

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 5, 1990

INTERVIEWEE: GERRI WHITTINGTON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Ms. Whittington's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's begin with a brief discussion of your background and your work in the White House in 1963.

W: I was working as a secretary to Ralph Dungan. He was a special assistant to President Kennedy. His main job was to--he was a talent scout for President Kennedy with the ambassadors and cabinet officers. Latin America was on his wing [?] and we were pretty busy. And President Johnson came in there occasionally.

G: Do you recall your first impressions of President Johnson when he was vice president?

W: Well, he was tall and stately. On his way to President Kennedy's office off the Cabinet Room, he spoke to me. And sometimes he had a congressman from Texas with him and he brought them in and introduced me to them.

G: How did the presidential assistants in the Kennedy White House regard Lyndon Johnson when he was vice president?

W: Well, I don't know. My boss, in regard to him, didn't say too much about him. But when he said something about him, he regarded him highly. I don't know about the others.

G: And so your contact with him was just casual?

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W: Yes.

G: He would come into the office--?

W: Yes.

G: No recollections regarding ambassadorial appointments or anything--?

W: No, I don't know, because my boss was very secretive and I never heard the conversations. I guess the conversation was mostly by phone.

G: And then after President Kennedy's assassination, did you work more directly for President Johnson?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me about that.

W: I worked for a short time for Jack Valenti, and I worked for Bill Moyers. Walter Jenkins and Mildred Stegall were--I sat at the same desk as I did when I was working for Ralph Dungan. Walter Jenkins and Mildred Stegall occupied the office where my boss under President Kennedy was. So at that time I worked for, as I said, Bill Moyers and Jack Valenti.

President Johnson called me at home one night and said, "I want to talk to you about a little reassignment. " I went to the office and I was completely surprised, and quite happy that he wanted me to join his staff as a secretary.

G: So did you work directly for him?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me essentially what your duties were.

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W: Well, I was in charge of the pictures [of LBJ], and I took dictation from him on various subjects. I went on several trips with him and I did all the do-lists that a secretary would do. Taking care of the pictures was my primary job.

G: Was there a rotation of secretaries so that there would be someone there early in the morning and late in the evening and on weekends? How did it work?

W: Yes. He had four secretaries, as you know. Juanita Roberts was the main secretary, and then Marie Fehmer and Yolanda Boozer. Well, I guess he had five secretaries. Vicky--

G: Vicky McCammon.

W: Yes, and me.

G: So not all of you would be there at once?

W: All of us would be there from--wait a minute. Most of the secretaries would be there from nine to six. Then the one that came in at twelve o'clock would be there until he left, which was eight or nine o'clock.

G: I see. And that would rotate on a daily basis?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me what it was like in the White House after President Kennedy's assassination, the atmosphere and how President Johnson assumed the office.

W: Well, there was a sadness around the White House and uncertainty and shock. I don't know how President Johnson--I wasn't up there. I was two or three doors down the hall.

G: But did he seem to restore confidence within the White House?

W: Yes, he seemed to. Although it was different. He ran the office different from--they were two different personalities.

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G: How so?

W: Well, I don't know. I'd have to think about that, but I know they were two completely different personalities in the way they ran things.

G: Was President Johnson more hands-on, more of an activist in terms of wanting to personally be a part of things that were done?

W: Yes. That was part of it.

G: What else can you think of?

W: President Johnson, as you said, wanted to--his personality was just different. I don't know how to explain it. I'll think about that when you come back.

G: You said that you traveled with him some on some of his trips.

W: Yes.

G: Do you recall the first one you took with him?

W: Oh, I went down to Texas. He took me to Philadelphia to attend a funeral, and I didn't attend the funeral; I stayed on the plane. And we went from [there to] Texas, down to Austin. So I stayed there over the Christmas holidays.

G: At the Ranch, is that where you stayed?

W: Yes.

G: Anything memorable about that?

W: Well, I stayed in the Carnation Room.

G: In the Carnation Room?

W: Yes, there were two rooms that had carnation wallpaper and I stayed in one of them. It was so amazing to me because I wasn't used to that. I'm a country girl. We all had

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dinner together, and in the office he gave out Christmas presents on Christmas Eve night.

I remember that.

G: Did he give presents to the family and the staff?

W: Yes. He gave presents to Cousin Oreole and he gave presents to his--I don't know what this lady was to him but she's in the pictures that the Library has that [Yoichi] Okamoto took--he gave a present to her. And he gave all his secretaries presents.

G: Do you remember going to Austin? I think there was a party for Horace Busby.

W: Yes.

G: Tell me about that.

W: I didn't know it was a party for Horace Busby but I know it was Twenty Acres Club.

G: The Forty Acres Club.

W: Forty Acres. It was on The University of Texas campus. He took me there and that was the first time the club was integrated, so he told me.

G: When did he tell you that?

W: He told me that night as we were coming back on the helicopter.

G: After you were leaving?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me what he said.

W: I don't remember. I don't remember the exact words. See, I had this accident so my memory is not as good as it should be. But he said, "You integrated that club."

(Laughter) Doesn't that sound like him?

G: Did you have any idea when you went there that you were--?

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W: No, no.

G: People didn't act like you--?

W: One little lady said to me, "Are you the photographer's wife?"

G: Meaning Okamoto's?

W: Yes. And I said, "No, I'm one of President Johnson's secretaries." So she said, "Are you foreign?" I said, "No, I'm a Negro." And they didn't act strange to me.

G: They didn't act strange to you?

W: No. I didn't know that the Forty Acres Club wasn't integrated. So I wasn't aware of it.

G: Let me ask you then since you described this episode, do you think it was intentional that he decided he wanted to integrate that club?

W: I think it was.

G: Why don't you tell me about Lyndon Johnson's attitudes on civil rights.

W: Well, I know he didn't--I thought he had a lot of empathy for the black people. And he had a lot of empathy for the Mexicans. I think he wanted to do something about it.

G: He himself was from the South or the Southwest. Did you detect any racial prejudice on his own part?

W: No, I didn't.

G: Did he ever talk to you about his views on civil rights?

W: No, he didn't. He talked to me about he was going to appoint--he did talk to me about he was going to appoint Carl Rowan to the U.S. Information Service. That's all.

G: What did he ask you?

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W: No, he didn't ask me anything, but he told me. And said among Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, and Whitney Young and James Farmer; he said that Roy Wilkins was his favorite.

G: Did you meet those civil rights leaders when they came to the White House?

W: Yes. He sent me in there to meet them. And I took pictures with them. I don't recall what they said. I don't think they said anything.

G: Did he ask you about your own experiences with regard to race? Did he want to know how discrimination had affected you?

W: No.

G: He never asked you?

W: No.

G: Anything on his appointment of Thurgood Marshall?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me about that.

W: Well, he didn't say anything to me about that but I was there.

G: Were you?

W: Yes. I've got the pictures. There are pictures in the LBJ Library of me when Thurgood Marshall came to his office. Have you seen them?

(Interruption)

G: Anything else on that first trip to Texas?

W: We went to church down there in Johnson City. There were two cities close to the Ranch.

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G: Fredericksburg and Johnson City.

W: Yes. I think I went to church in Fredericksburg, a little small church. A little wooden church.

G: Now there was Stonewall too, which was even closer.

W: That's right. I went to church in Stonewall. He had several visitors down there, including Scotty Reston of the *New York Times*, and John Connally and Willy West.

G: Wesley West?

W: Wesley West from Houston. And we went out and hunted deer.

G: You hunted deer?

W: Yes. And Pierre Salinger was down there.

G: Was he?

W: Yes. Judge Moursund.

G: A. W. Moursund.

W: Where is he now?

G: He's still in the Hill Country.

W: And Mrs. Johnson's brother.

G: Tony Taylor.

W: Yes. And Mrs. Johnson's niece. I don't know what her name was. We used to go down to Cousin Oreole's house at night. She lived on the Ranch, as you know. We used to go walking at night.

G: Walking up to Cousin Oreole's?

W: Yes, a walk around the Ranch. He used to like that. You're talking about this first visit.

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G: Did you go anywhere else? You were going to tell me something.

W: He had the press interviews there. We went into Austin and I went into Austin with Mrs. Johnson to go to the beauty parlor. It was quite exciting for me. I had never lived with a person of their caliber before and I had never been around them.

G: You said you've never been around a person of . . .

W: I didn't stay in the house. I stayed at the Ranch. One day he had several guests and I stayed up to--what was the name of that fellow that ran the Ranch?

G: Dale Malechek?

W: Yes. I stayed up to his house when President Johnson had other guests in. And it was a revelation to me.

G: Anything else about that trip that you recall as significant?

W: I remember the chief of the CIA being down there. And I don't remember his name.

G: John McCone.

W: Yes. Yes, I think that was his name. I took a dictation from him. I remember Bess Abell and her husband being there, and Liz Carpenter.

G: There was work being done on the War on Poverty at this time too. Do you recall that? Walter Heller was--?

W: Yes. I remember that.

G: What do you remember about that?

W: I didn't do anything on that so I didn't remember anything substantive about that.

G: Do you remember your next trip with the President?

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W: I don't know whether it was my next trip, but he took me to New York and we stayed at the Carlyle, and he met with Robert Anderson.

G: With Robert Anderson?

W: Yes. And Jack was there and Bill Moyers was there and Vicky McCammon--McHugh now. I don't quite remember what that trip was about.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

June 28, 2005

Geraldine (Gerri) Whittington
White House Secretary

Interview I: June 5, 1990

Interview II: July 18, 1990

The Library is making these interviews available without a signed legal agreement since no heirs can be located.

Researchers are cautioned, however, that copyright privileges have not been transferred to the government. The interview may have copyright protection and researchers are responsible for obtaining permission from the copyright holder for further use of the interviews. See 36 C.F.R. § 1254.62.

From e-mail from John Davenport on 6/27/05

This is in response to your request for guidance on making the oral history (OH) interview of Gerri Whittington available for research. For the reasons set forth below, we believe you may make the OH interviews available for research.

Background

Gerri Whittington was a former secretary of President Lyndon B. Johnson. She was interviewed in 1990 as part of the LBJ Oral History Program. Ms. Whittington provided information regarding her duties as the president's secretary and other information that she was able to recall. We understand that all interviewees in the OH program were made aware of the library's intent to retain possession of the interview and that the interview would be open to the public for research. We understand further that most interviewees would subsequently execute deeds of gifts for the interviews, without imposing any access restrictions. Ms. Whittington was aware of the Library's intent to make her OH interview available for research. Unfortunately, Ms. Whittington was in poor health at the time of her interview. She died before her interview was transcribed and before she executed a deed of gift transferring all rights and interests in the interview to the United States.

Authorities and Analysis

NARA is authorized to accept materials from private sources relating to a former president of the United States. See 44 U.S.C. §§ 2107(4); 2111. Generally, records and other documentary materials in NARA's holdings are available to the public for research unless there are access restrictions. See 36 C.F.R. § 1254.1(b). Some donated materials may have restrictions on their use and availability as stated in writing by the donor. See 36 C.F.R. § 1256.30.

Regarding the Whittington OH interview, it is clear that the interview is part of NARA's holdings pursuant to 44 U.S.C. §§ 2107(4) and 2111. As such, the interview may be opened for research unless the donor has imposed written access restrictions. Although Ms. Whittington never executed a deed of gift for her interview, she was made aware that NARA intended to make her interview available for research. There is no written record, nor is there any other indication, of Ms. Whittington's objection to the proposed use of the interview.

Conclusions

Given that (1) the majority of OH interviews are available for public use without restrictions; (2) Ms. Whittington was aware of and never objected to NARA's intent to make her OH interview available to the public for research; and (3) NARA has statutory and regulatory authority to make its holdings available for research, we conclude that the LBJ Library may open the Whittington OH interview to research.

Although we reach the conclusion that you may make the interview available for research, please note that the copyright status of the interview is still unsettled. Accordingly, when you make the interview available to the public, we recommend that you put researchers on notice that the interview may have copyright protection and that they (the researchers) are responsible for obtaining permission from the copyright holder for further use of the interviews. See 36 C.F.R. § 1254.62.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

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