

**Raymond Chafin Oral History Interview—9/9/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Raymond Chafin  
**Interviewer:** William L. Young  
**Date of Interview:** September 9, 1964  
**Place of Interview:** Logan, West Virginia  
**Length:** 8 pages

**Biographical Note**

Chafin, Democratic chairman of Logan County, West Virginia (1960), discusses the 1960 Democratic primary campaign and election in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Raymond Chafin, recorded interview by William L. Young, September 9, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Raymond Chafin

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Oral History Interview

with

Raymond Chafin

September 9, 1964  
Logan, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: During the 1960 Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] primary, Mr. Chafin was county Democratic chairman. Mr. Chafin, what was your particular role as county chairman in the Kennedy primary?

CHAFIN: Well, in the 1960 campaign, you know, I was county chairman. At that time I was mostly interested in the state and county ticket. At that time, when we first started the campaign, the presidential election wasn't even mentioned.

Then there were two candidates that entered on the ballot for the West Virginia primary, Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey].

At the beginning of the campaign, why, most of the county officials were for Humphrey, and as the campaign got started and was beginning to heat up as it does in Logan County in West Virginia, they started taking sides. Most of the candidates here in this county were for Humphrey. I'm talking about the elected officials; they were already in. But in the beginning of the campaign, why, most of the officials talking to me politically thought if we supported Kennedy that we'd have another thing like we had back in 1928, which I can just remember. It'd be like Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith]—that we'd have a hard time getting our ticket over. I don't think that they were strong against Kennedy because he was a Catholic; it was just the simple reason that they were afraid we couldn't win.

At that particular time, why, we had a Republican governor, and they were thinking in terms of winning the state, of the governor, and so on. They weren't even thinking, I don't

think they were thinking, of Washington or the president at all. I think they were thinking of themselves. So I met with them time after time, and we discussed both candidates. I liked them both. In other words, to head their campaign, they had put the pressure to me, almost, that I was going to have to support Senator Humphrey.

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At that time I hadn't said what I was going to do. But then the campaign did get under way, and I'd say the last two weeks of it, why, Senator Humphrey had been in here. He'd made two or three stops and speeches and had a breakfast here which we had several people attend. But in my traveling around over the county I could see that the Kennedy forces were gaining strength, and they had more young people, and they had a good organization. I saw that our candidates were going to lose all of the Kennedy support. We were in and other people were out. They had more to talk about what they could do, and I saw we were right up against it; if we didn't change our way, why, we were going to lose our candidates.

To tell you the truth, I was more interested in our candidates in Logan County; I wasn't taking too much of a hand at that time in the presidential race. So as time went on and I started calling our forces together—such as our candidates for judge, sheriff, prosecuting attorney, and on down the line—why, I began to tell them what was happening and how we were going to lose. We were going to get into a presidential race, going to get into a fight here and lose by it. And they'd always come back with the same old thing—one or two in particular—that we can't win if he's nominated.

So I made the remark to them the night that I finally got them to agree to let me go, to turn me loose in the presidential thing, to let me handle it the best way that I saw fit, that we were going to have to come out here and let the people decide and try to work it out that way. But I never could get them to understand just the difference between the presidential race and their race—say, you always wanted to go back to '28.

Now, the last meeting I had was with the business group, that was high officials with the coal companies. At this time I was a mine superintendent, and when I met with the top officials of the county, they always discussed politics with both the Democratic county chairman and the Republican county chairman; they want to know our views and what we stand for. But at this particular time in talking to the heads of the companies and with the business group, why, I could tell that they were leaning toward Senator Kennedy.

So after having this meeting with some of our local candidates, why, I came back into our headquarters and called a meeting with all of our candidates—in Logan County it's noted as the slate; we had the organization and so on. After explaining to the candidates different people that were for Senator Kennedy and that if we didn't go out here and stay out of the presidential election or take Kennedy, that we were going to lose. I showed them or tried to show them and explain to them where we could gain a lot of the opposition support by supporting Kennedy.

By the way, we started that evening at 8 o'clock and it was 2:30 before we came out of there. I just felt like jumping out of the window because it was so hard to try, me there by myself, to convince around twenty-five different candidates just what we were up against. So finally—I know I outstayed them and out-argued them—they agreed, “Well, you handle it”—some of them did. And then I had two or three get up and walk out and slam the door,

and said, "Well, you can take me off the slate." I agreed, I'd been a lot better off probably if I had taken some off the slate. I'm talking of the county race.

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As the primary came on up to three or four days before the election, why, we had Senator Humphrey's campaign literature all over our headquarters. So immediately after this meeting that we'd just had a night or two before, I took all the literature down, or had it taken down, out of our headquarters, and didn't put up either one. So at that time I contacted Mr. Claude Ellis, who was campaign chairman for the Kennedy administration. He had gained all the younger people in the county for Kennedy. I contacted Claude and asked Claude to bring me some of the literature. So he kind of laughed and said, "Are we working on you, Chafin?" And I said, "Yeah, you're working on us pretty rough. Looks like that some of our group would like to go along with you on this Kennedy thing." And he had several posters, placards, and the literature and so on, delivered to our headquarters.

Then when we put out our supplies, I had another fight with the candidates. When I had both Humphrey's and Kennedy's literature, I put them both in our shopping bag along with our supplies, and we sent them out to the precinct. And it was a surprise to me on election morning—I usually start out around 4 o'clock in the morning to see that the precincts are organized. The majority of all of our precinct captains were for Kennedy when this literature went out. And they were told to be for either one of the candidates that they chose. Why, they all seemed to be for Kennedy; he had sold them that he was the man for president of the United States.

YOUNG: Mr. Chafin, I'd like to go back and summarize something and then you tell me whether I've interpreted you correctly. You feel that many of the county officers, themselves, had nothing against Kennedy's religion, but they were afraid that the general population might object to his religion, and that they would go down the drain politically with a Catholic candidate, as perhaps happened in 1928. Am I interpreting what you said correctly?

CHAFIN: Yes, I think that's right. Well, in fact, I'd say two-thirds of our candidates at the committee were supporting.... Why, they told me and tried to preach to me that Kennedy would cause us to be defeated if he was nominated.

YOUNG: Well, the registration in the county, you say, is four to one Democrat. Is that about right?

CHAFIN: Yeah, it's about four to one, or maybe a little better.

YOUNG: But many of these local officers felt that, with a even four to one registration, enough Democrats might vote Republican in the fall general election? Is that.... Am I misreading what you said, or does it appear that in the fall election, then, they might be defeated?

CHAFIN: Yeah. They figured that Senator Humphrey would be a much stronger candidate than Senator Kennedy, which I didn't agree with, and they went right on down to the wire believing it.

YOUNG: But there was a fear that even with the four to one registration majority there might be a Republican victory in the fall if Kennedy got the Democratic nomination?

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CHAFIN: I don't think that they thought it would be a Republican victory in Logan County but I think they felt that it would hold our majority down here in this county so it would hurt the state ticket.

YOUNG: Well, you say that many of them went to the wire still believing this. For those that changed their minds.... You've indicated that Kennedy's popularity, with the support of the younger people.... How do you think, also, the anti-Catholic feeling that did exist was overcome?

CHAFIN: Would you mind repeating that?

YOUNG: Yeah. You've already indicated in this interview that you saw yourself, of course, many young people supporting Kennedy, and you realized that he had much greater support than Senator Humphrey did. Now, if some people objected to the President's religion at the beginning of the primary, how or what changed their minds before the primary election itself? In other words, those that were afraid of his religion, what did the President do to ease their fear?

CHAFIN: Well, the President, Senator Kennedy at that time, he came in here and made some speeches, around over the county, he met with several people, he sold himself. He was one of the greatest politicians that I've ever met. He visited the mines, he visited different communities, and he told them if he was elected president what he would do. And after he was elected president, I had occasion to talk with him twice. He did exactly what he said, he kept his promise with us. Now, talking of these candidates changing their mind, some of them never did; even after the primary election, why, I had trouble getting them together and getting them to speak up for Kennedy after he was nominated at the National Convention [Democratic National Convention].

YOUNG: Well, we haven't talked much about any of your contacts with Senator Kennedy himself. Do you have any stories of conversations with him or anecdotes, any examples of the Kennedy wit? You mentioned speaking with him at least twice after the election; I wonder if could you tell me what the occasion was?

CHAFIN: Well; first, the night he spoke in Logan at the courthouse, I was asked by Mr. Claude Ellis, me being county chairman, to introduce him. I told Claude at

that time that I'd rather not because of the factional fight and so on. They couldn't get anybody to introduce him, so Claude introduced him himself. After the primary election and after he was elected president, I talked to him. In fact, the night that he spoke in Logan, I had one of his men that was traveling with him tell me that the Senator wanted to see me. He'd see me at a later time and asked me where I could meet him. So I met him in the Aracoma Hotel, and just me and the Senator talked, ourselves; there was no one else present. He asked me personally to support him, and I told him at that time I couldn't make him any promise, that later on I would try to contact him and let him know what

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we could do. So he impressed me very much that night. In other words, he sold himself to me, a man as busy as he was and running for the presidency of the United States that would take time out and talk to me personally—he had to slip away from the crowd in order to do it. He was just one of the best campaigners I ever saw.

YOUNG: Well, could you tell me about your meetings with him, then, later?

CHAFIN: Well, later on he promised me that if he was elected president, I could come and see him; and I did get to see him on two occasions. He talked to me about Logan County, McDowell County, Migno County, Lincoln, and Wayne, and I also believe he mentioned Boone—in other words, adjoining counties. He talked to me about the people that were on relief and about what could be done. That's the first time that I had ever heard the stamp program mentioned was at that particular time. Now, I was asked by him to come back and make a study, which I did. He said he would contact me later, and in a couple of weeks he did. We had the telephone conversation at that time. I told him what I'd found in McDowell County, and right after that then the food stamp started. The first county it came into was over in McDowell County; it started from there. He said, "Later on we'll try and expand it and get it on; we want to try it." I think McDowell County was hit harder than Logan, and I think that's the reason he tried it in McDowell County first.

YOUNG: Your conversation, then, after the primary, was largely on economic matters?

CHAFIN: Well, after the primary I talked with him—oh, I don't know, I said a while ago, twice, but I guess maybe I talked with him more than that—we talked on the religious issue and what it might do, and he wanted to know about the county. All of the candidates were going to support him. Another hard fight I had was after the primary. We had a state convention, Bob McDonough [Robert P. McDonough], who was state chairman at that time, called a meeting with all county chairmen. In a lot of the counties in the state, why, they hadn't got all of their soreness healed up; in fact, we didn't have all of ours healed up here in Logan County. Some of the counties wanted to put in just a Kennedy headquarters in each county, in other words, just run it separate from the regular Democratic organization. I was one of about four that stood on the floor and was set down once or twice by state chairman because I was arguing that each county should go right along with the Democratic organization. But at that time the state chairman thought well, that could knock

him out of a lot of votes because there might be some Republicans that wouldn't support him because he was tied in with the Democrats. But West Virginia doesn't campaign; I've never found a campaign, especially in Logan County. I told them that we were either on one side or the other, we were either Democrats or Republicans, that we would lose by.... And that would give our Democratic friends—some of them that had been over on the other side—it would give them a place to hide. So I argued them down, and in this particular county, why, we just had one headquarters; in other words, it was straight Democratic ticket.

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YOUNG: Well, is there any way, in terms of the general election figures, to ascertain whether Senator Kennedy's religion did work against him when we compare him with Governor Barron [William W. Barron] and Senator Jennings Randolph? How did Senator Kennedy run in Logan County compared to the other two?

CHAFIN: Oh, Senator Kennedy, he led the ticket a way high, and I don't think the religious issue even worked into it anyway. I think the people just went out here and were sold on him and believed in him. I tell you I had several Republicans that had been Republicans all of their lives that told me they were going to vote for Senator Kennedy, which was hard for me to believe. And then in making my rounds on general election day, why, I found that they were telling me true, that they did support Kennedy and they supported our state ticket. We had several Republicans here that went right on down the line, and some of them that didn't support the county ticket, of course, but they did support the Kennedy ticket and right on down the state ticket, too—Wally Barron.

YOUNG: In other words, Senator Kennedy, then, was not a millstone around the necks of any local Democrats in the general election?

CHAFIN: Oh, no. Just a few days before the election, why, I happened to be in the judge's office, and he said to me, "Well, I'm going to have to hand it to you; I see you know what you're doing." He said, "I thought that Kennedy would lose this county by three or four thousand, and you told me the truth." He said, "I almost got beaten by being for Humphrey, and if it hadn't been for you, I would have been beaten, because I would have gone out here and stomped and made speeches, and so on, and got myself beaten." I had to agree that he would have done it; he would have got beaten if he hadn't laid off of the presidential thing. He made predictions to me a few days before the election that he thought Kennedy would carry the county, but he didn't think he would lead the ticket. So a few days after, of course, I had to go back in and remind him that he'd made another mistake after the election, that Kennedy did lead the ticket.

YOUNG: Well, you've touched on all of this at different points, but I wonder if we just might ask you a summary question: How do you explain the fact, then, that so many people seemed to be so wrong about Kennedy's running strength in Logan County—an overestimate of the religion issue and an underestimate of the economic



appeal? And Kennedy's personality, how would you balance the fact that many people were afraid of him and yet he turned out to do so very well?

CHAFIN: I think Kennedy's campaign that he put on here in the county.... He had two brothers [Edward M. Kennedy; Robert F. Kennedy] that came in here, and his sisters. They got around with the people, they met with them, they talked, they did a lot of campaigning, they met with all types. I think that's the main reason he carried the county. And he appealed more to the young people. For instance, at this particular time Kennedy came into Charleston, and my wife [Louise Chafin] and daughter [Margaret Chafin] went up to see Kennedy and meet him and to see the parade

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they were going to have in Charleston for him. This was in the general election, but this just goes back to show you the kind of a campaigner he was. He had met my daughter during the primary election. They had the airport all roped off and so on. And Claude Ellis, he knew my wife well—they were good friends—and my daughter. I didn't get to go up. Claude said, "Come on, come on!" and took them right on out to the plane. And you know, as he stepped off the plane he said, "Why, hi, Margaret. How are you?" Now, a man like that that can remember names, why, he's just a hard man to beat. If he ever met you once, why, most of the time he'd call you by your name. So I think that's what happened here in Logan County. I think he just.... People loved him so well that he could remember names and things like that. I think that that's the reason he carried Logan County.

YOUNG: Did there seem to be any difference between Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy in terms of their platforms or appeals or discussions of West Virginia problems, or were they pretty much in agreement on...

CHAFIN: There wasn't too much difference in their platform here in Logan County. And their speeches were pretty much the same; in other words, both of them were telling people what they were going to do, and they were both pretty well on the same platform. The only thing that people could talk about when it came down to the platform.... They didn't have much to say, only they tried to use the religious issue. And one time I listened to him, the night at the courthouse when they were talking about the religious issue. "Well," he said, "they didn't ask my brother what his religion was when they took him to the service." So I think that beat off the religious issue more than anything here in Logan County. I think that had a great deal to do with it.

YOUNG: To go from the general election, then, to the reaction to the Kennedy administration, we might give you two or three questions here, and you handle them any way you want to. Reaction to the New Frontier, to Kennedy: Was Logan County and this area pleased or disappointed with the Kennedy administration? And then how would you summarize the effect of the Kennedy years on Logan County and on West Virginia in general?

CHAFIN: Well, the people in West Virginia... I heard Senator Byrd [Robert C. Byrd] make a speech one time, Senator Robert Byrd. He said he talked to President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] about West Virginia, and he said, "Oh, yes, one of these days we might do something for that part of Virginia." So, in other words, now I think the people in Washington, our senators and congressmen and so on, know we have a West Virginia. So that's one thing: If he hadn't done anything else, he let the people of the United States and the federal government know that there was a West Virginia. Now, he has helped, he did help.

We needed a new courthouse and we had different organizations that went up to Washington; they made several trips. And finally they asked me to go, and I told them I'd be glad to go. I went up. I made one trip and

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came back and said, "Boys, we got our courthouse!" And we did. One trip's all I had to make. That was one particular thing

Then we have a garment factory down here that the President helped with. And they started a parking building here in Logan which we got through ARA [Area Redevelopment Administration], and several things—if we just had the time—have helped Logan County.

YOUNG: Mr. Chafin, do you have anything more, any final observations about the Kennedy years?

CHAFIN: I'd like to say this: He sure fulfilled every promise that he ever made to me. And I think that he's made us one of the best presidents. And it's a shame that such a thing had to happen. It was a great loss to Logan County and West Virginia to lose a great president, and I'll always remember him as one of the greatest.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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