

Esther Peters, Oral History Interview – 7/14/1964
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Biographical Note

Peters, Chairman of the Women for Kennedy of West Virginia (1960) and Commissioner of the American Battle Monuments Commission, discusses the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in West Virginia and New Frontier economic development programs in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Esther Peters

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Oral History Interview

with

Esther Peters

July 14, 1964
Charleston, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This interview is being taped in the Daniel Boone Hotel on July 14, 1964. Mrs. Charles Peters is being interviewed. Mrs. Peters at one time was President of the League of Women Voters in Charleston and Kanawha County. During the Kennedy primary campaign she served briefly as Chairman for Women for Kennedy for the Sixth Congressional District of West Virginia and then later for Charleston, West Virginians for Kennedy.

Mrs. Peters, would you tell me when you very first became interested in the political career of John Kennedy?

PETERS: I really first became aware of this attractive young Senator [John F. Kennedy] while watching him nominate Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] during the 1956 Democratic Convention. I was excited by his race for the Vice Presidential nomination, and was impressed with his graciousness in making the nomination unanimous for his opponent.

YOUNG: Well, you mentioned in private conversation before the interview started that your son [Charles G. Peters, Jr.], I believe, showed some interest in Senator Kennedy's career too. Could you tell me that story?

PETERS: Yes. After my son, Charles, watched the 1956 Convention proceedings, his

first comment was, "What a loss that Jack Kennedy isn't our nominee for Vice President. We could win with him. Watch him for 1960."

YOUNG: Well, when then in the 1960 campaign did you first become interested in the Senator's primary race in West Virginia?

PETERS: When some of Senator Kennedy's staff first came to West Virginia, my husband was invited to attend a luncheon which was being sponsored in behalf of Senator Kennedy. He, because of a previous commitment could not accept that invitation. A few days later I saw Charlie Love [Charles M. Love, Jr.], who had asked my husband to attend that luncheon. I inquired of him what women attended the luncheon. He said, "None." I said, "Do you mean that you haven't asked a woman to be on this committee? If Jack Kennedy is elected President, it will be the vote of the women."

YOUNG: Why, Mrs. Peters, did you feel that the vote of the women would be so important in the Presidential aspirations of Senator Kennedy?

PETERS: I felt that the young women would love him from the romantic standpoint and us older women from the motherly instinct.

YOUNG: Well, when did you first then become active in the primary campaign?

[-1 -]

PETERS: I was among those invited to meet the President—Senator Kennedy—at breakfast in May 1959 to lay plans for the 1960 primary campaign in West Virginia. And I was asked at that time to head the Women's Division of this Sixth Congressional District in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, your breakfast meeting with the Senator was then your first personal contact with him?

PETERS: Yes, yes—it was. It was the first time I had actually met Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Did he seem to be as attractive in person as he had been on television?

PETERS: Oh—oh, he was more attractive, more attractive than he had been on television, and soon after the....

YOUNG: Did you foresee any difficulties at that time for the Senator as a candidate in West Virginia?

PETERS: Yes, I did. I felt certain after his appearance at a meeting of the Young Democrats here in Charleston in October 1959 that he would be our nominee but I did realize there would be many problems.

YOUNG: Could you list some of the problems you anticipated?

PETERS: Well, of course, one of the problems was his youth; another, his religion. They were the two main problems.

YOUNG: The problem of youth then could be an asset in some circles and a liability in others?

PETERS: That is it.

YOUNG: And you would say the same for religion?

PETERS: Yes, yes—but more in West Virginia. It would not be as much of an asset as a hindrance.

YOUNG: I believe you told me before we started this interview that you were with the Senator when he came to West Virginia to actually file. Could you tell me a little bit about that story?

[-2 -]

PETERS: Yes, we were in doubt for some time about the wisdom of Senator Kennedy entering the West Virginia primary but when the decision had finally been made and he came here to file, my son and I were among those of a small group headed by Robert McDonough [Robert P. McDonough], Lawrence Tierney and Charles Love, who met him at the airport around midnight. We accompanied him to the Office of the Secretary of State for the file. A large number of people, including the news media, were waiting for him there to witness that momentous event—an event which was to mean so much to West Virginia, the nation, the world and for Jack Kennedy, himself, for as he frequently and gratefully acknowledged, it was West Virginia that made him President.

YOUNG: After Senator Kennedy filed, I believe you said you went to a television station to make a tape. What kind of a tape was this?

PETERS: Well, we then went to one of the television stations and he was interviewed there. I have forgotten now just what special questions were asked but, of course, religion, I think came into every interview.

YOUNG: How did you personally feel about his filing? Did you feel that it was a calculated risk or that the difficulties could be overcome?

PETERS: I felt it was a certain risk but that it was possibly worth the risk.

YOUNG: You also mentioned that Senator Kennedy then appeared very shortly after

that, I believe, on the campus of Morris Harvey College here in Charleston. Could you say something about the student reaction to the Senator's appearance?

PETERS: Yes, when he spoke at Morris Harvey College, he received one of his warmest receptions. Students surging about him to shake hands with the smiling Senator gave those of us working in his campaign great encouragement. The following day volunteers flocked to headquarters, eager to work for Senator Kennedy, who appeared to them as the very embodiment of their dreams for a leader of our country.

YOUNG: Were these students college student volunteers in the primary?

PETERS: A great many of them were college students, a great many of them were older women, some of them high school students.

[-3-]

YOUNG: Did you notice, Mrs. Peters, whether the volunteers were drawn from any special circle or religious group?

PETERS: No, they were not. They were from all groups, and that is what made us so happy. I believe that among the men volunteers Catholics did predominate, but this was not true of the women except at the very beginning of the primary when we did seem to attract more Catholics, but as time went on Protestants were in the majority, and this continued to be true throughout the general election campaign.

YOUNG: It seemed to be a pretty cosmopolitan....

PETERS: Yes, very cosmopolitan group.

YOUNG: Was anybody placed in charge of giving special attention to organizing the college students or were they treated just as regular volunteers?

PETERS: They were treated as regular volunteers.

YOUNG: In other words, you didn't separate them....

PETERS: No, no—we did not.

YOUNG: Do you remember any special thing that the Senator may have said at Morris Harvey in directing his appeal to college students or were his remarks of a general nature?

PETERS: Well, they were more of a general nature but he did urge them to take part in their government. That was one of.... And, of course, he touched on the

religious issue—some of the questions—he answered questions after his talk—and some of the questions, of course, dealt with the religious issue.

YOUNG: And I believe you started out as the Chairman for this Sixth Congressional District but that eventually you concentrated your efforts on Charlestonian West Virginians. Is that correct?

PETERS: Yes, I worked more in the Charleston area and I think was called more the Chairman of the Kennedy Campaign in Charleston.

YOUNG: Could you outline generally and in some detail your duties and just exactly what you did?

[-4 -]

PETERS: Well, it seemed to me I had my hand in a great many things. At one time there was a meeting in the Civic Center where we had a reception for Senator and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and I was Chairman of the Hostesses. We had 200 enthusiastic ladies serving as hostesses for that event and the crowds at that reception were so large that members of the press called me to inquire how it was possible to attract so many people at a primary. Some remarked, "It is simply unbelievable for a town the size of Charleston."

YOUNG: I think you told me a story about a minister then that called you the next day, is that right—was this after that meeting?

PETERS: Well, this was during a visit of Edith Greene—Congresswoman Edith Greene—in Charleston and part of my work was to get small groups together for her to talk with and on one occasion we had a prominent member of the clergy present and when he told us goodnight, he gave us no indication of how he felt but the following day he called me on the phone with this message. "Mrs. Peters, I've been thinking about our meeting last night. I've prayed for guidance and I believe there are enough of us Protestants to keep an eye on that Catholic. I'm happy to support Senator Kennedy." And members of Senator Kennedy's family were graciously received by the many Protestant churches throughout the area when they observed Candidates' Day a few days before the date of the primary and one of my assignments then was to make arrangements for members of his family to be escorted to these different churches throughout the area.

YOUNG: Do you feel then that in Kanawha County there was not very much actively bitter anti-Catholic feeling? How would you measure this?

PETERS: Oh, I wouldn't know how to measure it because there certainly was some actively bitter. I had some real bitter notes—anonymous notes—but I would say there wasn't too much of that.

YOUNG: What was the denomination of the minister who called you—do you remember?

PETERS: Yes, the Christian Church.

YOUNG: Disciples of Christ?

PETERS: Yes.

YOUNG: Could you say anything about your own personal contacts with the Senator and any of the anecdotes that you remember about him—that sort of thing?

[-5-]

PETERS: Well, he seemed to appeal to all ages, the young and the old. I love to recall the occasion where a little red-headed boy was holding a placard—WELKUM JAK—Welcome, Jack—and Senator Kennedy had the car in which he was riding, stop—got out, shook hands with the little redhead, thanked him and patted him on the head. I'm sure that little fellow will never forget President Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, Mrs. Peters—I'm sorry—go ahead.

PETERS: Another time, at a meeting in the Civic Center, I saw Senator Kennedy make his way through the mob across the room to speak to an elderly lady in a wheelchair—it was just that sort of thing that seemed to grasp the affection and loyalty of those who worked with him.

YOUNG: Did Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] do much campaigning in this immediate area in Charleston and Kanawha County?

PETERS: Yes, he did—yes, he did and Senator Humphrey had quite a following here.

YOUNG: How would you compare his use of the personal touch and that sort of thing with that of Senator Kennedy?

PETERS: Well, he simply didn't have the personal appeal that Senator Kennedy had. A lot of Senator Humphrey's appeal—with all due respect to Senator Humphrey—was anti-Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, do you feel that some of the people that supported Senator Humphrey were perhaps thinking in the long run of having that support eventually switch either to Senator Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] or someone else?

PETERS: I think certainly that was true and I think that a great many people because of our tradition of liking fair play voted for Senator Kennedy because of this—

what they called—“ganging up”—against Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Do you think that some of the anti-Catholic feeling was drained off into the Humphrey camp?

PETERS: Yes, I do.

YOUNG: That would be a factor in the campaign?

PETERS: Yes, I do.

[-6-]

YOUNG: In Kanawha County, were there similar teas and open houses for Senator Humphrey—similar to the Kennedy reception which you mentioned?

PETERS: I don't remember—I remember the Unitarian Church had invited both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey on different occasions and they had receptions following their talks but I don't remember of hearing of any other special receptions for Senator Humphrey. He was invited, as Senator Kennedy was, to speak at Morris Harvey but he had nothing like the crowd that Senator Kennedy had.

YOUNG: He did speak there, however?

PETERS: He did speak there—yes.

YOUNG: To go back to another matter in the primary—do you feel that there were any ideological differences or differences of policy between the two candidates that attracted different voters?

PETERS: No, I don't.

YOUNG: The issues then were not primarily important?

PETERS: No, no—I'd say....

YOUNG: Well, as a native of Charleston, I'm sure you know the area very well. Were there any.... How would you distinguish between the types of supports for both candidates other than the factors that you have already mentioned—the possibility of some anti-Catholic feeling being drained into the Humphrey camp—is there any other way that you might delineate the two groups?

PETERS: I would say there was no definite line there because we had some of the most prominent people in Charleston say they planned to vote for Senator Kennedy in the primary but weren't sure of their position in November.

YOUNG: These would be prominent conservatives?

PETERS: Prominent conservatives—yes. And then we had some of the conservative people supporting Senator Humphrey because I think you can contribute a great deal of this to the fact that they—there were people voting for Senator Humphrey who were not really for Senator Humphrey but they were really supporting other candidates.

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YOUNG: This at least would stop the Kennedy bandwagon and perhaps enable a dark horse....

PETERS: Yes, yes.

YOUNG: We can hardly think of Stevenson as a dark horse but at least his nomination was considered difficult.

PETERS: Yes, yes.

YOUNG: You would say then—I don't mean to put words in your mouth—but correct me if this impression is wrong—but the weight of wealth and conservatism tended to be on Humphrey's side but both sides drew from every class and every section in the community to a degree. That would be correct?

PETERS: Both sides received conservative votes, but Senator Kennedy did carry most of the silk stocking precincts in Charleston.

YOUNG: Well, you have already mentioned that Senator Kennedy had great appeal because of his charm to women for two different reasons. Did the Senator make any appeal to women in terms of special promises of special legislation or public policy—anything that perhaps touched women more than it might men in terms of future policy?

PETERS: I don't remember too well. I remember, of course, he always said he was going to help West Virginia and, as I remember, he did say that he thought more women should be in government. And that, of course, would have an appeal but I don't think he made any special promises that would....

YOUNG: To women, as such?

PETERS: Attract the women—no.

YOUNG: In other words, we simply assume that women too are interested in poverty

and the battle against poverty and upgrading the economy and all these other things.

PETERS: And he promised that he would come to West Virginia and help and he did.

YOUNG: Well, the Senator frequently, of course, as any politician, spoke to his immediate audience in terms of the things that the immediate audience would be interested in. Did you notice any of that in Charleston or Kanawha County? What were the subjects that were frequently mentioned in his campaign here?

[-8-]

PETERS: His talks in Charleston were addressed more to the state-wide audience as they were televised throughout the state. I remember he did have Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] in Charleston as he did throughout West Virginia speaking in his behalf. I think Mr. Roosevelt was more helpful to him in other areas than he was in the Charleston area.

YOUNG: In which areas would you feel then that FDR, Jr. was most effective?

PETERS: Throughout the coal fields—he was very helpful throughout that area.

YOUNG: That would be southern West Virginia?

PETERS: Yes.

YOUNG: And the Kennedy remarks then to Charleston audiences would be addressed more to a state-wide audience than to the particular county or city.

PETERS: Oh, yes—more to the state.

YOUNG: All right—we've covered, Mrs. Peters, the area of appeal to women voters, appeal to state-wide audiences, there are one or two more items that I would like to ask about, if you don't mind. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the Kennedy war record in the campaign? The PT boat and so forth. Do you feel that this was one of the most effective techniques or did it get votes?

PETERS: Yes, I think it did get votes. Yes—on the whole I would say—I heard some criticism of the use of it but I think on the whole it was really helpful to him.

YOUNG: There has been an awful lot of discussion, as you know, in the various books written about the campaign on the subject of the balance and the weight of financing on the Kennedy side. Had both candidates had an equal amount of money to spend and had they both started their organizations at the same time, do you feel the outcome would have been any different?

PETERS: No, I think Senator Kennedy would have been the winner.

YOUNG: In other words, the extra effort was perhaps extra padding but that he would have won in any event?

[-9-]

PETERS: Yes, I do.

YOUNG: Do you have any other particularly interesting memories of the campaign or memories of your contacts with the President himself that are vivid in your memory?

PETERS: Well, I think it was rather amazing at the Kennedy Headquarters during the Fall campaign—the number of volunteers we had. We had an unprecedented number—numbering more than 400 and they were all splendid volunteer workers and...

YOUNG: I'd like to ask you a question about your association with the League of Women Voters, if you don't mind. As I understand it, that organization is presumably non-partisan, is that correct?

PETERS: Yes.

YOUNG: Did you use any of your contacts through it especially in the campaign?

PETERS: No, I couldn't do that.

YOUNG: But just friends perhaps who happened to be Democrats and as a result would be available for help?

PETERS: Yes, yes.

YOUNG: Well, do you feel that Senator Humphrey at times was perhaps—to use an old West Virginia expression—putting up a poor mouth and yet on the other hand may have had considerable backing?

PETERS: Oh, I'm sure he had considerable backing. Of course, I don't know but I heard of many instances where a great amount of money was spent in behalf of Senator Humphrey, whether he had direct access to all that money I don't know. It is my understanding that most of his money came in at the last minute and was spent on Election Day rather than on things like TV during the campaign.

YOUNG: Well, then, would you say that he perhaps was not quite the underdog that the

public press made him appear in some instances?

PETERS: No, I certainly do not feel that he was.

[-10-]

YOUNG: With the results of the primary in mind, do you think then that the Democrats on both sides in this particular county and the Democrats that you knew closed ranks for the general election?

PETERS: Yes, I do. I think there still was that certain anti-Catholic feeling but aside from that I think they closed ranks and were strong supporters of Senator Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, did the issue of religion figure in the general election in your opinion the way it did in the primary election—by November had it fairly well died down or was it still important?

PETERS: Oh—it was still important in the Fall election.

YOUNG: Well, if you could....

PETERS: It wouldn't be now—a great many people have told me—who voted against President Kennedy—that they had planned to vote for him this time—that they were ashamed they had voted against him.

YOUNG: Do you feel then that the President's actions as President completely won over the people who felt there might be some church-state infringement?

PETERS: Yes, completely won over a great many people.

YOUNG: That he was no longer feared as a Catholic as the election of 1960 would have approached had the President lived?

PETERS: No.

YOUNG: Let's turn then to something else—after the President had been in office, do you feel that West Virginians in general were pleased with his treatment of the state?

PETERS: Oh, I think most West Virginians were highly pleased—felt that he had really made good his promise to come back and help West Virginia.

YOUNG: Did you have any further personal contact with the President after he entered the White House?

PETERS: In August 1961 I was appointed by President Kennedy as a member of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

YOUNG: Did President Kennedy ever attend any of your meetings?

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PETERS: Yes, we dedicated a memorial—the East Coast Memorial in New York City in May 1963 and President Kennedy made the Dedicatory Address. I sat on the platform with him and talked with him afterwards.

YOUNG: Do you remember any of the conversation?

PETERS: No, because everything was so hurried.

YOUNG: Well, of the Kennedy programs, which ones do you think had special appeal for West Virginia or can you remember any of the New Frontier programs which may have been greeted with special enthusiasm in West Virginia?

PETERS: Certainly the Peace Corps has been greeted with great enthusiasm in West Virginia. I know a number of people who have enlisted in that. The Area Redevelopment and the Food Stamp Program which he inaugurated the day after his Inauguration were well received. Of course, we have been delighted with Action for Appalachian Youth, and Area Redevelopment.

YOUNG: President Kennedy was here at one time in connection with that program, wasn't he?

PETERS: No, Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] has been here in connection with that program. And Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett] has been down here several times in connection with that and Sergeant Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] came here two years ago—and spoke about the Peace Corps—and people were very enthusiastic in their reception of him. And, of course, I feel that the North-South Highway has been a great contribution to West Virginia. Also, the plants like Food Machinery and North American Aviation that the Kennedy Administration induced to come here. I feel that people as a whole in West Virginia feel that Kennedy certainly kept his promise in helping West Virginia—he did a great deal.

YOUNG: Is there any point, however, of which there has been any criticism of the Kennedy Administration among West Virginians in moderate positions of influence that would be able to make any kind of evaluation that you are aware of?

PETERS: No, I don't think so. I think you always find a few soreheads—a few people

that want to.... That are against anything.

YOUNG: Well, we would assume as we approach this election year there would be a certain amount of partisanship from the opposition—but at least among the Democrats who supported either Kennedy or Humphrey, you feel that....

[-12-]

PETERS: Among the Democrats and the fair-minded people, I feel that this....

YOUNG: This might lead back to another question—what effect do you feel that the selection of Lyndon Johnson as the Vice Presidential candidate had on unifying the Democratic Party in the general election of 1960?

PETERS: I think it did a great deal in West Virginia towards bringing the factions together for a united effort in the Fall campaign.

YOUNG: Mrs. Peters, if you were to summarize in general the broad effect of the Kennedy primary, the general election, and the Kennedy Presidency on your native State of West Virginia, what do you think the most valuable contribution was made by the late President?

PETERS: I really believe that one of the most important contributions made to West Virginia was the encouragement he gave—especially to the Young people—to actively participate in their government at all levels—city, county, state and federal—I am frequently reminded that since the Kennedy campaign it is much easier to get acceptable candidates for office as well as volunteer workers for headquarters and field work. He just had that certain something that inspired confidence and deep, deep affection.

YOUNG: Do you feel that any future Presidential candidate or candidate for other offices will be able to get volunteers and volunteer enthusiasm a little more readily because of the Kennedy campaign?

PETERS: Yes—yes, I certainly do.

YOUNG: And you think that at least in your own particular area the word “politics” is a little more respectable because of the Kennedy campaign?

PETERS: Much more respected.

YOUNG: Much publicity was given to West Virginia during the campaign and much of it was unfavorable. Could you react in general to the President and the responsibility for this unfavorable publicity and then say a word about the reaction to the unfavorable publicity during the last four years?

PETERS: I think the poverty angle in West Virginia has been overplayed. For instance, some people have gotten the impression that Charleston is the center of poverty—well—you drive through Charleston and see all of our chemical plants and many other signs of prosperity, you certainly wouldn't class Charleston as a poverty city and...

[-13-]

YOUNG: How do you feel about the national image of West Virginia?

PETERS: I feel that the national image of West Virginia was certainly helped during the Kennedy campaign rather than hurt because before the Kennedy campaign many times when I was traveling outside of West Virginia and would be asked where I was from and I would say, "Charleston, West Virginia," they would say, "Oh, is that near Richmond?" And now, when I say, "I'm from West Virginia.", everybody knows where West Virginia is and that there is a West Virginia.

YOUNG: Mrs. Peters, let's talk a little more about the President personally. Do you feel that the President's Harvard accent and his reputation for being an Easterner helped him or hurt him in a State that is otherwise known for its independent and rather standoffish mountaineer habits at times?

PETERS: I do not think it hurt him—I think he knew how to handle that Harvard accent and that, if anything, it helped him in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Let's turn then to the President and Mrs. Kennedy's conduct in the White House and more or less this over-worked word "image"—were West Virginians at all aware of the President's personal life—did they follow it carefully and how do you feel they reacted to it if they did follow it carefully?

PETERS: I think that most West Virginians felt that President and Mrs. Kennedy brought a dignity and culture to the White House that hadn't been there since the days of Thomas Jefferson.

YOUNG: Well, can you think of anything in particular that West Virginians who did follow the President's personal life approved of or felt was a fine addition to the life of the President?

PETERS: I think the majority of us in West Virginia are very proud of the restoration of the White House under the guidance of Mrs. Kennedy and we also have loved the youthful atmosphere created by Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] and John-John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] with their many friends and animals and we have also appreciated the fact that West Virginians have had frequent access to the White House.

YOUNG: Well, Mrs. Peters, do you have any other observations on the Kennedy

Administration, the years of the New Frontier, or the West Virginia elections?

[-14-]

PETERS: I think we have pretty well covered everything but I might add that I think the Kennedy campaign brought a new level of excitement to West Virginia elections—something we had never had before.

YOUNG: This has been an interview in Charleston, West Virginia, on July 14, 1964, with Mrs. Charles Peters. Mrs. Peters served in the Kennedy primary campaign in working with the women of Charleston, West Virginia, and Kanawha County. Later she was appointed by President Kennedy to the American Battle Monuments Commission. The interview was conducted by Mr. William L. Young.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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