

Kennedy's Delaware visit

By ROGER A. MARTIN

"President John Kennedy coming to Delaware" the headlines read 30 years ago, in November 1963. Delawareans were excited to learn he was coming to dedicate the newly constructed Interstate 95 just west of Newark, but nobody could have been happier than Gov. Elbert Nostrand Carvel. To him, it was a dream come true.

Despite their being in the same political party, Carvel and the young president had not been getting along at all. Now, Delaware's chief executive saw the Kennedy trip as a way to warm up the cold relationship that had existed since the man from Massachusetts had come to the White House. The problem began in the summer of 1960.

Carvel had served as Delaware's governor from 1949-1953 and ran for the U.S. Senate in 1958 against incumbent Sen. John J. Williams. While Carvel was a popular candidate, he needed all the help he could get, Williams being one of the most popular politicians in Delaware history.

During the campaign Kennedy came to Delaware on behalf of Carvel's candidacy. Kennedy had gained national stature in his unsuccessful bid for the vice presidency of the United States at the Democratic Convention in 1956. Kennedy was extremely popular and added glitz to the Carvel campaign. Even U.S. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas and Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota appeared on TV tapes made in Washington with Carvel, but all was for naught. Carvel lost, but he and Kennedy had gotten to know each

other.

Two years later as Democrats gathered in Los Angeles for their national convention, Carvel found himself in a stew as a delegate from Delaware. Having served as governor for one term, he had been beaten in his bid for re-election by J. Caleb Boggs in 1952. Now he wanted to return as the state's governor, but getting his party's nomination was not going to be easy.

There was a serious question in his own back yard from Sussex countians in the Democratic Party. For one thing, there were other contenders for the nomination, such as Harry Smith and state Sen. Walter "Doc" Hoey. Tyler McConnell of Wilmington, the likely candidate, was supported by Raymond West, the Sussex County Democratic chairman.

While Carvel had been known as a progressive governor, Sussex countians looked at him with a frown. He had been a bit too liberal for them. Two other points cast him in disfavor among his brethren. He had been too quick to support Wilmington's John M. Conway over Selbyville's Elisha Dukes for chairman of the state Democratic Party in a recent battle. Second, as governor, Carvel had been supportive of labor unions in invoking the negotiated wage rate on all state construction projects, especially school buildings. Sussex countians didn't cozy up to labor unions.

So, Sussex County Democrats watched Carvel closely as the 1960 elections approached. They wanted to see who he was going to support in Los Angeles for the presidency at the Democratic National Convention. Quite simply, Carvel was damned if he did and damned if he didn't support John Kennedy.

On the one hand, didn't Kennedy come to Delaware on Carvel's behalf in 1958 in the Williams election attempt? Wouldn't it be fair to support the man who helped him then? On the other

Roger A. Martin, a teacher and an historian, represents the 11th District in the Delaware Senate. His latest book, "Delaware's Medal of Honor Winners" will be released this week. This article is an excerpt from a work in progress, "Tales of Delaware II."

meant Bert Carvel was



President John F. Kennedy shakes hands with the late Gov. Millard Tawes of Maryland as he arrives in Delaware a week before his death to dedicate Interstate 95. Looking on are, top, the late U.S. Rep. Harris B. McDowell and, left, former Gov. Elbert N. Carvel.

hand, Kennedy was liberal himself and, more important, a Roman Catholic whereas Sussex County was overwhelmingly Protestant! What to do?

With the Delaware Democratic Convention two weeks away and the nomination for governor still up in the air, Carvel finally chose to support the less liberal Sen. Stuart Symington of Missouri and, ultimately, Lyndon Johnson,

but it was Kennedy who got the nomination. Carvel winced. He had backed the wrong horse. And Carvel's problem went from bad to worse when Kennedy pulled out a squeaker election night and won.

Having won himself as Delaware's new governor, Carvel decided to try the olive branch approach. Back in 1948 he had called Harry Truman, when he

again in good graces

was surprisingly re-elected, and he and Mrs. Carvel had had a pleasant conversation with the man from Missouri. Now Carvel would do the same thing with Kennedy and all would be well. They could start off on the right foot with what looked like four great years ahead.

He went to the phone to place a congratulatory call to the president-elect. As he waited for his call to go through, Carvel quickly found what his decision in Los Angeles had cost him. Kennedy refused the call. The word went forth. The governor of Delaware was persona non grata to the new White House occupant.

In the ensuing months every attempt to get back into the good graces of the glamorous president of the United States was shunned. As Carvel later said, "It was as if Kennedy wanted to keep me at arm's length." The Kennedys were known to say, "Don't get mad, just get even," and that attitude seemed to prevail.

When governors of the United States had met at the White House in the past, the governor of Delaware, the First State in the union, was placed next to the president, but not now. Whenever Carvel went to such gatherings, the seating was random and not according to the old custom. Every time Kennedy and Carvel met or conversed thereafter, Kennedy referred to him as "Governah" Carvel, never as "Bert" or Elbert.

Carvel went to Washington to testify several times before Congress on legislation favored by the Kennedy administration, but the chill remained.

Carvel was at a loss as to how to make amends. After the great storm of 1962 that ravaged Delaware's coastline, Carvel invited Kennedy to Delaware to celebrate the reconstruction of the area with the federal government's help, but Kennedy refused "Governah" Carvel's invitation.

Then came the day Kennedy accepted an invitation to come to

Delaware to cut the ribbon at the Interstate 95 ceremony on the Delaware-Maryland state line.

Why he accepted is open to conjecture. It might have been quite simply because Congressman Harris McDowell Jr. had asked him. McDowell had been out front from the beginning as a Kennedy supporter. Or maybe it was because the ceremony didn't involve only Delaware. Maryland's Gov. Millard Tawes was also there as well, along with other dignitaries from both states.

On Nov. 14, 1963, President Kennedy arrived by helicopter from Washington along with Congressman Harris McDowell, and his entourage alighted at a rise overlooking the ceremonial spot on the Delaware-Maryland line. A stone, still standing today, was later placed on the line between the two states in the median strip to mark the dedication of the highway.

When the festivities were over and Kennedy was alone, even without Secret Service men, Carvel approached the president and walked with him up the hill to the helicopters. As they returned to the landing spot, Carvel explained to the president that Kennedy had nothing to worry about regarding his re-election campaign the next year in Delaware. Delawareans were for him. Carvel also related to Kennedy that thousands of Delawareans had parked their cars and walked miles to hear him. Kennedy politely smiled at Carvel's comments.

Then as he started to board the helicopter, Kennedy turned to Carvel, waved and said, "So long, Elbert!" At that moment Carvel realized that all was forgiven and that he and Kennedy were again on friendly terms — but not for long.

The next Friday, eight days later, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was dead of an assassin's bullet in Dallas.