

Samuel Solins Oral History Interview—2/20/1965
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Solins, a John F. Kennedy for President supporter in McDowell County, West Virginia (1960), discusses the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in West Virginia and New Frontier economic development programs in the state, among other issues.

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Samuel Solins

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Oral History Interview

with

Samuel Solins

February 20, 1965
Welch, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Mr. Solins, would you tell me how you first became interested in Senator Kennedy, or how you first became acquainted with him?

SOLINS: I have to begin with a visit with Harry Truman [Harry S. Truman] that leads up to my acquaintance with the late President John F. Kennedy. When Harry S. Truman's birthday neared, May 8, 1960, I asked him to come to Welch, that we were planning to give a dinner for him. His answer was that a dinner was being given to him by many persons throughout the United States, but that he would make arrangements with the National Democratic Committee to arrange for a closed circuit, and Truman's voice and appearance could be sent over the air and that arrangements

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should be made with the National Committee. It was found that the National Committee's charges were something like \$4,500, which was beyond our financial ability. So then it was I asked Truman to get Stuart Symington [Stuart Symington II] to make the talk. Symington, when Secretary of the Air Force in Truman's Administration, was in Welch as an Armistice Day speaker, and I had given a luncheon to him on that occasion. As May 8, 1960 was approaching, Symington wrote a short note stating that he was not able to attend.

Then it was that I got in touch with Sidney Christie [Sidney L. Christie], now a U.S. District Judge, who was then Democratic County Chairman of our county. He and I discussed getting Jack Kennedy because it seemed as though Kennedy was acting like a prospective candidate. Kennedy accepted the invitation and we met him at Bluefield. He came in on a private plane. From there we went to the home of Laurence Tierney [Laurence E. Tierney Jr.], a coal operator, formerly from McDowell County, and now lives in Bluefield. At the home of Laurence Tierney, Senator Jennings Randolph,

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Laurence Tierney and I sat at the luncheon table together. Then Kennedy asked me if I didn't know Truman right well and what did I think Truman would do about Kennedy's candidacy. I told him frankly that I hadn't discussed the matter with Truman, and even if Truman had disclosed something to me, I couldn't reveal it without his consent. Kennedy apparently admired the statement that I made, and he said, "Well, I will keep in touch with you." We came on down to Welch and there was a platform built in front of the Court House and he greeted the people. They were pleased with him. That evening we had the Truman birthday dinner and following the dinner I gave a cocktail party for Kennedy and had invited about a hundred and fifty prominent people, a cross section of business, professional, labor unions, and businessmen. He greeted them all and shook hands with them and when he left he stated that I should let him know how things looked in West Virginia. I told him that I would let him know, and all that he would need to invest was \$1,000 in the

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primary: that was the amount that was required as a deposit.

YOUNG: That was the filing fee, wasn't it?

SOLINS: Yes, the filing fee. So when he went back to Washington, as I was leaving the office the next day at five o'clock he called me over the telephone—my wife was in the rear of the office—and I was surprised to hear his voice. He thanked me again for the cordial reception and the cocktail party that I had given, and he reminded me again to let him know. I then looked over the situation and made several inquiries and talked to Sidney Christie. Sidney wasn't too sanguine about the chances of a Catholic.

YOUNG: How were your feelings at that time about the chances of a Catholic?

SOLINS: I didn't have any feelings because I am a Jew, and I know that a Jew had a difficult time making things go politically where there are not so many Jews as registered voters. I felt that a Catholic would have about the same difficulty but probably not so severe as a Jew. But be that as it may, I

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wrote to Kennedy and told him to put up the \$1,000, that in my opinion he had a 50-50 chance. He entered the primary, and from then on my office was visited by his advance men. One would come in from some area and state, "Where will the bus be parked that brings Kennedy and his crew to make a talk?" I explained that it would be in the Municipal Parking Building lot here just a few feet away. Then another person would come in with billboards and say, "Where can we put up these billboards?" and "Where can we put up these little handouts?" Another would come in the next day or two and say, "Are you giving him a cocktail party this time?" I said, "Yes, I am giving him a cocktail party."

So it went on until he arrived and we then gave him a big send-off and he had no less than 1,500 people in attendance, out of doors. He was pleased with the reception and he came to the office following that. I introduced him to all the office force. I have about 20 some people in my employ. I assembled them all together and

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and frankly stated, "Here is the next President of the United States." He laughed and said, "Well, I'll have a Coca-Cola on that!" I had told him that we keep Coca-Colas in the freezer in the rear for our rest period for the office force. He drank a Coca-Cola on that. Then he left, but I gave him the cocktail party that evening and had better 500 people in attendance. Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] was with him, his brother; Smith [Stephen E. Smith], his brother-in-law; and what's that fellow's name? [Interruption] Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] was with him. It was about two hours after the cocktail party was in session that Sorensen came to me and said, "We've got to take our man Kennedy away from this crowd because he is tired and he is worn out." I said, "Well, if that is the way he wants it, all right. But he doesn't seem to have had anything to eat. So I took him back in the kitchen and my wife prepared a plate of chicken salad sandwiches and milk, for him and also for Ted. They stayed about fifteen or twenty minutes and left.

The next time that he came to Welch it was

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on that occasion that I went to the hotel room with him before the speaking engagement and visited with him in the hotel. His brother Ted was with him. Robert [Robert F. Kennedy] had been, but he went some other place. Kennedy said to all those occupying the quarters to step out, he wanted to talk to me. The first thing he said, he put his hand on his brow and said, "Sam, these Baptists are giving me hell." I told him that our day would come, that he needn't worry, that I thought that he had McDowell County sewed up and from what I could see the state was going overwhelmingly for him. That pleased him very much. I asked him one thing. I said, "Now before you leave I want you to stand up and make a statement to these 500 people assembled here that you will be here next November 11 as our Armistice Day speaker." He said, "Maybe you won't want me if I lose." I said, "Yes, we will want you, win or lose." He stood up and made the statement that he would be in Welch on Armistice Day. I then told him as he left that I was going to be a candidate for

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elector from West Virginia on the Democratic ticket. I was nominated as an elector for this Congressional District and had the pleasure of voting for him at the state capital in the Governors office. I wrote him what I had done and I reminded him that he was to be our Armistice Day speaker November 11, 1961.

Much to my surprise he had O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] write me a "Dear Sam" letter saying he, O'Donnell, had crossed things up and had made an appointment for the President November 11th and was awfully sorry. I ignored O'Donnell's letter and I wrote to the President and stated that my secretary never made an appointment for me without my knowledge or consent, and I wanted him to know that. I sent Sidney Christie a copy of that letter, but I didn't know until some two months later that Sidney made this statement to me in the presence of two or three others that he had followed that letter up by saying to Kennedy, "Don't pay any attention to Sam Solins." That is the way it stood. I saw him later and told him when he was

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in Charleston, West Virginia on the hundredth anniversary of the state of West Virginia that I had his book, *While England Slept*. It had been in my library since 1942. His comment was, "Hell, I didn't know that you had that book in your library. Send it to me and I will autograph it." I did and he sent it back autographed. It is in my possession.

YOUNG: Did you have any other meetings with President Kennedy which might be of interest, other than the ones you described?

SOLINS: Yes, I met him at Wheeling, West Virginia. During the campaign he came up there to help Congressman Cleveland M. Bailey. I saw him at that time and he greeted me like an old friend and I was pleased to see him, but in the rush of things I didn't get a chance to stay with him very long. That is about the only time that I saw him up to the time of his death.

YOUNG: Mr. Solins, would you describe briefly the reasons for the Kennedy appeal in McDowell County? Why do you think the Senator was able to win in the

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primary? What were the main issues on which his victory was based?

SOLINS: He had an appeal to the general public. He was a clear thinker and had a grasp of the issues. Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], his opponent candidate, was too much of a liberal. He tried in his talk in McDowell County to cover too much for the general good, but the sound-thinking people didn't know where the money was coming from. Kennedy didn't make such proposals. He had youth, good looks, and a charm about him that just simply captivated the people. That's about as far as I can say.

YOUNG: Well, would you comment on the religious issue then as it worked out when the President said to you, "These Baptists are giving me hell." Did he mean in McDowell County or in West Virginia in general?

SOLINS: No, he meant wherever that strong feeling existed. It wasn't necessarily in West Virginia that he met with the Baptist opposition. I think it was in the deeper South. In the deeper South is where he was confronted with some underhanded

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criticism that reached his ears and hurt him.

YOUNG: Was there much opposition to him here on the basis of religion in McDowell County?

SOLINS: Strange as it may seem, no, because for some reason or other the people in McDowell County didn't look upon the religious issue as an issue at all. They had read a good deal and heard a good deal, but it didn't seem to affect the citizenry.

YOUNG: Is there any explanation for this as to why the county is rather remarkably free of this anti-Catholic feeling?

SOLINS: I would say that in our county we have everything from the dregs of the Slavonic race clear to the Virginia gentlemen, and it is on that basis that the people feel free of religious prejudice and race prejudice, for we have had justices of the peace, deputy sheriffs, and constables of the colored race elected by white people.

YOUNG: Was the Negro vote fairly important in the primary? Could you make an assessment of this?

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SOLINS: We have one-third of our population colored, and for the most part they are now in the Democratic Party and I just don't believe that they gave one serious thought against Kennedy because of his religion. It didn't develop that way in the primary.

YOUNG: Could you describe briefly the kind of organization that Senator Humphrey had in McDowell County, or did he have one at all?

SOLINS: Well, this is a paradox, so to speak. Before we met up with Kennedy, Judge

Robert M. Worrell of the Circuit Court of Pineville, fourteen miles away, a very dear friend of mine, called me over the telephone one Sunday and stated that a man by the name of West, an attorney and a friend of Worrell's, was championing the cause of Senator Humphrey. He asked me if I wouldn't do Worrell a favor and assemble a few well-known politicians and give a luncheon in the restaurant for Senator Humphrey. Humphrey was coming in the next day in a bus. That was before Kennedy had discussed being a candidate; at least, that was before he

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appeared on Truman's birthday. I did what Worrell said for me to do. I assembled the politicians and gave the luncheon at Humphrey's expense. He insisted because I told them frankly that I was doing this for Worrell but not as a supporter of Humphrey. I wanted that clearly understood because at that time I didn't know that Jack Kennedy was going to be a candidate. In fact, he hadn't appeared in Welch because that was before the Truman birthday. When Humphrey was here with his wife they sat next to me and Humphrey made the statement that he had just been campaigning in Wisconsin and he was complaining bitterly that the Catholic children would line the streets and boo him as he passed by. Well then later on, of course, was when Kennedy had the same complaint against the Baptists. When Senator Humphrey left he made the statement to me that he was coming back and he did come back later on, but I told him then that I was for Kennedy and he said he was sorry, and that was the end of my conversations with Senator Humphrey.

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YOUNG: You indicated a minute ago that Senator Humphrey appeared to be more radical than Senator Kennedy. Was this a widely held point of view in McDowell County?

SOLINS: Yes. Humphrey appealed to a certain lot of people who wanted to spend and spend and spend but they just couldn't figure out where the spending money was coming from. That was the trouble.

YOUNG: Well, you seem to be the man who is always called upon to give the party or have the luncheon. You did serve as a presidential elector. Did you have any other official position in connection with the primary—heading any committees or anything like that?

SOLINS: No, I wouldn't accept any other appointment. As far as I went, to be an elector and to vote for Jack Kennedy, that was all that I was concerned about.

YOUNG: Would you consider yourself then a sort of behind-the-scenes arranger of social functions?

SOLINS: Probably social functions because every bi-election and every presidential

election the

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politicians asked me to give a cocktail party for either the candidate for the governor, or the candidate for United States senator, and I would do that at their request but I seek no political office. The last cocktail party was given for our now Governor, who was then a candidate for governor, Hulett Smith [Hulett Smith]. The next day he said he wanted to appoint me on some kind of a commission when he got to be Governor. I told him he couldn't run after me fast enough to give me a job on any commission!

YOUNG: Have you had these parties at your home, sir, or at the hotel?

SOLINS: No, they have always been at either the Appalachian Community Room or the Moose Hall. When Truman was here I had 289 people as my luncheon guests, and when Kennedy was here I had, as I explained, 500 people at the cocktail party.

YOUNG: Let's go from the primary now, unless you have something more to say about it. Are there any more observations about the primary you would like to make?

SOLINS: No, I have no other observations.

YOUNG: Well, let's talk then, if you will sir, about the buildup to the general election. This, of course, is a Democratic stronghold. Could you say a word about the campaigning between the primary and November?

SOLINS: You mean this last one?

YOUNG: No, I mean in 1960 after Senator Kennedy had the nomination—the work between then and the fall election.

SOLINS: Well, after I served as the elector in the Governor's office I had no further connection with the campaign other than to serve as host to every member of the elector group together with their respective spouses at the Daniel Boone Hotel at a cocktail party and a luncheon.

YOUNG: I wonder if you could give just a brief, thumbnail economic sketch, then, of McDowell County in 1960 and the way in which Senator Kennedy and then President Kennedy was aware of the economic situation in this particular area.

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SOLINS: That goes back to Kennedy's good, sound, common sense, as I would put it.

He made it a point to acquire information of the coal fields, their depressed area, the automation which had stepped in. He had such a sound grasp that this area was in need of economic help, and he explained it that something had to be done if he were elected. One of the first things that would be done if he were president was to create some legislation to help the economy of this depressed area. I don't think his opponent gave it a second thought. While he realized that this was a depressed area, he had nothing to offer in the way of remedying the situation.

YOUNG: Do you mean Senator Humphrey or are you talking about Vice President Nixon in the fall election?

SOLINS: Senator Humphrey. Vice President Nixon, when he was a candidate, didn't come down to this area at all, but Kennedy had been all over the area, visited many of the coal mines while he was campaigning and he had first-hand knowledge of the depressed condition. Nixon dealt more in

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the clouds, as I gathered. I may be wrong; I may be doing him an injustice, but he didn't tread his foot in the depressed area in the southern part of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Would you describe, then, the general reaction to the "New Frontier" in McDowell County to President Kennedy's many programs for West Virginia, the way in which they were received locally.

SOLINS: Well, it lent hope, it lent hope to a depressed people, a people that were looking for a job—none available—and there seemed to be no hope for the future. It was Kennedy's idea to enact legislation that would be of some help and relief. It was more or less like a shot in the arm.

YOUNG: Which of the Kennedy programs were best received? Could you mention any details, any particular programs that seemed to be received by the McDowell County natives to the greatest degree?

SOLINS: As I recall it, his desire was to take a man that was in his forties, cut adrift from a job that he had been working at for fifteen or twenty

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years, with a limited education and no skills, to help him find a trade so that his family could be kept from want at this period and teach him something in the way of a trade or a vocation that would help him in the future. That was one of the helpful things.

YOUNG: Anything else, sir?

SOLINS: No.

YOUNG: Has this program of re-training as you have observed it locally been effective?

SOLINS: It has, but the unfortunate part is that when they are trained they go elsewhere for employment. The industries don't come here to take advantage of the trained help. That's the unfortunate part. But one of these days we hope with the trained help they will stay here and industries will come in and take advantage of that trained help.

YOUNG: Is your economy still almost 100 percent dependent on coal, or have you had some diversification?

SOLINS: Very little. We have got it right here. We've got the coal, and what we need is faith in getting

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the coal out and finding enough to give employment. As it stands now the economy in this whole area has improved certainly a minimum of twenty to twenty-five percent.

YOUNG: Since 1960?

SOLINS: Yes. I would say there is a more hopeful feeling everywhere you go in the coal fields.

YOUNG: During the 1960 primary, as you know, the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and the national publications focused great attention on West Virginia. What was your reaction to this and how do you feel the local people reacted?

SOLINS: Well, naturally you don't like to read that you are living in a poorhouse. While to a certain extent that may be the actual fact, you are reluctant to admit it and prefer that something rosier would be said about your community. That is unfortunate. When the *Saturday Evening Post* had a distressing article, it didn't make us feel good about it. But the point is that there were so many people that were being fed by the Government in one way or another, and without

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that who knows what would have happened to the families? But we are better off now than we have been for the last three or four years, and some of the mines are reopening that have been shut down for five years.

YOUNG: Well, you are anticipating then, gradual improvement rather than....

SOLINS: Without a doubt, without a doubt.

YOUNG: Well, as we conclude our interview, have you any final statement, Mr. Solins, as to the broad effect of the Kennedy years on West Virginia?

SOLINS: On November 11, 1963, Vice President Johnson was in Welch and made the Armistice Day talk. I had the pleasure of introducing him as I was Chairman of the Speakers Bureau of the American Legion, and my opening remark was, "Here stands the man who is just one heartbeat from the President." And eleven days later he was sworn in as President of the United States. But when the tragic death of Kennedy was announced, it was such a shock to the people in this whole area just as it was throughout the nation. It was hard to realize

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that a thing like that actually occurred. When Johnson was here during the luncheon that I gave for him I told him that Kennedy had started in motion a relief for this distressed area and I had the privilege of talking to him for better than an hour on conditions that were needed, and he stated that he agreed with Kennedy that conditions should be looked after in this coal field. When he left following that he wrote a letter to me stating that my statement that he was a heartbeat away from the presidency proved true but he was distressed and was sorry that it had to happen in that manner. He further stated that he planned as best he could to follow in the footsteps of Kennedy for the relief of the miners in this whole area. That is as far as I can go.

YOUNG: Thank you very much, Mr. Solins. This has been an interview with Mr. Samuel Solins of Welch, West Virginia. The interview took place in his office on February 20, 1965. The interview was by William L. Young, and the background noises are those of the typewriters and the secretaries in his office.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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