

**Marguerite R. Benson, Oral History Interview – 12/9/1965**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Benson, a Wisconsin political figure and campaign worker in Wisconsin and West Virginia for the 1960 Kennedy for President campaign, discusses the 1960 primary campaigns in Wisconsin and West Virginia, including campaign teas and rallies and John F. Kennedy's rapport with voters, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Marguerite R. Benson

December 9, 1965  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let's start in the late 1950's when it looked like there might be a Kennedy-Humphrey [John F. Kennedy; Hubert H. Humphrey] campaign here in Wisconsin in the spring of 1960. What were you doing at that time? Were you active in party affairs?

BENSON: I was active. I was the state Vice Chairman, and due to the fact that we felt that Senator Kennedy had been more or less talked about ever since 1956, there were a great many of us, I believe, that felt that we should prevail upon the Senator to enter into the Wisconsin primary. There had been rumors that Senator Humphrey was also going to enter but that didn't faze us, even if we did admire and oftentimes felt that Senator Humphrey was our senator, too, because we had been absolutely lost without a Democratic senator. Whenever we needed a speaker, well, we always fell back on Hubert. He was gracious enough to come in and help us, and so we were more or less foster parents in the state of Wisconsin, and we adopted Senator Humphrey. It wasn't that we lost our love for Senator Humphrey at the time that we threw our, well, shall we say affection toward Senator Kennedy. How it transpired, I have no idea. All I know was that we decided, a few of us.... It was a very small group in the beginning, but like many of these things it does mushroom.

MORRISSEY: Who was in that small group?

BENSON: Well, there was Mr. Lucey [Patrick Joseph Lucey], the present Lieutenant Governor, and Dave Rabinovitz [David Rabinovitz], who at one time we felt was going to be the federal judge. There was a Mr. Corbin [Paul Corbin] from Janesville and our present judge, William Moser, and myself and a woman by the name of Rose Grobe, who was a Senatorial District Chairman here. Now I'm speaking only of the small group in and around Milwaukee, with the exception of Patrick Lucey, who was a Madison resident. Then it mushroomed, but we were primarily the nucleus. That was our group, the little bitty group.

Then, of course, each in our own way we started to do a little converting, and that was how we did it. And trying to convert some of these people was rather a tough job, believe you me, at that time...

MORRISSEY: I can imagine.

BENSON: ...because, well, labor, we had labor. Naturally it seemed that many of the top echelon in the labor group were for Senator Humphrey which.... That was their prerogative. Then, of course, a great many people pulled back and said, "You can never elect John Kennedy. He's a Catholic, and a Catholic.... Look what happened to Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith]." I mean, there were so many arguments that.... They said, "Well, we'll wait. We'll wait and see. How do you know he's going to come in?" Now, you see, this was all groundwork preceding his entry or his, well, decision to come into the primary.

MORRISSEY: Did you ever talk to him about this decision to come in?

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BENSON: I didn't because I was not.... I think Mr. Lucey and several of the other men, I think they did, but no, I never went directly to him, although I was wholeheartedly with him. If he had said, "Come and talk to me," I would have taken a broom and flown there. [Laughter] But other than that, no, but once he decided, that was it.

MORRISSEY: What was the source of your original interest in him?

BENSON: Well, it seemed to me.... The Convention in 1956.... You see, I had met the Senator, just met him, in Washington, oh, a year or two after he became senator of Massachusetts. He was shy; he was a very shy young man. You haven't got blustering, like you think a senator with, "Hello, hail well fellow," you know, and all this business. No, he was always quiet, genteel, and he looked at you. Whenever he talked to you, he'd look at—he looked at me the day I met him, and I was then able to give my whole heart. I said, "Well, I like him. Anyone that'll look at me when he



meets me instead of saying, 'How do you do' and turn the eyes away...." Well, maybe that's the Irish in me. I don't have any idea, but you've got to look at me when you talk to me, and Senator Kennedy did that.

Then when I went to the Convention in Chicago in 1956, there had been rumors that he would, or might, throw his hat in the ring for the vice presidency. At that time I thought, "That's wonderful. With Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] it would be an excellent ballot." They were both very great men, brilliant men, and I felt that that was excellent, that would be fine. And it was a little disappointment at the time that the Senator did not get the vice presidency, but I think the Almighty had something in the making—I meant that was my own feeling.

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So we went along with Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]. I traveled by plane through the state of Wisconsin with Senator Kefauver, and we did all we possibly could for him—the ticket—which we naturally would do. And then, of course, when rumors started....

I really think that we, in the back of our mind, without knowing it, subconsciously always thought of Senator Kennedy as the next President, somewhere along there, because we never could have picked it up as quickly as we did and do—many things we did without a format—unless we had had something buried very deep. I'm not the only one that felt that. I think the people that supported him, from Lieutenant Governor Lucey right straight down through the ranks, that did come to the fore, in the beginning I think that they had it. They had something in the back of their mind. So that was that. Then when the Senator came into Wisconsin and announced that he was going to run for the presidency, well, we just started to pick up what we had been doing only working a little harder.

MORRISSEY:            Were you working here in the city of Milwaukee?

BENSON:                Yes, I live here in the city of Milwaukee. Oh, I worked all over the state for the Senator. Then Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] came into town shortly after the announcement and immediately appointed me to be sort of the liaison throughout the state. I went out with Polly Fitzgerald, and we organized teas and rallies from Kenosha right straight up through all the little towns. And that was the beginning. And we worked diligently, and hours meant nothing to us—early in the morning, late at night, weary, down, bloody but unbowed.

MORRISSEY:            Did you find that at some of the little towns throughout the state that some people resented these Easterners coming in and trying to...

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BENSON:                Yes, Mr. Morrissey. In the beginning there seemed to be the carpetbagger idea, but as soon as the Senator or his brother Bobby would put in an appearance, that seemed to be washed out very quickly because they saw the person. You see, when you read about a person, and say they're



from New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, you get an idea that they're far away from you, but when they come to you and you talk with them they have an entirely different idea.

Then, of course, throughout the state when the television.... I think the television did a great deal for all of the politicians, both Republican and Democrat. They felt they knew him. But as soon as they saw him in person, he was their friend.

MORRISSEY: I see.

BENSON: It was just amazing. And it was the same way throughout the various states that I would go into.

MORRISSEY: Was the same thing true of the Kennedy girls when they came in?

BENSON: The Kennedy girls made a great hit because they are a gracious group. The three girls that came were gracious and, as several of the farm women said to me out in the western part of the state and the northern part of the state, "You wouldn't think that they came from Massachusetts; you'd think that they came from Wisconsin," which I thought was a very great compliment because we here in Wisconsin seem to be an entirely different breed for some reason or another. Maybe it's because we're slightly provincial? I couldn't think of any idea whether that would be the proper word or not but they did enjoy the girls. I know that Mrs. Shriver—that's Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver]—made great strides toward getting people to listen to the program that the Senator was presenting because she was in here several times. So I do think

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that the family as a whole, the Kennedy family, as far as I'm concerned—and I'm not at all biased; I just think this is the truth—made great strides because they were so much one. It just seemed that they were one person, and the one person was Senator Kennedy. You'd never think of them any differently.

MORRISSEY: Now what amazes me is the fact that Hubert Humphrey is your neighboring senator; as many people have told me, he was your Democratic senator for Wisconsin for so many years there—at least his vote on foreign issues was in accordance with the way people up in the northern and western part of the state see these things, his vote on labor issues was similar—and yet John Kennedy came in from the east coast and won the state by more than a hundred thousand votes in that primary.

BENSON: Yes, it's...

MORRISSEY: It's a big question, but why?

BENSON: Why? Well, I suppose it is human nature to forget perhaps some of the

things that have happened and use just the present. I'm afraid that I have to almost say that I do not know why, although as far as I am concerned—I'm speaking only of me—I do believe that Senator Kennedy, President Kennedy as he later was, had a magnetic something that seemed to touch each and every one of the farm and those in labor that did come over to him because he seemed to be part of them. It always seemed to me that after I would go back after the Senator was there that one or two of the farm people would remember only one thing that the Senator had said because that was the thing they were interested in. If it was farm crops, it was this; if it was the dairy farmers, it was that. What he said about labor or foreign policy or education or anything, that left them entirely, but he was right in that point, they said. So you see it only took a grain of sand, a grain of something they wanted, and he gave it to them. It seemed that he did that all over. One little grain and...

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MORRISSEY: Some people have told me that Kennedy campaigned like a presidential candidate and Hubert Humphrey campaigned like a senatorial candidate.

BENSON: No, I think President Kennedy campaigned like a human being, like a specialist, like a doctor. He knew that the ills of whatever area he was in were present, and it was the illness of that particular area that he found a bromide for. By finding that, that's what made him so great. He was a human being; he was not campaigning. He came to the public; he came to the people and knew that they had a headache. So what did he do? He found the pill that cured the headache. And he did find the pill. So I'd say—I've been in so many campaigns, from ward committeeman right through alderman, senator and so on, that I can almost feel the difference of whether you are actually running for a position or are you running to do something for the people that you're asking to vote for you. That's what President Kennedy did. President Kennedy asked the people what they wanted and he found out, more often than not, that it was that they wanted, and before they had an opportunity to tell him, he told them.

So you see, it wasn't campaigning as such, as, you know, this torchlight parade of the olden days. But to me that—I... It's very mean to have to say these things because I can't find the right words. My—not emotions, but my heart is so deeply toward this particular campaign and I found everyone in the campaign, anyone associated.... We are richer, Mr. Morrissey, for having touched President Kennedy. And I say that wholeheartedly and right from my soul. I am richer because it's something I can never forget. And his kindness to the people throughout the world—also I am richer. We all must feel that.

MORRISSEY: Yes. what did you do besides work with Polly Fitzgerald on the scheduling of teas and what not?

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BENSON: Oh, I went out and interviewed. I had to schedule the teas. My

goodness, that would take us weeks and weeks in advance to get committees organized to get the teas ready and get the right people to sponsor and to—not sponsor, especially, but to get them interested that the Senator was coming on. It wasn't an easy job.

MORRISSEY: I can imagine.

BENSON: We would go into virgin territory and say, "Senator Kennedy is coming here, and we're planning a tea." And they'd look at you, and then they'd say, "Oh, we've got to get a pair of white gloves." And I'd say, "Oh no, you come in your overalls. That's what the Senator would want." And that's what he did want. He didn't want any of this white glove, tailcoat.... Oh no, the President wasn't that—the Senator, I have to call him Senator because I'm speaking about him as a Senator.

MORRISSEY: Right.

BENSON: No, he would stop regardless, along the roads. When a man was out in the fields, he'd stop the car and that's it. No, no, and I've seen him in the mining areas down in West Virginia where the black hands of the coal miners would come.... Jack Kennedy was never afraid of soiled hands, never. And the white glove, there were times that the white glove was necessary but no.... So you see we had to convert people to the idea that the man from Massachusetts was not a white glove man when he came to talk to the people. He was there asking them what they wanted, and he knew what their wants were.

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MORRISSEY: Did you find some Republicans in these towns were ready to help you out?

BENSON: Oh yes, and quite amazingly so, where they definitely after talking to him craved organizations—and lawyers clubs and rotaries and that. Maybe not the entire group, but you would find three or four men that had some prestige in the group. Oh yes; yes, indeed. I was very pleased to see that.

MORRISSEY: Were some of these Republicans Catholics?

BENSON: Mr. Morrissey, that's one thing we never talked about. If we did approach it, if it was approached by an individual, we would never deny it, but if there was nothing said there was no reason to bring it up. We weren't campaigning on a religious theme. We were campaigning for the President of the United States. I am a Roman Catholic, and I don't believe twice in the entire campaign did I have to defend my religion. No, not at all. I would blurt it out and say, "You know, I am a Roman Catholic, but that should make no difference to you because we're all God's

children.” It was amazing how they would fall right into it. Now, we never denied it, but if it came up we would talk about it.

MORISSEY: I recall that some of the Kennedy people were upset because some newspaper reporters would go around head counting the number of Catholics on a committee in a certain community to receive the Senator.

BENSON: Here in Wisconsin?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

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BENSON: I don't remember reading anything like that.

MORRISSEY: Really?

BENSON: Do you remember what newspaper that was?

MORRISSEY: I think it was one of the state papers. I can't recall which one.

BENSON: Really?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

BENSON: Well, I suppose it's back there, but the shutter hasn't quite opened so I can't remember that. [Laughter] Well, if they did that, then they're the losers. They're the losers. Well, I suppose we all have our idiosyncrasies, and we have our fetishes and that, and we all cannot like sugar. A lot of us like strong vinegar, and so we're human beings, Mr. Morrissey, and to each his own, even no matter how hard we try to convert them. If we do a good job and we feel that we're doing a good job, that's all we have to remember.

MORRISSEY: Did you notice there was a distinction between the way the Kennedy campaign was run here in Milwaukee and the way it was run out-state? Was there a different emphasis within the city as contrasted to the rest of the state? For example, was an effort made here in the city to appeal to the ethnic groups which wasn't emphasized to that extent outside the city?

BENSON: I don't believe that we, in the local area, ever felt that there was a division. We were all—we were people. I do remember that there were people that did not speak the English language that had to be, more or less, gathered together by someone of their own nationality and have things perhaps slightly interpreted, but it never, to my knowledge.... And I hate the word “segregated.” We'd never

have one Polish group and they'd be all Poles or we'd have one Scandinavian group and they'd be all Scandinavians. If they happened to invite the Senator or if they happened to have one within the group

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that wanted the Senator, he would in his own language say, "Senator Kennedy is coming into Milwaukee. What do you say about having him here?" in their own language. In that way, if you want to say we had ethnic groups divided, then I would say yes, but it was not in the format. It was a mixture. You know, the United States is a mixture of all. So I would say, as I have stated, it would be one prominent member of these various nationality groups that perhaps planted the seed and so he would gather his own group and ask the Senator or appeal to us of the committee if we could arrange to have the Senator come, which he would stretch every point to get there.

Now, the same way in the Negro groups, in that colored area... Now, you see, when people mentioned 'colored,' we have more than one color here. We have the Puerto Ricans; we have the Negro; we have the Indian; we have that, but it seems that people only think of the Negro. Now we have Indians up in the Menominee reservation, up in the Shawano area—those people are Indians. Now they're Americans. So are the Negroes, they are Americans. So the segregation thing, this idea of one group, one group.... Sure the Senator spoke to all groups, but there was no concerted effort, say, well, this will be for this group.... That was their.... If they wanted to do it, the Senator would comply to their wishes.

MORRISSEY: As you traveled around the State, how did you think Humphrey was doing?

BENSON: Well, Humphrey is a great favorite. He's a breezy man. Senator Humphrey has the feeling of a carpet-slipper. It doesn't sound good but I really mean that, because no matter where you meet Hubert—and I've met him in many, many places—he's very breezy. He makes you feel that you're the only person he met that day. Well, of course, that was an incentive to some of the people bordering on the state of Minnesota. And Senator Humphrey is a great man. I have nothing but the greatest respect for him, but he wasn't my candidate and so.... But we had no.... I met him in West Virginia, and I met him as we were coming in. He was going out with his great big caravan of very beautiful young ladies. I said to him,

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"Well, Senator, we've come in to pick up the pieces." And he said, "Well, I think that's all right, Margie." So you see there was never any animosity between the two factions, no, none at all. It was just one of those things that, "Well, I play tennis but I don't like baseball." So you know....

MORRISSEY: Yes.

BENSON: So it's rather peculiar, but it turned out all right to a point and then beyond that.

MORRISSEY: Did you see the Senator, Senator Kennedy, on his visits?

BENSON: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any specific recollections of any conversations with him or anything of that nature?

BENSON: I have many beautiful recollections. They would be personal recollections, at these rallies, too numerous to mention. All I can say.... He was the greatest, just the greatest. He was a very dear friend; he was a great Senator; and he was a great President. And I say that with all my heart. Once he's your friend, oh, bless him. And the Kennedy family.... Bobby is the same. I must say this in all truthfulness. Bobby was just here, you know, at a dinner for Mr. Lucey. Hasn't changed. Teddy [Edward Moore Kennedy] was the same. The girls are all gentle people. The Kennedys are gentle people, and there's no doubt but that there are many other families that are gentle. There's a great many things that I'd like to say but I feel they are a little personal. All I can say is I'm very proud to have been a small part of the entire shining stone, one tiny facet. And that was what I was, just a tiny facet.

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MORRISSEY: Where were you on election night when the votes were being counted in the primary campaign?

BENSON: All over. Running like mad. One television set over at the police station.... You know over here in Milwaukee we had the returns come into the gymnasium at the courthouse—or at the safety building, rather. We'd be there, or we'd be over at the *Milwaukee Journal* or the *Milwaukee Sentinel* or at the WPMJ, WISM. We had all these men. Of course, the wire services gave us a great deal of service, too. Well, it was just a mad house when we knew that Kennedy had carried not only Wisconsin but one particular district we never even thought we'd carry. That was the one that pushed us over the top.

MORRISSEY: Is that the seventh?

BENSON: The seventh district, yes, because, you see, that's so close to Minnesota. It's right there. We really tried our very best. Now up in Eau Claire I know Charles Spalding and I were up there, and we were preparing for a large rally, and we tried to get things organized. We felt that there was a great deal of pulling away from us, but they all came to hear Senator Kennedy because he came to town. I don't believe that any.... Of course, we didn't carry it, but I think that we did very

well up there considering that it was right on the border of Minnesota. I know that Chuck Spalding can tell you all about that area because he was up there a great deal.

MORRISSEY: Of all these teas and rallies you planned is there any one or two that stand out in your memory as the most difficult?

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BENSON: The most difficult. No, no, it was all hard work and long hours in the organizing of them. No, no, I can't say—because the response was terrific, just amazing. And the teas, naturally we directed a great many of these invitations toward the women and the women's groups. But you would be amazed, Mr. Morrissey, the men that also came to these rallies and to those teas. There in the state—now I'm speaking of the state—they were very well attended, and the citizenry seemed to respond beautifully.

But there was one rally here, and I've forgotten who gave it. It was up here at the Jefferson Hall. I remember that Ethel Kennedy [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] had flown in that morning. That's Bobby's wife. I didn't even know she was there. All of a sudden they started schottische, a dance, and Senator Kennedy and a group were up on the stage. I was back in the halls shaking hands with everyone that I wanted to come in and meet the Senator. Oh, it was just a mob scene, when all of a sudden someone said, "Why don't you get in the grand march and do the schottische?" Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], the present Postmaster General, and I did the dance; we did the dance all around the hall. After it was over, the Senator said to me, "You know," he said, "I got the biggest kick of my life when I saw you and Larry O'Brien walking down the aisle in that grand march." [Laughter] To me that was amazing because it seemed that whenever I did anything, especially in Milwaukee, everybody followed suit. They said, "Well, if Marge can do it, come on, let's go. There goes Marge," Well, it was a grand night.

MORRISSEY: I can imagine.

BENSON: So many, many things.

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MORRISSEY: Who suggested that you go down to West Virginia?

BENSON: Bobby Kennedy and Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings]. I worked with Lem over in LaCrosse. We had quite a large rally over there. Lem Billings was working over there with Helen Keyes [Helen M. Keyes]. Then I went in there with Helen and Lem, and we got into that area and worked very, very hard. So I got a call from—I've forgotten if it was Massachusetts or New York, somewhere—and I was ordered to go into West Virginia right away.

MORRISSEY: You were ordered. [Laughter]



BENSON: I was ordered to “Pack your bag and get the next plane out of there.” Believe you me, it was the funniest thing I did. That West Virginia was magnificent, just magnificent. It just seemed that when we went in there.... There had been groundwork started, but I went there and we organized the.... We had an ox—what do they call them?

MORRISEY: An ox roast?

BENSON: An ox roast, we had that. We had teas. I went to the Episcopal minister in Ravenswood. I asked him if he would like to—I had understood that he was a strong admirer of Senator Kennedy. Having heard that, I just went to him, and he got the ladies’ aid women’s club, and we had a tea at the Women’s Club. That’s a very wonderful memory for me.

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At that time Senator Kennedy had lost his voice. Teddy was giving the speech that Jack would have given to the assembly. We had this beautiful tea. It was really a beautiful day. We thought that we might have to carry it out into the garden because the clubhouse was—we hadn’t anticipated these people coming in from way out, but once the news had gotten out that the Senator was going to be there they came. It was on a Sunday. They all seemed to come right after church and sit in their cars and wait until the Senator got there. I can remember this, and it made the biggest impression on all the people: President Kennedy went into the kitchen and thanked the women and at the same time he asked for a cup of hot tea, or coffee, and he stood in the kitchen and ate a sandwich and a cup of coffee. They never could forget that. They thought that here.... They knew; they had him President of the United States right then and there. “To think that the President would come into our little kitchen and have a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Just think.” It was just something.... That was Jack Kennedy. Then when he did his due on the steps of the clubhouse, the church clubhouse, his voice came back a little bit, and he touched Teddy, and then he said, “I can say ‘good-bye’ to all of you and God bless you.” Well, that was all he needed to say to get the wonderful impression before that. That was a wonderful thing.

And then the following day or two we had a big ox roast. Then we also had—in Charleston we had another tea, but that was outside on the courthouse steps. Rather than have a tea we had a rally. Knowing the destitute families and the hunger, I said, “Forget about the coffee and cookies. Let’s have hot dogs and cokes.” I got together with the group, and we had hot dogs and we had wiener biscuits and big jars of mustard and catsup and Coca Cola. It was.... They were hungry, really, really hungry, which West Virginia, in some parts of it, have been for a number of years.

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MORRISSEY: Could you tell me that story you told before the tape was on about sitting in the room with the Senator and some other people?

BENSON: You mean one about the poverty program and that...

MORRISSEY: Right.

BENSON: Yes, Mr. Morrissey. I remember we were all seated in the room. There were a few of us—my memory fails me. I should have remembered who was all there at the time, but I do remember that Senator Kennedy was mentioning.... And, oh, Larry O'Brien was there; I'm sure he was. We were talking about the various conditions throughout the country. At that time Senator Kennedy said this would be good—that was a program to do away with illiteracy—so he thought of the school program, an educational program. How there were no notes taken; this was all extemporaneous. Then he said, "And something must be done about these people that are hungry." That to my mind was the beginning of the so-called poverty program that is now in effect; this educational program that is now in effect was talked about just in conversation and the care for the aged was talked about in general conversation. Many times the Senator would bring out some of these thoughts at his next public appearance. Regardless of that, these were things that were on his mind: to elevate the American people to the dignity that he felt they should have. They should not be hungry, they should not be illiterate; the aged should not be forgotten. Those various things are what has transpired today. That was the Kennedy program, period, in my mind. I'm only one, so there must be other people that have recognized that these were points in the Kennedy conversations off the record perhaps, in small groups, but they did materialize and they are here today because he thought of the people as human beings, not as a "vote" or "mix" or a "cross." And I was very proud. As I've said before, we are the richer for having touched his coat.

[-17-]

MORRISSEY: Did you work with Polly Fitzgerald in West Virginia, too?

BENSON: Oh, yes. Well now let's see, was Polly down there?

MORRISSEY: I think so.

BENSON: I don't believe.... Yes, I think she was there just a short time, but we were all together. There were two or three of us that were down there, and then Polly would come in and she would leave. Then she would go on and get in with another group, but she was the spearhead. We would call back and talk. She would always check up in the event that—so things were going right. After the first one or two of them we seemed to know what the format was, but we had to adapt ourselves to the area in which....

Now here in Milwaukee, we could have the Schraeder [Hotel] or the Pfister [Hotel]. It would be a semi-white-glove affair. In West Virginia you have housedresses, clean and that, but the circumstances were different, and in many other places. In Kenosha, it was a semi-white-glove affair, but, you see, that would be in the larger cities. But it isn't the larger cities

that the Senator was anxious to get into; he wanted to get in and meet the man of the soil. He wanted to meet the people that—without them we could never live, and they were the wonderful farmers. Although he wasn't a farmer himself he knew what their wants and needs were. Although he was not a mechanic or a laborer in the sense, he knew what the laborer groups wanted. So it was it.

MORRISSEY:        Would you tell me the story about the visit to the Masonic home in West Virginia?

[-18-]

BENSON:            Well, outside of a town called—oh, my memory fails me, but it seems to be either Parkersburg or Ravenswood, in that particular area—there was a home for the aged Masonic people. I had known that a great many of these homes voted absentee ballots, so I felt that I should make a call at the home. And so I did. I spoke to a woman that was in charge there, and I asked her if her people in the home voted, were interested in politics. She said yes, they listened to the debates on T.V. and they listened to Mr. Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] and to Mr. Kennedy and all of the reporters. I said, “Well, then they are interested in politics.” She said, “Oh, yes.” Then I introduced myself and said I was with Senator Kennedy's campaign group and would she mind taking our brochures and perhaps it would be interesting reading to the inmates of this home. She looked at me, and she said, “Here?” I said, “What do you mean ‘here’? This is West Virginia and the United States of America.” I said, “This man is running for President of West Virginia and the United States of America.” She at that time said, “You know this is a Masonic home.” I said, “But the inmates here are Americans, aren't they? And don't you believe that they would be interested in who was to be their President whether they are members of the Masonic order or members of the Mohammedan religion?” She looked at me rather startled, and she said, “Well, putting it that way, would you like to meet our ladies? They're in the solarium.” So I went in with her and explained why I was there. There was one little old lady looked at me and she said, “Are you Catholic?” And I said, “Yes, ma'am, I am Catholic.” She said, “Well, that doesn't make any difference. I think he's a very handsome young man.” I said, “Well, thank you very much.” But I said, “Handsome is as handsome does. I'm sure that you will enjoy reading this brochure of ours, and if there are any questions I will be very happy to come back one of these days. If there are any absentee ballots that you would like to apply for, I'm sure that your county officials here would be very happy to bring them to you.” I had a very fine day with them. In fact, I think I got the entire home for Masonic aged to vote for Senator Kennedy because they liked his looks and they liked the way he answered Mr. Nixon. You know, when you start talking to little old ladies that are more or less

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closed in, they remember a great deal more than we on the outside. So I felt that was very good. They had no animosity at all because of any religion or color.

MORRISSEY: Did this happen during the primary campaign?

BENSON: Oh, this was the primary campaign.

MORRISSEY: In West Virginia.

BENSON: In West Virginia. That was when I was there. I did not go back into West Virginia after the primary; we had to work here after the primary. This all transpired.... Many, many instances happened in West Virginia that seemed to be.... You know, West Virginia is not of my religion, and I think that they were very, very wonderful people knowing that they were supporting a man that was not of their religion but that believed in the same God that they believed in. They were just God-loving people, and I think that's why we won.

And of course Senator Kennedy had a pretty nice group of people working there. We never argued religion. No, that was nothing: we wouldn't even think of talking about it. We thought of the good that the Senator could do for them, and that's what they were interested in. So I have very fond memories of West Virginia, and I have made a great many friends. I've been back there twice. If our tragedy hadn't happened, we would be back there again in another year or two, or this past election. So I kept up all of my contacts that I could because I wouldn't even have to go back into West Virginia with a large majority of the people.

MORRISSEY: What occupied your time here in Milwaukee during the Kennedy-Nixon race?

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BENSON: Oh my, they're so numerous I couldn't....

MORRISSEY: That's the answer I expected.

BENSON: I just couldn't answer that.

MORRISSEY: I mean, you were working all the time?

BENSON: Oh yes, indeed, and don't forget I am not the only one. We must.... I say "we" because we all did it. Well, of course, maybe that part would have been missed. I hope it would have been because I loved it so. I enjoyed it very, very much. The harder I worked, the better I felt. It just seemed that we had work to do and we knew it must be done and there wasn't a sluggard or lazy bone in any of our bodies. That is to my idea because I know the people that worked for the Senator. Oh, once and a while you'd get a gripe or a groan from them, but it all smoothed itself out.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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