

**William Wallace Barron, Oral History Interview – 8/10/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William Wallace Barron  
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**Biographical Note**

Barron, attorney general of West Virginia from 1956 to 1961 and governor of West Virginia from 1961 to 1965, discusses programs on the state and national level to improve the economic and living situations for West Virginians, John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Hubert H. Humphrey's 1960 primary campaigns in West Virginia, and Barron's relationship with JFK, among other issues.

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# William Wallace Barron

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Oral History Interview

with

William Wallace Barron

August 10, 1965  
Charleston, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This is an interview with former Governor W. W. Barron of West Virginia. Governor Barron is being interviewed in his office in the Nelson Building in Charleston, West Virginia, on August 10, 1965. Also present for the interview is Mr. Con Hardman. Governor Barron, what role did Mr. Hardman play in your administration?

BARRON: Mr. Hardman joined me during the middle of the gubernatorial primary in 1960 as my press secretary and gave me very sound advice on how to handle not only the press, but my over-all public relations. I credit Mr. Hardman with doing a tremendous amount of good for me. In fact, I think when he joined my staff, it really assured my victory in the primary.

YOUNG: Did he continue, then, in your administration?

BARRON: Yes. Then, when I became Governor, Mr. Hardman became my press secretary and, in the background, worked with me in preparing a great majority of my speeches.

YOUNG: Governor, since you were a candidate yourself in the 1960 primary, I wonder if you would explain for the Library the nature of the relationship that may

have existed between yourself and Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], who was also, of course, in the primary?

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BARRON: Well, one of the things that first sticks in my mind occurred even before the primaries, when I had occasion to be in Washington. I was then Attorney General, and had met Senator Kennedy previously on probably not more than one or two occasions. I was walking down the hall in the Senate Building, and as I walked by him, he said, "Hello, Wally. How are you?" That really struck and impressed me as something very unusual – with the tremendous number of people that he had met, to recognize me, the Attorney General of West Virginia. So we got off to a good start right there.

Although at this time we had yet to develop close personal or political contacts, I felt even then that it was a solid relationship because he would take time out to talk to me, and would know my name, and discuss West Virginia and its problems and needs, knowing that I probably would be a candidate for the governorship of West Virginia.

YOUNG: You became Governor of West Virginia after a period of depression, after a period which had seen economic decline. Would you give your opinion of the value of the nationwide publicity given to West Virginia by the primary, and some evaluation of the treatment of the state by the national press?

BARRON: Well, these are broad but important questions, and I believe they deserve rather detailed answers. Now, national publicity was concentrated upon West Virginia, and its people and its problems, as never before. To my mind this publicity centered around the two major elements. The first of these, and the one that brought the West Virginia primary into major focus was the establishment in the minds of the general public and the professional politicians throughout the land that this was the first real and crucial test of whether a Catholic could win the confidence and votes of people who were felt to be predominately rural, traditional, white, Anglo-Saxons. In fact, it was more than this. West Virginia was considered to be in the heart of the "Bible-Belt" and the primary was felt to be an acid test of Senator Kennedy's acceptability. If he could win or even do well in West Virginia, he could do so much to put to the lie to the traditional American notion

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that a Catholic could not be elected President of the United States.

The second element developed out of the first, and it was the focusing of attention on the economic plight of West Virginia and the entire Appalachian region. This national public awareness was later to be developed into a national concern that laid the groundwork for the public acceptance of the great and creative programs for Appalachia of not only President Kennedy's Administration, but also those of President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson].

The overwhelming victory of Senator Kennedy in the West Virginia primary not only gave the Senator a tremendous boost toward the Democratic nomination, but it also demonstrated to all the nation that the people in West Virginia and in Appalachia were not the backward, narrow-minded types that some detractors had portrayed. People everywhere began to see that West Virginians were much the same as they were. They were able to identify with West Virginians, and it was this new awareness that brought the public concern that did so much to condition the nation for accepting the problems of West Virginia and of Appalachia as problems for the nation, as problems for the Federal Government. Finally, the deluge of attention and publicity on West Virginia had a very healthy and stimulating effect on our people. We are a proud people, and we wanted to show the rest of the nation that we could and would work to solve our problems. This incentive was later very dramatically displayed in the remarkable success we enjoyed with our "Clean-Up" program, and in many other self-help programs and endeavors. Also, I might add that the concern shown by both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] for our problems was a great source of inspiration. It is so much easier to try to help yourself when you know someone cares.

In regard to your question as to the treatment of the State by the national press, I think that over all it was very fair and very constructive. It was with the press as it was with the two Senators: at first it was mainly just another challenge, another job to be done, another attempt to understand and influence, what seemed like a rather curious and different type of people. But very soon in the campaigns, this mere curiosity changed to concern and with concern came sympathy. In the final analysis the national press acquitted itself admirably in the campaign and did a tremendous job in aiding us on the way to economic recovery and a renewal of our own resolve and dedication.

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YOUNG: Did you observe this growth of concern to be very marked in Senator Kennedy?

BARRON: Most certainly. As I said, when Senator Kennedy first came to the State to begin the campaign, I believe that primarily this was just another challenge to him – another job to be done, although admittedly a very difficult and hazardous one. But as he began to travel our State and meet the people on a personal basis, and see the economic plight that so many were in, he was visibly touched. Although he had surely seen areas of depression and economic inequities in his own Boston and in the course of his campaigning, I don't believe he was prepared for what he came face to face with here in West Virginia – the magnitude and extent of our predicament. This was not in India or some far-off country. It was right here in America – in the land of plenty. It was happening to Americans and not just in isolated situations but in great sections of the country. As a result, Senator Kennedy developed a sympathy, a care, and a concern for our people that was real and that stayed with him while he was in office. For instance when I became Governor in January, 1961, the State had around 106,500 unemployed. President Kennedy, of course, was well aware of our situation. As I have said, he developed a remarkable insight into our people and our problems and knew that we were a rugged people. With help and because of our

individualism, he felt that much could be done for West Virginia. His first words – I believe on television, or at least to me – were that he made a promise to help West Virginia and the people of West Virginia, and he was determined to carry that out. And he did, from the first day that he took office. Make no mistake about it, President Kennedy was deeply sincere in his often expressed affection for West Virginia and in his determination to help us.

YOUNG: Governor, would you evaluate some of the most effective Kennedy programs for West Virginia? In other words, what did he do for the State that you feel helped the most?

BARRON: One of his earliest acts involved the problems of adequate food commodities for the people who were in need. I think this was his very first decision as President of the United States, to see that the needy people of West Virginia and other people in similar circumstances would receive the additional food commodities they needed so desperately.

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Also, at the very beginning of his Administration, the President and Mr. Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff], who was a member of the Cabinet then, helped us to set up the ADCU program – the first time it was ever attempted in West Virginia – which provided unemployed fathers around \$165.00 a month. We talked to the President and we talked to Mr. Ribicoff. They permitted us not only to have this money for the unemployed fathers, but to establish a program so that these fathers could work. West Virginia was the first state in the nation to do this. I believe that this program did more than any other thing for the morale of the people of West Virginia who needed help. Our system was copied by the other states in great detail, the program permitted unemployed fathers to work for a dollar an hour rather than just receive outright grants or “hand-outs” and not do anything for the money. It gave them jobs – and dignity – and restored them as the “bread-winners” for their families.

YOUNG: Governor, I expect we might call these “crash programs,” things to help immediately. Would you go over an analysis of the more long-range efforts of the New Frontier and of the Kennedy years on the West Virginia economy?

BARRON: These were not merely short-range programs. When I went into office, I took the oath at midnight so that I could enact a new sales tax to support the ADCU program. It is still in existence, and it is still one of our finest programs. So it has been one of our long-range programs. Also, I think West Virginia was the first state to have the food stamp program which was later started, I believe, Con, in two other states. It was started in two countries: McDowell and Mingo. This program was also received very well and it did much to boost our morale.

In regards to these long-range programs, another thing that the President did was the matter of defense contracts. At the beginning of the President's and my Administration, we were around forty-ninth or fiftieth in receipt of defense contracts. Before I went out of office as Governor I believe we were down to twenty-third. That is really something for the overall



picture for West Virginia because it meant putting great numbers of people back to work and getting industries to increase their investments and operations in our State.

Another program was the Area Re-Development Act. There is question that the ARA program stimulated the economy. One of the

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best programs we had – I don't know whether it's lost or whether we'll get it back – was the Accelerated Works Program. I think everybody in West Virginia, particularly the people in our congressional delegation, and in the Legislature and the executive branch of the government, and the people in general – feel that this was one of the best programs initiated in West Virginia.

Then there was the accelerated Federal-State Road Program. In the primary race in particular, we promised the people of West Virginia that we would have an interstate road coming down from Morgantown in the north through the central part of the State, perhaps joining up with our West Virginia turnpike. The matter came up again in the general election – more with the Democrats; it may have been mentioned by the Republican candidate, but not to the degree that I did as the Democratic candidate for Governor. After the election when we were sitting down with President Kennedy, we talked to him about what we had told the people, and what we had do. Although such a road was not then a part of the Interstate Program, the President took it upon himself to give that mileage to West Virginia. There is no question in my mind but that President Kennedy just told the Bureau of Public Roads that West Virginia was to have this extra mileage, and we got it.

I might add that credit must also be given to our congressional delegation, and to Mr. Robert P. McDonough, who was my liaison man in Washington all through my term as Governor along with Paul Crabtree.

YOUNG: Governor, I think when the tape recorder was turned off, you had mentioned something about the park system, too. Would you say a word about that?

BARRON: Of course, that was one of the most significant programs for West Virginia because, actually, in the final analysis West Virginia has to depend a lot on the tourist trade. It's been said before, West Virginia is right in the center of the big population areas of the East. When I first went to see Bob McDonough in Washington about Federal assistance for our park programs, we weren't being very successful with some of the lower echelon in Washington. So we went directly to see the

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President of the United States. I was there with Bob when President Kennedy picked up the telephone and called the proper person and said, “The Governor of West Virginia is coming over there, and I want you to tell him that he is going to get the parks – twenty-four million dollars worth.”

So we went over, and got the money for the State.

YOUNG: Governor, administratively, was this Federal matching money, or was it a Federal grant to the State through a congressional program?

BARRON: It was both grants and loans.

YOUNG: Would you go ahead, then, and describe the Statehouse-White House Relationship in more detail in terms of your personal relationship with the President.

BARRON: Well, to do this requires a little background, and we must refer back to the primary in West Virginia. I mentioned that before the primary I had met Senator Kennedy on a few occasions. He had remembered my name, which made quite an impression upon me. But at the beginning of the primary race Senator Kennedy had not been in West Virginia as extensively as had Senator Humphrey. I knew Senator Humphrey well, and he was very popular in West Virginia because he was a good speaker and remembered names and was very thorough in making his rounds in West Virginia – then, with no thought, I suppose, of coming in here and making a primary race. But, during the campaign, in running for Governor, I had my hands full in beating my own opponents, particularly during the last couple of weeks when the pressure was really on. Publicly, I didn't declare for one side or the other. I did tell my friends and the people of West Virginia, and I know I told the press, that certainly both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey were welcome in West Virginia; that they had every right to run in West Virginia as candidates in the primary and were both qualified for the office of the Presidency. During the course of the campaign, many times I ran across the working team of Senator Kennedy which was actually remarkable. In fact, I think a major reason Senator Kennedy won in West Virginia was because he had such a wonderful team. They were very persuasive. The question

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of whether the President was a Catholic or not a Catholic actually did not become a major issue in the minds of our people. For instance, in campaigning down in the southern part of the State where the Shrine is very strong, I saw a great number of people who had the Shrine pin on who also carried a Kennedy button. I think that Senator Humphrey, while he made a wonderful campaign, just didn't have the money; I don't think he had the team; I think he did everything possible but Senator Kennedy simply just had too much going for him here in West Virginia. When Senator Humphrey first entered the West Virginia primary I was favorable toward him because the Senator was a liberal, and he had an organization, supposedly, going for him in all the unions in West Virginia, which represented a pretty powerful force to have behind him. But, again, when Senator Kennedy came in, the support which Senator Humphrey had as a liberal and having the unions behind him seemed to disappear, and I still say that it was mostly teamwork, organization, and the personal charm of President Kennedy which overcame that. There wasn't much Senator Humphrey could do about it. But let's not mistake the fact that Senator Humphrey was a fine candidate. He was well liked in West Virginia, and he campaigned forcibly and with vigor. But, as I pointed

out, the odds against him were just too heavy once the powerful Kennedy forces swung into action. I have immeasurable respect for Mr. Humphrey, and for his great capabilities. Senator Humphrey was an outstanding candidate and he was well received, in my opinion, everywhere he went in our State. This made the Kennedy victory that much more outstanding. Here was no political hack, but a professional politician of great ability and personal charm and magnitude. Senator Humphrey represented a formidable force to be encountered. A victory over that force was not to be taken lightly. But in the final analysis, the combined strength of the opposition forces was simply too overwhelming, that's all. Our people still like Mr. Humphrey, and this is clearly evident if you talk to them in all parts of the State.

YOUNG: Governor, let's move from the primary, then, back to subject we were discussing earlier before Mr. Trent [Curtis B. Trent, Jr.] came in – this matter of Statehouse-White House relationship and your role in the Appalachian program and so on. Would you say something about that?

BARRON: I became Chairman of the Appalachian program in 1962

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and made many proposals at our first meeting at White Sulphur Springs. I had pretty much the backing of the Appalachian states although some of them, like Ohio and perhaps parts of Pennsylvania, at that time didn't see the picture as clearly, I think, as Kentucky and West Virginia and Maryland who were really the driving forces in getting the program started. After making these proposals, which were generally accepted by all the Appalachian states, President Kennedy then appointed Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., to go into the Appalachian proposition and work it up in a form that could be presented to the President. The President had the help, of course, of his Cabinet. This program then was presented to the President and, generally, he adopted the same proposals I had made at White Sulphur Springs in 1962. At one of our meetings in the Cabinet room, I had taken my brother with me. We were all busy. As you know, everyone was trying to talk. The President went by, and stopped and I said, "Mr. President, I want you to meet my brother, Fred Barron." Well, I don't think he understood what I said until he had gone a few steps. Then he came back and asked: "Did you say that was your brother?" I said, "Yes," and he went over and really gave my brother a thrill because he shook his hand and took about five minutes to talk to him of how pleased he was that he could come and how was his family. That is just one example of the type of warmth that President Kennedy had for everyone and especially for West Virginians. I pointed this out to show how close and informal, and how personable, were the relations between the President and myself. I recall once when I was waiting in the hall in the White House, he stuck his head out of his office and saw me and smiled and waved his hand and said, "How are you, Wally, I'll see you in a minute." No matter how busy he was, he always took time to talk to me. I remember a time shortly after he became President, when I talked to him for forty-five minutes about West Virginia and things in general. Then he followed me on out where his secretaries were, and sat on the desk, introduced me to all his secretaries; we sat there for another twenty or thirty minutes talking

to them. Never in my life, have I seen anybody who had the charm and warmth, and he sincerely meant it; there's no question in my mind. My relationship with President Kennedy was something I will never forget. Again, when he came down in 1963 to speak at our Centennial, he was in a hurry, of course. I had quite an experience coming down

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from the airport; he would be driving along, stop his car, and get out and shake hands with people. Then we went up to the Capitol, where they had my office and that whole section of the Capitol roped off so no one could get into that end of the building. My daughter and my two grandchildren were in the roped off area, but were right up front. When we went by, I spotted them and asked President Kennedy if he would mind coming back and shaking hands with my daughter and grandchildren. He did, busy as he was, he stood there and talked to them for about five minutes. Then we went on out to make our speeches to the people who were waiting outside. It began to rain rather heavily. President Kennedy spontaneously said, "The sun does not always shine in West Virginia, but the people always do." These words are still widely quoted by the press and by the people of West Virginia. You might say this was the high water mark of the Centennial. These are just some of the things that made me and all the people in West Virginia so fond of him. There was no time when you could not call through to him on the phone. If you could not get the President, you got someone who was very close to him who would make contact with him about our problems. If it was important – and generally it was when we called to talk to the President – he would call back and talk about what the problem was and what we should do about it.

YOUNG: Governor, much was made during the primary of the national attention focused on West Virginia. I would like to approach it from this angle: What kind of an education do you think John F. Kennedy received in West Virginia in the primary? In other words, how were his eyes opened, and in what way did he respond to the situation that he ran across in West Virginia in any areas that you have not mentioned?

BARRON: Well, as I mentioned before, at the beginning of the primary, I think that President Kennedy was not acquainted with West Virginia nearly as much as Senator Humphrey. But wherever Senator Kennedy went, the people would really go wild; they would yell and scream – I never saw anything like it in my life. Now, while they would give Senator Humphrey good applause and would cheer for him, still it was not the same kind of attraction that Senator Kennedy had in West Virginia. There is no question in my mind that as he traveled through West

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Virginia and his team gave him the information about the problems of West Virginia that his eyes were opened. I am certain that he did not make the statements that he was going to help West Virginia on purely a political basis. I think he found out what the problems were and knew that West Virginia needed some help; and, regardless of the campaign, he was determined to help the people of West Virginia. When he said he would, on the basis that

they needed this help, and when he kept his promise, that made him tremendously popular in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Governor, you have mentioned your access to the White House and the fact that, if you could not get the President, you got someone, and the President would, perhaps, call back. You have mentioned a great many ways in which you had contact with the President. Is there anything we are leaving out – any political issues or such things as the parks that you can think of, any other ways in which you did have direct contact with the President over a particular public policy?

BARRON: As this warm relationship grew, as Governor of West Virginia, I went to Washington many, many times to testify before various committees supporting the programs the President was particularly interested in. I think he was always interested in knowing what the other states were thinking about and doing. When we went to the Southern Governors' Conference – and occasions when I was in Washington – he would talk to me. In fact, on many occasions he called me in West Virginia and asked me to watch out and observe and tell him what the other governors were thinking on his various programs, and I tried to convey to him the feelings of the governors towards these programs as well as the people of the respective states. As a result of that, I think at almost every national governors' conference we went to, we played golf with John Bailey [John Moran Bailey]. We would talk over the situation while playing golf. John was a good golfer, and he did not have any trouble beating us, incidentally. But he got a great kick out of playing golf and talking politics, and he especially asked me to look into several things for the President.

YOUNG: Governor, would you go on then with any other stories you may have with respect to your relationship with the President?

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BARRON: Well, one of the first things I did in office was to ask the Legislature to give me the money and to create the office for a liaison man in Washington. At that time I named Paul Crabtree to work with the congressional delegation and of course, to work directly with the President and his staff. In the meantime, I had another liaison man in Washington, Bob McDonough. I paid his expenses directly out of my contingent fund. He went to Washington every week and sometimes spent two or three days a week there. These arrangements, for the first time in my knowledge brought a close contact between President Kennedy, as President of the United States, and the Governor of West Virginia. Previously, the Governor had worked, I think, mainly through the congressional delegation and then through the President. In these meetings, Mr. McDonough and Mr. Crabtree and myself would go to Washington and meet with the congressional delegation. I think this created excellent teamwork so that we at the state level knew what policies the congressional delegation were following and they certainly knew what our policies in West Virginia were and what future policies we would have in mind. And this teamwork and a close relationship with the President paid big dividends. Starting in 1961, we were at a low ebb but the next year was the greatest economic year that we had had in West Virginia. 1963

was greater than 1962; and 1964 was greater than 1963. So, during that period of time West Virginia achieved the greatest prosperity it had ever had. I credit much of this to the direct contact between myself as Governor, and the liaison and President Kennedy.

Another little incident was the time I went to Washington, and the Fairmont band was present to present to the President the flag of West Virginia. The President made a small speech, and I made a speech. Of course, my remarks more or less were off the cuff. I said it was my hope that the flag of West Virginia would fly over the white House. I mentioned the fact that I was not sure of the regulations – whether it would permit the flag of West Virginia to fly over the White House. President Kennedy's immediate response was it did not make any difference what the rules and regulations were, or what anyone said about it; that the flag of West Virginia was going to fly over the White House. The same day, that flag was flying over the White House.

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I would like to go back again to Senator Humphrey. I do not want to have anyone think that he was not a good friend of West Virginia; he was extremely popular, and he was more of a national figure, I think, at the time of the primaries than Senator Kennedy was. Vice President Humphrey has always been a close friend of West Virginia. Whenever we see him, he always talks about West Virginia, and he talks about the 1960 primary. He has a very good sense of humor. As I mentioned before, I think one reason why the victory was so great for Senator Kennedy was that he overcame not only a brilliant man, but a man who spoke the language of West Virginia.

On reflection, if I had to say what impressed me most in President Kennedy, I believe it was several things. In the first place it was his tremendous growth toward greatness. The Kennedy that entered the West Virginia primary was not as great as the Kennedy who won the election, and the Kennedy who I met and talked to after his first few days as President, was not as great as the Kennedy of his last months. I attribute this to three qualities that he possessed more than any man I have ever met. The first was his ability to see things in a general positive way and his increasing self-confidence. With this came a remarkable ability to be objective and realistic about facts, and to acknowledge certain things or situations even if he did not like them. Finally there was his unmatched capability of true sympathy, of wide identification of himself with others to the extent that it seemed that the satisfaction of the needs of other people became almost indistinguishable from the satisfaction of his own needs. You really felt he cared.

He developed into a true politician of the people for he was blessed with a genuine humanity, shrewdness, and good humor. And his vigor was no mere matter of public imagery. He developed a remarkable balance between his personal authority, which protected him from hasty criticism and dissension, and his competence which enabled him to supervise the details of government.

Above all I was impressed by the way that he handled the supreme power of the Presidency. John F. Kennedy in the White House was like a rider finding himself in the saddle when he knows how to ride. It quickens his faculties and exalts his purposes. Here was a man big enough for the job, who grew bigger with ever day that he was in the Presidency. I have no doubt of the greatness

of John F. Kennedy. He has left an impression upon my life and mind as no other man. I also have no doubt that had he lived he would have continued to grow in stature. His place is now on the high peaks of history; had he lived he surely would have reached the very summit of greatness.

YOUNG: Governor, two members of your former staff as Governor have been present for this interview – Mr. Hardman and Mr. Trent. I wonder if you would identify them both, please, fully?

BARRON: Mr. Hardman, as I mentioned, was my press secretary during my campaign for Governor in 1960 and served with me as my press secretary during the years 1961-1965. Mr. Curtis B. Trent, Jr., who is also here, was my first assistant when I was Attorney General of West Virginia and served as my executive assistant during my term as Governor of West Virginia.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with former Governor William Wallace Barron of West Virginia in the Governor's office in the Nelson Building in Charleston, West Virginia. The interview was taped on August 10, 1965, by William L. Young.

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