

# The 1960 Democratic Primary

By Stan Bumgardner

Sixty years ago, the eyes of the nation turned to West Virginia to decide one of the most momentous election primaries in history. Primaries had been around since Florida adopted the first one in 1901, but they'd played mainly minor roles in presidential party nominations.

That changed big time with the 1960 Democratic primary. Dwight D. Eisenhower was finishing his final term as president, and the White House was up for grabs. The presumptive Republican nominee was Ike's vice president, Richard Nixon. The Democratic field, though, was wide open. Adlai Stevenson II had been the Democratic standard-bearer for the two previous elections but had been soundly drubbed by Ike on both occasions. While he and a few others remained longshots in 1960, the party was looking to move on.

One of the leading candidates was U.S. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, who would wind up on the ticket but as vice president. Johnson went the traditional route of sitting out the primaries and waiting for party leaders to draft him. So, the primaries came down to the two other prime contenders, both U.S. senators themselves: John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota.

Kennedy easily won most of the early primaries, which, for the most part, Humphrey bypassed entirely. On April 5, Kennedy pulled an upset of sorts by winning in Humphrey's neighboring state of Wisconsin, placing a lot of weight on the outcome of the West Virginia contest on May 10.

Kennedy filed for the West Virginia election in February, two days before the *Saturday Evening Post* published "The Strange Case of West Virginia: Poverty Amid Splendor," which went out of its way to show images of

tarpaper shacks next to photos of vacationers at The Greenbrier resort. While the magazine—and soon the *New York Post*—sensationalized West Virginia's poverty, the articles did underscore the Mountain State's increasing economic woes, showing ghost towns where coal towns had thrived just a decade before. As a result, poverty became the central topic of the primary.

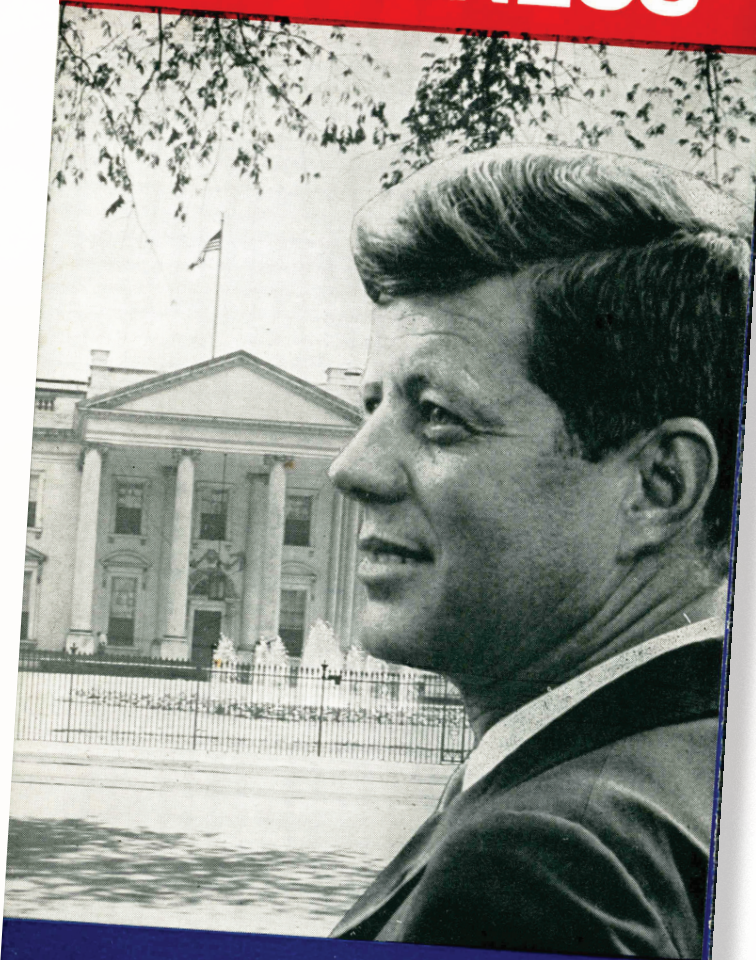
But the 1960 primary was crucial in another way. No Catholic, such as JFK, had ever been elected president. Only one had even been a major party nominee. In 1928, New York Governor Al Smith, a Catholic, had been thrashed at the polls by Herbert Hoover. In 1960, there was a genuine question of whether a Catholic *could* win the presidency. West Virginia—where some 96% of the population was Protestant—would be the test case. A loss seemingly would send a resounding "no" to the nation. But a win, on the other hand, could all but clinch the nomination for Kennedy.

Kennedy's substantial 22-point win here gave him the inside track for the nomination, and he never looked back. The late political columnist David Broder later compared the significance of JFK's West Virginia win to then-candidate Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 Iowa caucus—a state that was 96% white. JFK's triumph in West Virginia was a statement for the ages and proof that a Catholic could indeed become president.

Here are two stories about that race. Tim Reese takes us through a day in the life of the JFK campaign, while Aaron Parsons shares with us the story of the Humphrey campaign, through the eyes of a young campaign worker, Carol Haid.✿

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JFK campaign brochure, courtesy of Marshall University  
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