

Oral History Interview #4

with

JOHN J. CARSON

Washington, D.C.
November 22, 1971

By Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

HESS: All right, before we begin Mr. Carson, let me add that upon returning to the office after our third interview, I found a notation--I found some notes in another folder about the time that you and five other gentlemen were on a task force for Secretary Schwollenbach at the time that he became Secretary of Labor.

And since, as I mentioned to you on the phone the other day, as I have covered this with someone else at the Library, and have mentioned the names, if we don't add something on, historians in the future will wonder what happened.

Well, now they will know why it was not mentioned before, where it should have been, was because I failed to put this, what I have in my hand, these notes in your folder. But we will cover that now. And I will start by saying that in the New York Times

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of July the 1st of 1945 there is a reference to the special task force that was called in at that time. I'll read just a little bit of what the New York Times has to say:

Louis B. Schwollenbach took office as Secretary of Labor today and immediately announced a 30 day goal for blueprinting the reorganization of the Federal Government's labor activities. He said he hoped to see the reorganization effective in 60 days, but that some of the affectation might be beyond his control. Secretary Schwollenbach brought into the department six temporary special assistants who, he said, would be his "eyes and ears" in speeding the reorganization of the department. They would help him three or four weeks he added, and none would stay beyond that time. They are: John R. Steelman of New York, a former Director of Conciliation, who will help in that field; Carl Moran of Rockland, Maine, former Representative and former member of the Maritime Commission; John Carson, former newspaperman, now with the National League of Cooperatives, who will advise on public relations; Edward Connelly, Federal District Attorney in the Washington judicial district where Schwollenbach just resigned his judgeship..." [Two names I can't pronounce] "...A. A. LaFramboise..."[Do you remember how to pronounce it?]

CARSON: No, I never met him.

HESS: L-a-F-r-a-m-b-o-i-s-e.

"...Mr. Schwellenbach's judicial secretary who will make a general administrative study and Ike..." [and another name] "...Comeaux, controller of the Seattle City Light Company who will study budgetary commands.

"Also at his first press conference Mr. Schwellenbach made the statement that he left the bench

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'absolutely without knowledge of this department.'

All right, now just to get into that, what do you recall that we did not discuss the other day about this Secret Six? Now, I believe we mentioned Mr. Steelman, but what do you recall about some of the other men?

CARSON: Well, I remember Carl Moran very well, in fact Carl was in the House and I was doing some newspaper work and got to know him pretty well. He was the--very successful as a member of Congress, he returned for several years from Maine, when he might not have been expected to return. And then when I went down to become for a short time, secretary of the Maritime Commission, Carl was a member of the commission. He was a very--a fellow with a lot of vision, a very courageous guy, he spoke his mind at all times even on the Maritime Commission he had time--he had trouble with some of the other commissioners occasionally, as he should have had, in my opinion, but other than that I don't know anything about him, but I have respect for him and I have respect for anything he'd say.

HESS: Do you recall anything of what he had to handle at the Labor Department?

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CARSON: I don't know. I know about it and I can't remember what caused Schwellenbach to bring him into the work there because I never knew that Schwellenbach and Moran were friends when they were up on the Hill together. I just can't remember.

HESS: All right, what about Edward Connelly?

CARSON: Connelly I do remember vaguely. I didn't remember him the other day, but I think his work was more to do with the crust of the lawyers, the legal department there. He was a very nice fellow, very quiet fellow, but he obviously knew nothing about the department and I doubt that any of them knew much about the department, except Steelman, of course.

HESS: And the first of the two men whose names I cannot pronounce, Mr. LaFramboise. Do you recall anything about him?

CARSON: No. He and the others you mentioned were there at any time it must have been after I left, but of course I didn't stay there; I only gave part-time to it. It wasn't a paid job at all, it was a voluntary service and I only gave part-time to it, but he didn't appear then and there after that job was finished I---

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Lou asked me to come in, oh, occasionally through the week and talk and I did go in and see him on several occasions, oh, many occasions, and I never remember, I don't remember or recall, I don't recall those names at all at any time. They never met with us at least.

Moran, Steelman, Connelly and I met, and if they--if the other fellows met with Lou they met at another time.

HESS: What seems to be the general attitude of the Labor Department towards this task force that was brought in at this time?

CARSON: Well, I--when you went into that kind of a job, of course, you went in with the realization that there would be a good many fellows from the--well, the old hands who would be ready to ridicule--to ridicule the idea that Lou had and so on. But that didn't make any difference to me and I didn't see--openly at least, there was no criticism or ridicule, or no objection at any time. I thought we had got--I know that I had got the cooperation. In fact, I think I told you I had the job in the Conciliation

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Division; that was Steelman's old division. When I reached my conclusions, which was that the thing had to be completely reorganized, gotten away from a cheap service division, begin to get some ideas into this thing, into the job. But after I had made my report to Lou, it was oral, an oral report, in a conference we had with all four of them, four advisers to Lou, a few days later one fellow who had been Steelman's predecessor called me to compliment me on my idea of trying to develop a civil service status for the staff. And he said that he had made that same endeavor many times. He went out to become the labor adviser for one of the big corporations, I forget his name. He's a young fellow, I never met him, he talked to me over the phone several times, never met him. But we agreed, and he was very enthusiastic about what Lou was trying to do.

And actually, of course, I think I knew the department better than any of these fellows, including Steelman. I didn't--and I knew it better than Lou knew it. And the department was so--I don't know what word, descriptive word you could--it was dead, from the neck up and the neck down, throughout all my time as a newspaperman. The fact is that very rarely in all the newspaper work I did around here, and that's many years, I very rarely heard anybody say that at any time

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he went to the Labor Department for a story or so on. It was a department that had nothing to offer. That was true when Fannie Perkins was there too. She, of course, was a little bit of a theatrical person in some respects and she gave it a little life, but it wasn't of any value.

HESS: What's your opinion of the way that the Department of Labor has developed, has it in the present day developed...

CARSON: Of course, I am not competent, or what I would have to say would not be of much value, because I again, I don't get down there and I haven't gotten down there in, oh, the last

twenty years or more, but again, you'll find these come out--stories have come out and very rarely is there any news that comes out of the Labor Department.

HESS: Well, as Mr. Schwellenbach said in his first press conference, he knew absolutely nothing about that department. I think we touched on that the other day, but do you think that's a fair appraisal, or do you just...

CARSON: Oh, I'm sure that Lou knew nothing about it,

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because there was no reason that--as he told me, the only reason that he had for knowing Steelman was on Steelman's initiative. Steelman sought for opportunity to come up and advise him about something, not related to the department, but some of the information he got around Washington where he could be of help just to Schwellenbach he presumed.

Let me say one other thing that I'll always think was typical of the status of the Labor Department, and that perhaps still is. There was the rather large auditorium in the Labor Department, as there are in most of the departments, in fact in all of the departments that I have covered as a newspaperman. But this was a very large auditorium and it was the Department of Labor's auditorium. Either at that time, just before Schwellenbach came in or after Schwellenbach--no, it was before Schwellenbach came in, they took that auditorium away from the Labor Department and made it into an auditorium for General Services and so on. I...

HESS: Was that the present day departmental auditorium?

CARSON: Yes. I think that's--that could be.

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HESS: Yes, that's the one they consider for use by all the departments.

CARSON: Yes. They took it entirely away. I remember that there was--we had contemplated, or I had suggested to Lou when I got into trying to set up an educational conference, the labor leaders later--of the educational directors of the various labor organizations. The question was whether it would be that or whether we would develop a big conference bringing in everybody that we could get that would be interested in that subject. And I recall very distinctly that the information that we got at that time when I--was that we couldn't use the Labor Department conference hall because somebody else had asked for it, and they might not use it but they had prior rights to it and so on and so on.

HESS: Couldn't even use your own auditorium.

CASRON: No. No.

HESS: Do you know why Mr. Truman selected Mr. Schwellenbach for this particular role?

CARSON: Well, I'm sure he and Lou--Lou and Truman were

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very intimate friends. As I told you in the first interview, that Lou was given the job by Jack Garner the streetcar vice president, was given the job of becoming a tutor of Truman's when Truman first came to the Senate, and Lou was very much interested in and very close to Truman. For example, when at the time at the convention when Truman was nominated on the Sunday night, as I told you I think before. Truman--they had a little conference at the apartment, I think, of Senator Hatch of New Mexico, and the ones that I remember being in that conference were Shay Minton, Senator Shay Minton; Senator Hatch, Lou Schwellenbach, Jimmy Byrnes came in, there were a couple of more in there, but it was obvious that wherever Lou would be found in those days--or Truman would be found, the probability was that Lou--the other one would be found in all those conferences.

Schwellenbach told me about that conference. That was on a Sunday night where Jimmy Byrnes came to tell the conference that he had talked with Roosevelt and Roosevelt had assured him that he would be the vice-presidential nominee. And Lou was laughing about it. I had breakfast with Lou the next morning; he told me the whole story.

HESS: Were they fairly close at the time that he was

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the Secretary of Labor? Did they have a close relationship?

CARSON: They were very, very close, so close that they could be highly critical of each other, or at least Lou was critical of Truman on several occasions, but...

HESS: What occasions do you recall?

CARSON: Well, I remember very well when the dropping of the Iwo Jima bomb was--the one that Lou lost control of his emotions, of his temper, and told Truman, "Keep your damn mouth shut at least."

HESS: Did he phone him up at that time?

CARSON: Yes, he called him on the morning after. I had not read the morning papers because I wanted to get down to see him. I had other work to do, I wanted to get down to see him about something and I was waiting for him, when Lou came in and he said, "Go on in." And he was very emotional and distraught, suffering. And he said, "Did you see what they've done, what happened over there in Japan?" And he talked about the bomb, and the children that they murdered, the women and men over there. "Who in the hell ever thought

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of doing this was so on and so on." And I listened to it, and I listened to him, didn't comment, and then he grabbed the phone and called the White House to talk to Truman and he talked to Truman and he said, "Who in hell told you to drop that bomb over there," and so on, so on. And then he listened and I remember he said, "Well now, for God's sake, keep you damn mouth shut at least," and so on. He had lost complete control of his emotions and he was suffering, obviously.

HESS: Did he ever relate to you what President Truman had said to--that he did not want him to repeat?

CARSON: No he didn't. But--no, he didn't say that Truman didn't want him to repeat anything, he didn't want...

HESS: No, that's what I meant, he...

CARSON: He didn't want Truman...

HESS: He didn't want Truman repeating it.

CARSON: Yes, Truman yes. They announced that morning they had dropped the bomb you know and he didn't want Truman--he didn't want Truman to indicate in any way that he was proud of having dropped the bomb.

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So then later on, when Truman—when Steelman went over to the White House, Lou resented the fact that this Steelman was taken over there. He knew very well it was the result of Steelman's initiative that he went over there, and thereafter, Steelman and Lou--oh, I can't remember the incident, but it came to a point where there was a question of whether--I think whether Schwollenbach would stay. I forget what it was, an issue, a labor controversy or a strike or something, and Steelman had stepped into it and taken charge, and Lou made a very--I remember made a very strong protest about Steelman's activities at that time.

HESS: Did he make it to the President?

CARSON: Yes, he went to the President about whether Steelman was in command, or whether he, Louis, was in command.

HESS: That's right.

CARSON: And of course, he was assured that he was in command. And I actually, it wasn't long after this that Steelman's sun began to pass, to fade away, his power began to diminish and then he began to disappear.

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HESS: You know he held the same position though right up to the end of the Truman administration. He had the title The Assistant to the President. Did you feel that his influence waned during the Truman administration?

CARSON: Oh yes. Oh yes, Lou--I don't know how much his wane was with Truman himself, but the fact was that Steelman had no real esteem around here for, or from those who, say, let's say in the labor movement and so on. He wasn't--I told you that Fannie Perkins went down to New Orleans to get--and there she offered a fellow named Charlie Logan, who was head--and about forty-four--he was head of the War Labor Board offices through the South. I don't know what the title of it was. And then later on he opened his own labor offices and he knew Fannie Perkins very well, he got to know her very well. She was out to his house one night, Sunday

night, to dinner at Charlie's house, and Charlie came down the next day to my hotel to tell me what Fannie had told him that she was going back to Washington to get rid of Steelman and she wanted Charlie to come back and take the job. And Charlie--I told him not to take it because the department--part of the job was utterly impossible and would not add at all to his prestige at all. He

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decided not to take it.

HESS: Well, the question was whether or not the Secretary to the Department of Labor felt that his influence was undercut by having a man in this position, in Steelman's position in the White House, is one that interests researchers at the Library a great deal. Of course, now Mr. Schwullenbach died in the summer of 1948 I believe and shortly thereafter was replaced by Tobin. Do you know offhand if Tobin also expressed an opinion to the President that he wished that Steelman was not--not in the White House?

CARSON: No, I remember the name, Tobin, was he...

HESS: Maurice J. Tobin, I think J.

CARSON: I wonder if he was--I remember the name very well and remember he was in there, but I never met the fellow and I never went down there. I just wonder if he is a brother or son of the Tobin of the Teamsters, you know. Dan [Daniel J.] Tobin was head of the Teamsters in all those years and actually a very interesting thing at that time was that when Billy Greene resigned as secretary, I think he resigned or he moved up, the question was one of electing a secretary of the AF of L. And Tobin wanted Elmer Milliman, who was president of the Railroad Labor

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Executives Association and also of the Association of--oh, it's the track builders, I'll think of it in a minute, the name of the organization. He wanted Milliman, he asked Milliman whether he wanted the job as secretary, and Milliman decided not to take it until he talked to me at the time, and I said, "Why?"

And he said, "Well, in the first place, I'm not going to be a secretary and possibly go on to become a president of that damn executive council up there, running the AF of L," he said. But then he told me later that Tobin actually wanted him to become head of the Labor Lights Life Insurance Company, that's why Tobin didn't want him to take the job there. But I don't remember, there was something though in the news during Tobin's career down there. He was in controversy with somebody, maybe--I don't know whether it was Mr. Steelman or not. I don't know what's become of Steelman; he got control of a couple of papers out here and...

HESS: He has since sold those papers and he has retired.

CARSON: Is he alive?

HESS: Oh yes, he lives in Arlington, Virginia. He also has a place in Florida and is building a home in

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North Carolina. So, he's still around.

CARSON: He was on the make all the time.

HESS: All right, I think that pretty well covers our Secret Six item and that's the main thing that we came today.

Have anything else to add?

CARSON; Well, there was one thing I remembered the other day that I forgot to tell you about and unfortunately I can't remember the fellow's name. And I've run through my Congressional Directories back in that period and...

HESS; Maybe if we can get his name by the time we get the draft back...

CARSON: Well, maybe you or some of your people know his name. He was the Congressman from Missouri that was distinguished as being a great authority on Mark Twain. He was a man of--oh, when I knew him he was a man then of probably sixty-five years. I think he probably retired, he might have been beaten, but I remember one day I was standing with him over in the door of the House...

HESS: Do you recall if he was from the district where Hannibal was located? I don't really know because...

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CARSON: I wouldn't know. The name, I have a vague recollection it was an Irish name, but I wouldn't say that, but anyhow I'm sure that anybody in Missouri will--or anybody who has the history of Missouri. I have no--I can find nothing in the Congressional Directory that I have to give me--helpful to my memory. But he was a distinguished fellow and distinguished on that score being a great authority on Mark Twain and he was a modest guy, and a fellow who knew his politics. But he and I were standing in the House door, the House restaurant door one day at noon talking, and Truman came along. He came from the Senate through the halls and stopped and said hello. He just said hello and he said, "I'm sorry, but I'm racing to get to a lunch engagement over here," and laughed and went on.

And this fellow said, this Congressman said, "You know," he said, "it's tough what Harry has to go through in this election. He can't win, of course," he said, "because the, oh, the Kansas City Star has developed all this stuff of the political, the..."

HESS: The Pendergasts.

CARSON: "...Pendergasts and so on."

HESS: What year was this?

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CARSON: Well, I think Truman was--the second...

HESS: The second time he ran.

CARSON: Yes, the second time he ran.

HESS: In 1940.

CARSON: That's about the time. He said, "He can't win," he said, "the Pendergasts they have just dragged him, Truman, into this and Truman when the time comes, Truman is going to have to say he's for Pendergast or against Pendergast, and if he says he's against Pendergast, then he'll lose his support from the machine, and if he's for Pendergast, the Star will murder him and so on so on. So, you know damn well what Truman's going to say," he said. He said, "You know, Truman, that sweet little smile, that cute little smile that Truman has," he said, "that's not Truman, wholly Truman at all." He says, "This guy's a tough little fighter. When the time comes he'll stand up and say--that smile may fool you."

Well, then that was the one thing I remember about that day. Can't remember much more about it, we had quite a talk about Truman. And this Congressman said, "You know, Pendergast. Yes, he was head of the organization, political organization out there, but it was comparable with all of the other political

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organizations throughout the country, Republican or Democrat." He said, "The old man was a very fine man until he became senile," he said, "After he became senile he got to playing with the horses and got in an affair with a couple of women." And he said, "There was nothing to the affair, but," he said, "the Star, of course, you know, lives off that kind of stuff and so they attacked Pendergast."

Well, then, I think I may have told you about this. Yes, I think I told you. I was asked later by the Cooperative League to get a speaker for the big annual conference of the cooperatives, and I wanted to get Truman to talk. Well, Truman protested up till that time that he was never a public speaker, he couldn't make a speech, and so on. But I still wanted Truman to make a speech, talk. And I went over one afternoon to ask him if he would make the speech. And I said, "Now, I've got to get it approved by the League board."

And he said well he'd think about it and he said, "Come talk to me again when you get the approval of the board and we'll talk about it."

And then I went on to tell him that why I was so glad that he stated he wasn't going to run out on Pendergast at all, and yet you had--I said, "Mr. Truman, you defended Pendergast, not by any particular

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action, but said it was that Pendergast in all your contacts with Pendergast he had been a very fine man, you'd be glad to support him and everything. And then he sat down and talked to me

about his whole career with Pendergast--now maybe he didn't--I think we talked for probably a half an hour and I said that one thing--I was just at that time we had an incident where a fellow--the head of the New Jersey political machine, Hague, was being attacked viciously by the press for political activities up there and so on. And I said, oh, I noticed the newspaper correspondents at the conference with Franklin D.R., FDR, that we asked Roosevelt about Hague and Roosevelt did a typical Roosevelt stunt, dodging and making a joke of all of it and so on without ever committing himself either way for Hague or against Hague. Now I said, "I don't know Hague anymore than I know Pendergast, but Hague was in some respects responsible for Roosevelt's election. He's--the New Jersey support was necessary, but it may not have been determining, but it was necessary. And in those days he was very anxious to be a supporter, a friend of Hague's compliment him, support him, but now when the trouble, attack starts, Roosevelt runs out.

Now, it was very obvious to me what--Jim Farley

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didn't run out. In the midst of that attack, Jim Farley went out and played golf with Hague and went out of his way to publicize the fact that he and Hague were playing golf. And I said, "That's the kind of a guy that Jim Farley--I like in that kind of a situation. That's why I admire so much your attitude towards Pendergast." And then he told me the whole history of Pendergast as far as he was concerned.

I still think that--I like what Truman did very much in the Pendergast affair, because I have lived with a lot of the political bosses and all in all, the fact is, one of the things I always remember this incident. This was personal. I remember saying to one of my friends related to one controversy, that was quite common in the press galleries, where some of the newspapermen were colleagues of mine, friends of mine, were launching an attack on political bosses, but on members of the Congress too and so on, but I said, "Well, as far as I'm concerned, I've had a lot of experience with businessmen, the biggest of businessmen, and with newspapermen, the top down and so on, among others, and if it ever came to a showdown, I'll

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take the members of Congress as far as morals are concerned and so on. And it's very obvious why. My experience with political bosses goes back to, intimately, to 1911, and with Tom Taggart of Indiana who is a great, great man, and then with others right on through. But one asset they have to have is that they keep their word, then they--as long as they have that established, everybody accepts it...

HESS: The political integrity.

CARSON: The political guts, they'll pull through, but if they begin to hum and haw and dodge, and deny those who have--their associates and friends--deny the morality of the courage or so on of the honesty of those. That's one asset they have.

And the other thing is that always impressed me, I traveled through the offices of the House of Representatives and the Senators for many years, going to have to go as a newspaperman, but at all hours of the day and out in the evenings, and all that time I only saw one little incident of no consequence whatsoever which might have been, as we say, an indication of sin. It wasn't. I

saw one Congressman lean over the desk, I opened the door and stepped in and he was just leaning over the chair of his

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stenographer to kiss her or something and that's all. I stopped and walked right out of course. And he was a very nice fellow, I don't know what the circumstances was, but that's the only thing I ever saw in all those years I traveled. But I've seen far more than that in the newspaper world, business and so on.

HESS: I expect so.

CARSON: They live in a showcase all the time, they are constantly being watched and covered and talked about and so on.

HESS: And if they did something wrong it would come to light.

CARSON: Yes.

HESS: It certainly would.

Well, thank you very much sir.

CARSON: Okay, that's all I know, if I can help any more let me know.

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