion would not interfere in public policy?

BAILEY: Yes, I think so, because in 1958—as I mentioned a few moments ago—when I ran for office, I ran against perhaps the top man in Wood County, the top politician.

YOUNG: This was for county commissioner?

BAILEY: That's right. He was a professional and I was just a beginner in this work.

YOUNG: Who was your opponent?

BAILEY: Lloyd Amos, who won it because he had been in there before. But at that time I received thirteen thousand and some votes and only missed being elected by one hundred seventy-six votes, which I felt was pretty good. So I felt that in Wood County I had a lot of people that believe in me and supported me. I believe that the very fact that I was a Baptist minister and worked for the Senator, I was able to swing a good many votes in his column in the primary and also even in the general election.

YOUNG: Well, did you use any specific arguments in favor of the Senator that we haven't covered earlier in the interview? In other words, how did you draw off the hostility that might exist to a Catholic candidate? How did you explain this to your personal friends as you met them on the street and talked, and that sort of thing?

BAILEY: Well, I've always been a student of history. I also taught history some in high school. I overcame that by the fact that I would say to them that the Constitution of the United States gives everybody the right to run for office regardless of his religion or his color, and so forth. And it wasn't too hard to get these people to see that they should forget about the religious part of it and think in terms of the man. And when they began to think that way, of course, they were willing to give him support and I think that's the thing that overcame it.

YOUNG: Well, did you make any statements from your own pulpit? In other words, were there any sermons or did you in church announcements or sermons touch on the issue of politics and Catholicism before the primary or before the general election?

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BAILEY: No, Sir. That's one thing that I don't even mention in the pulpit. I stay away from it altogether, even in my radio broadcasts that I had at that time and still have. I stay away from that because I feel that in a church you ought to be primarily devoted to teaching and preaching the Word of God and stay clear from anything that might be debatable.

YOUNG: In other words, your influence was transmitted simply by lending your presence and then by private contacts, rather than by public utterances?

BAILEY: That's right, outside of the prayer that I gave at the park.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, I think we touched on this earlier, but just to summarize: Would you indicate the Protestant denominations that expressed the most hostility to the President because of his religion?

BAILEY: As far as I know, I think mostly the Baptist and the Methodist people. I think the other churches pretty much lined up with him.

YOUNG: Or at least kept quiet?

BAILEY: That's right, especially those that were on his side; I mean those—his party.

YOUNG: Well, then, to look at it another way: Did you notice that enthusiasm for the President was especially high among the Catholics? For instance, would a

Republican Catholic be likely to vote in the general election for a Democrat, simply because he was a Catholic?

BAILEY: Well, perhaps there was some of it, but it wasn't too noticeable. I mean I think the people still voted their party pretty much.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, did you notice here that any members of the Roman Catholic faith may have switched their registration in order to vote for Senator Kennedy in the primary? In other words, Republican Catholics switching and registering as Democrats?

BAILEY: I think that the registration, as far as I remember at the time, remained pretty much the same. There might have been a few but, if so, it wasn't noticeable at all.

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YOUNG: Would you be able to estimate the percentage of the Catholic population in Wood County? Would you have any idea as to the number of communicants of the Roman Catholic Church as opposed to the Protestants in this county?

BAILEY: Well, the percentage is very small. The percentage of the Catholic people here wouldn't be over 2 ½, I suppose, or 3 percent, probably.

YOUNG: Not very significant.

BAILEY: That's right.

YOUNG: Mr. Bailey, in concluding this interview, do you have any summary statement with respect to President Kennedy and his impact on West Virginia, or your view of him, as a clergyman in Wood County?

BAILEY: Well, I think that the people of West Virginia will always feel that he was their president and that he was one of the greatest presidents that we've have ever had. In fact, he spoke more of West Virginia than any president we ever had before. In fact, the state was hardly ever mentioned before, until Mr. Kennedy became president of the United States. And I'd like to say that I feel, as a minister, that the President was in there to help all groups of people. And I don't think once in his time that he ever differentiated one group from the other, because he was thinking of all the people in terms of one, and not any special segment of the people. And I think the fact that he won the nomination and then the presidency was due to the fact that he had first-hand knowledge of what he was trying to do, and the people of the United States knew that. And, of course, the people of our state knew that he had the answers to the problems that we were facing. Therefore, in the November election they gave him their vote.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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