

## Kennedy Memorial Foundation History

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Late in 1966, there was talk of a possible project to build a permanent North Dakota Democratic-NPL headquarters in the capital city of Bismarck. We had seen projects and dreams like that one talked of before without resulting in a serious effort.

By early 1967, the talk had increased to the point that we thought we should seek out the opinion of Senator Quentin Burdick. In February or March of 1967, we talked with the Senator in his Washington office. We expressed our apprehension that we did not have the fund-collecting power to construct such a headquarters building. Senator Burdick expressed concern that any building fund would cut into his 1968 campaign fund collections.

Pressure continued to mount among party people to have something done. We were still doubtful as to the possibility of the project. But because we felt the matter was of considerable importance, we invited 35-40 cross-section Democratic-Non Partisan Leaguers to discuss the matter with us in Bismarck. This group included district chairs, legislators, state officials, and prominent party workers. Not a voice was raised against the project. Rather, there was enthusiasm and pledges totaling \$10,000 were made at the meeting.

By that time, the thought that the headquarters should be a working memorial to President John F. Kennedy was firmly implanted. In the spring of 1967, the proposed project was taken to the Democratic-NPL State Executive Committee for their approval or disapproval. They gave their approval, and the State Chair appointed a fund drive committee made up of Rolland Redlin, Dr. I. L. Lazareck and Walter Christensen. Mrs. Guy was asked to be an honorary co-person with Rolland Redlin. This she agreed to do.

The original plan was to collect \$40,000 in funds or pledges so that construction could begin on August 15, 1967, and the building be occupied in October 1967. The total cost initially was estimated to be \$60,000 for the project.

Because the fund drive was confined to those who were willing and able to donate \$500 or more, the funds did not accumulate as rapidly as was hoped. The \$500 or more figure was set, believing that this would not cut into normal sources of campaign revenue. Subsequent events proved this to be true.

The timetable was later changed to a January 1, 1968, start, with occupancy hoped for July 1, 1968. Still there were inadequate funds. The donors of \$500 or more had been promised that if construction were not underway by July 1, 1968, they would have their donations returned.

At a Democratic-NPL Executive Committee meeting in Harvey in the spring of 1968 to which all district chairs were invited, a decision had to be made. Should the project be shelved and the money returned, or should we make an effort to get underway before the July 1, 1968, deadline? There were a few voices raised at that meeting asking that the project be cancelled. But the overwhelming sentiment expressed

by motion was that we proceed with the project and have a groundbreaking prior to July 1, 1968. A ceiling was set by motion at that meeting that we not commit ourselves for a project that exceeded our pledges and cash by \$10,000. Shortly after that meeting in Harvey, Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Almost automatically, the JFK Memorial Center became known as the Kennedy Memorial Center in order that tribute could be paid to those two brothers who have been such a vital force in this generation's Democratic Party.

The Kennedy Center Building and Site Committee was composed of Dan Chapman, Walter Christensen, Bernard Hillyer, Jean Guy, and Albert Wolf of Bismarck; Reuben Heuther, Dickinson; Tony Klein, Williston; Rolland Redlin, Minot; Leo Stein, Harvey; Ken Urdahl, Jamestown; Mary Gray, Valley City; Mrs. Myron Bright, Fargo; and Lloyd Omdahl, Grand Forks.

On May 18, 1968, the Democratic-NPL State Executive Committee by motion put the affairs of the Center in the hands of the Kennedy Memorial Center Foundation. This was done to establish a legal entity to receive funds and administer the Center; an entity that would have continuity from one year and one administration to the next, but with the North Dakota Democratic-NPL Party offered an option of leasing the building for its headquarters. That Foundation Board of Directors was made up of floor leaders in the House and Senate, the Democratic National Committeewoman and National Committeeman, the Democratic-NPL State Chair, and the other's named to the Board by previously mentioned officeholders. Therefore, the Board at that time was made up of Art Link, Herb Meschke, Mark Purdy, Liv Bjorlie, Larry Erickson, Walter Christensen, Rolland Redlin, Albert Wolf, and Jean Guy; the last four being selected by the first five listed. Senator Burdick was kept informed of the project.

In November of 1968, the Democratic-NPL Executive Committee met in Mandan and expressed approval of the bids to build the Center and approve raising the debt limit from \$10,000 to \$40,000.

It had been two years since the original concept was proposed. It was true that the plan was more elaborate than the original concept of a modest metal building on low priced land. The Memorial Building was then located at an excellent location with a building planned which combined dignity and a sense of elegance and grace most appropriate to the memory of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and also was most appropriate in establishing pride and a sense of permanence to our Democratic-NPL party as a lessee. It is our belief that we are one of the first state political parties to lease a suitable building from which to carry out headquarters' work on a continuing basis.

Prominent Bismarck architect and loyal Democratic Party supporter, Bernard Hillyer, agreed to draw up plans for a suitable Memorial Building on the busy corner of 19th Street North and Divide Avenue in Bismarck. John Meisner Construction Co. won the bid and agreed to construct the Hillyer planned structure and sidewalks for \$55,000. It was obvious that there were not enough funds on hand to construct the building, so a mortgage was placed on the project. This caused some apprehension among project leaders and supporters because the Democratic-NPL Party had never been made up of active supporters with deep pockets. Two prominent couples and major financial politically active supporters came to the project's rescue with a novel but inspiring proposal. Gordon and Mary Gray of Valley City and Bud and Vi Stinson of Devils Lake agreed to co-chair a targeted fund drive to pay off the building mortgage. These two couples drove to North Carolina to locate the furniture manufacturing company that had crafted President Kennedy's two oval office rocking chairs. They found the rocking chair manufacturer who had been turning out the Kennedy model rocking chair without change for a number of decades.

Gordon Gray and Bud Stinson were practiced businessmen and negotiators. They finally contracted for delivery of 640 Presidential Kennedy rockers, one for every thousand people of North Dakota's population, to be delivered by rail car to Bismarck, to be sold as collector's items.

The project was not only conceived and negotiated by the Grays and Stinsons, but the financing was secured over their signatures as well.

The rocking chairs, individually boxed in cardboard, came in several boxcars. It was quite a task to carefully unload the boxes, and trip after trip, transport them to Bismarck storage. Rocking chair salespersons were enlisted all across the state and consisted mainly of Democratic-NPL legislators, district party officials, and state office holders.

The rocking chairs were a genuine buy. They were of a finished oak of obvious sturdiness and with the dignified lines of what a presidential rocker would look like. Pictures in magazines, newspapers and television showing President Kennedy holding court with visitors in the Oval Office made the cane back and bottom chairs easily recognizable.

The chairs priced at a bargain price of \$100 sold well. After a few months all the chairs were sold and even appeared in some very unlikely ownerships. The chair project was not only a fundraiser that wiped out the Memorial Center mortgage, but it gave good publicity to the Democratic-NPL Party and its supporters.

A mortgage burning celebration was held, of course. On November 6, 1971, Senator Ted Kennedy participated in the official dedication ceremony for the Kennedy Memorial Center.

The building was acquired by the Kennedy Memorial Center Foundation to make it available to the public but also available for leasing for which the Democratic-NPL Party was willing to contract. Every effort was made to comply with the legal requirements governing foundations and political parties.

The Democratic-NPL Party, by leasing the Kennedy Memorial Center building, was able to escape the bane of small state political parties which usually operated only for a few months during an election campaign in vacant store front buildings or on the second floor of downtown office buildings. The sense of permanence was always lacking, and the purchase of the proper equipment to be used for only weeks instead of year round activity was almost impossible.

If politics is the highly valued glue that holds our country's democracy together, states should have permanent locations for their political parties' activity, to be efficient and focused.

The North Dakota Democratic-NPL finally was able to lease such a building. Party activity has proved that it is not only a successful step forward but also an absolutely necessary contribution for citizen involvement in good government. There is lingering proud evidence of the contributions made by the many stalwart citizens who stepped forward to make a public building the wellspring of political activity named the Kennedy Memorial Center. There is a brass plaque attached to the back of each Kennedy rocker sold as a permanent "thank you" to the buyer. But perhaps of even more interest are the founders who contributed their \$500 to get the project started. Their gold-plated plaque on a board in the foyer of the Kennedy Center identifies by name those early political stalwarts, and plaques continue to add names as each generation of new supporters come on the scene.

*This review of events leading up to the building of the Kennedy Memorial Center was written by Governor William L. Guy and was presented by both Governor Guy and Mrs. Guy to groups interested in the background of the development of the Center.*