

## INTERVIEW II

DATE: November 7, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: CYNTHIA WILSON

INTERVIEWER: Lewis Gould

PLACE: By telephone from the LBJ Library to Ms. Wilson's office, Washington,  
D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: I think when we paused the last time we were just about getting to the point where we'd gotten you in the White House and gotten you at work and talked about who you'd worked with, and now I think it's time to talk about some of the work that you did, some of the specific episodes and controversies and topics and issues that came up. One of the first things that occurs to me is to say something about the First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful Capital and to what extent that you had any interaction with that group.

W: My interaction with the First Lady's Committee was in two ways: One, I did go and sit in on meetings and take notes and so forth, although there was not a transcript or anything like that, but there to take notes and to sort of be there so that we would know what was going on that needed to be done. I also did the very minor chore of sending the notification each month to the committee members when the meeting was going to be and where and so forth. But the main thing I did that involved that committee was some of the follow-up work. For instance, when the committee had, as it did each spring, a big fund-raising event to thank donors and to also attract additional donors, I worked often with Liz and Bess on the actual arrangements for those. For example, what was often done was some kind of a

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tour by bus so that the committee could see projects that had been completed and then projects that needed to be done, and then it would end up with a luncheon. One year it was at the State Department in what I think is called the Diplomatic Room, and then another year, I can remember the luncheon was actually in the East Room, which was kind of unusual. And so I did a lot of the staff labor of putting together some of the logistical arrangements for some of those kinds of visits. Then in between times, I did some, although not a great deal, I did some of the staff running around and checking on local projects, although most of that was done by Nash Castro, who would report directly to Liz and then, through Liz, often directly to Mrs. Johnson about progress on park service projects and the projects that were being done elsewhere. For instance, ones that involved the city pools or something like that would often be tracked by Sharon [Francis], who worked pretty closely with the city officials. I can remember her struggling with trying to keep some of those pool projects on track because, as you're probably aware, the capability of the city government to carry out some of the ideas and projects was a lot less than the capability of the park service. They were a lot harder to work with. And Sharon I can remember struggling and being very frustrated in working with some of the city officials in trying to both plan and implement some of the projects that were gifts from the committee and the ones that the committee gave funds for.

G: What was your impression of who the most effective and forceful members of the committee were, the ones who were the significant and influential committee members?

W: Certainly Mary Lasker had Mrs. Johnson's ear and was effective by dint of putting up a lot of money to get things done that she wanted to do, and she certainly had a significant impact within that committee. Laurance Rockefeller certainly did although, interestingly,

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my memory of him is of a very quiet person. He was not the sort of person who in the monthly meetings ever said very much, but yet he would then come up with the funding or whatever for a particular project or idea, and I think there was probably a fair amount of communication directly between him and Mrs. Johnson that I was not privy to. But certainly he was a very major player even though, as I say, his manner is such a quiet kind of reserved, gentlemanly manner that, if you didn't know what was going on, and you just walked into one of those committee meetings, you might not even know he was there because he was very, very quiet.

Then, third, Stewart Udall, in a different kind of a way, and he had--it seems to me early on he had a good deal of impact although I think of him, in fact, being greatest not so much on the Washington projects sponsored by the committee but his impact showed up more in Mrs. Johnson's involvement in issues around the country, national park issues like the Grand Canyon and some of these other issues that were very much of interest to Udall as secretary of interior. My impression was, with Udall, that he kind of let the Park Service carry the ball in the District. I don't know to what extent they really kept him wired into their day-to-day activities, but it certainly didn't appear that he was that much on a day-to-day basis involved with all the plantings and other things. He was certainly aware of them, and had strong opinions about things like the Pennsylvania Avenue Plan and those kinds of things, but I think of him in fact as being more active on the sort of environmental conservation sort of issues, in that area, and also sort of the overall Pennsylvania Avenue Plan, the big [inaudible] and those kinds of issues. An example that I can recall, on one of our annual bus tours around the city looking at things, as we were going across Memorial--no, The Roosevelt Bridge, I guess it was--on the Virginia side of the Potomac across from

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Georgetown the area is called Rosslyn. There are now rows of big high-rise office buildings there, but back in the middle sixties, that area was not yet developed, but there was one great big apartment house on a building behind the Iwo Jima Memorial that really stuck up into the skyline. I can remember Udall commenting on how much he hated that building and how they had tried through the National Capital Planning Commission and so forth to prevent it from being built there because it was right behind the Iwo Jima Memorial, but it was also an intrusion on the skyline. But they were unable to stop it. So he was very interested in those kinds of grand, if you will, sort of the grand plans, the over-all, the big picture. I think of him as being interested in Washington more in the big picture and not little individual school projects and stuff.

Then all the people on the committee, as I said last time--Nash, technically, was not a member of the committee but was certainly very much involved.

G: He eventually, I guess, becomes a member of the committee.

W: I guess, and I--my memory is very fuzzy on that, at what point he is, but to all practical purposes he was, certainly in terms of his involvement, and he was a very key player.

Then, at different times, different other people like Walter Washington had a lot of influence with Mrs. Johnson, and he was very influential in bringing before her the concerns of initially the city housing department, which is where he started, and the next--I think, before he was mayor, he was like--

G: The National Capital Housing Authority.

W: Yes. National Capital Housing, and so--I mean, early on, if you look through the records, there were some projects where we specifically went to some of these public housing

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projects and tried to spruce them up, so he was very much of an important voice in bringing those kinds of issues to Mrs. Johnson.

G: What about the White House Conference on Natural Beauty? There's some--in the literature, especially I guess Elizabeth Drew's article on highway beautification--there's some suggestion that that was not as well organized as it might have been, and then there are others who say, "Oh, yes, it was!" and I was just wondering if you had any impressions of how that had gone off.

W: You mean the Highway Beautification issue?

G: No, first the Highway Conference on Natural Beauty in May of 1965. Then we get to Highway Beautification.

W: Of course, I had just come in January, and that really came together very fast. At the time, from my then-perspective as a fairly naïve young person just come to Washington, it appeared to be very well organized, but I can imagine that from the standpoint of people who had been involved in some of those issues for a long time prior to that it may not have been so well organized as they would have liked, and I think it was put together pretty fast. I don't know who, in fact--

G: I think it was Laurance Rockefeller and Henry Diamond that really were the kind of executive assemblers of the--

W: Yes. That would make sense--yes.

G: Well, what about highway beautification? What part did you have in that, and in retrospect what memories do you want to talk about that?

W: The main place that I got involved in that was in coping with all of this mail we got on it. The industries--the junk-car industry and the roadside-restaurant industry really flooded us

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with mail, particularly of the variety of the Mom-and-Pop roadside diner, and "You're-going-to-put-me-out-of-business" kind of mail, so that there were just tons of mail coming in, in opposition to doing anything. There was also mail coming in support of doing something, but the industries, the proponents of billboards and so forth, were clearly better organized.

One other very direct way that I had an involvement that fits into the broader picture, the legislative issue *per se* was very clearly in the hands--as far as I could see--of the West Wing, as we referred to them, and that means the President's staff. They really appeared to control the legislative agenda, and we, Sharon and I, that is, were not at all real players in the sense of being part of that operation. I know I certainly wasn't, and I don't think Sharon was either. I wasn't, and I don't think Sharon was either, now although her memory may differ some on that, but it was pretty much in a--we would hear from Liz that something had happened, but we were certainly not involved when they got into the real legislative stuff, strategy and all the compromises and deal cuttings that went on. I do know that the proponents of billboard control were not delighted with the deals that were cut, and there was a lot of difference of opinion on those, what was the right way to go, and some people thought they had compromised too much, particularly a lot of people felt very strongly on the issue of compensation, that it was a real mistake, to start compensating people when there was already a court-case history on the books in various states where they had used police powers to get at the billboards without compensation. So that was a very sore point, and then there were other sore points too, but frankly at the time I was not privy to all that internal sort of dealing and so forth, but I mean I was aware that the citizens' groups were not entirely happy.

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G: What's your judgment about whether billboard legislation could have been passed later if the conservation groups had been mobilized, or how do you feel about the argument that 1965 was the one opportunity to get it through?

W: I think in some respects that may be true in that with some of these issues, you do have to strike when the iron is hot, and I'm not sure whether once the ball got rolling there was any way to delay it and wait until you got better organized. Given the deepening difficulties that the administration had as the four years evolved, with Vietnam and all the riots and all the other civil disorders and so forth, whether later on there would have been the will to take on that particular issue in the midst of all that, I don't know. But I certainly think that it's one of those judgment calls that at the time it is that you just make your best shot, and you never can really know.

I think a lot of the problem was at the time, is that the environmental groups simply were not really mobilized to do real well-run political campaigning, and that came later. And in a way, this was one of the things that helped catalyze that whole movement. I mean all of Mrs. Johnson's activities were part of the real launching of the environmental movement, which in 1970, of course, with Earth Day, sort of burst into real bloom but had been beginning to bud back in the mid-1960s. When I consider some of the subsequent efforts that had been made to do something about the billboard legislation and how extremely well-organized the billboard industry is, and given the political campaigns that they contribute to and the free billboards and all of that in the campaign, I don't know whether it would have made that much difference if you'd waited a year and then tried to do it. They would have been just as well, if not better organized in that time, and I'm not sure

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that the--it was really another five years before environmentalists really got strong enough to take on some of the big issues.

G: Now this leads us right into what you and I have talked about often by correspondence, about Mrs. Johnson's impact on the environmental movement and the issues that she dealt with in the mid-1960s, as you saw them coming in from the perspective of people who were writing her and the answers you were writing. What were some of the issues where you think she had some public impact and her response to the public also helped to--how shall I put it--evoke environmental attitudes in the nation at large?

W: I think clearly the billboard issue, even though it sort of went awry later, in terms of it did not live up to its original hope, helped raise the whole issue of urban blight, aesthetic, visual blight. And one thing that's often forgotten is that the junkyard part of that legislation basically succeeded, and a major eyesore, those dreadful automobile junkyards, for the most part, those are pretty well cleaned up, so that piece of it did. But I think just that whole campaign raised the whole question of, "Why are we living in these ugly cities?" I mean, "Why are we doing this to ourselves?" So in that sort of broad sense that raised that whole family of issues. She also had a lot of success in focusing on downtown, and the idea is not just Washington downtown, but downtown anyplace, whether it be Fayetteville, New York, or in a big city. You know, the idea of "Let's not junk our old downtowns; let's instead do something to spruce them up and make them attractive," the sort of idea that--it had a bit of historic preservation, but it was also, I think, in a way a forerunner of this whole idea of trying to bring back life to the inner city, because of course at that time you had all of the big malls being built and so forth, and she really--look at her trips, for instance. A lot of them were to places where a city had recently done a downtown mall. They had taken



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the [inaudible] of their main downtown shops, the plan of the city, some of the traditional sort of--she did a lot to encourage that type of urban renaissance, if you will, to try to do something to save the old centers of cities, and I think that was very important. Even though it was a good many years before large cities subsequently did begin to turn themselves around, I think it's really significant--like this past week in Washington we have just had the opening of--one of our oldest department stores has built a brand-new building downtown, and they advertised the biggest freestanding department stores to be opened in the United States in the last twenty years. And it's viewed as the real signal that downtown has finally been reborn, and it has a lot to do with the subway, and it has a lot to do with other things that have been in the works, but I view it as all part of something that was beginning back in her time in trying to encourage in Washington--have you ever been on F Street where we have that poor little downtown mall that was never completed because they never closed the street?

G: Yes, I think I have.

W: Where Garfinckel's is. You know, they planted trees down the center, but there're still cars, so it's never really succeeded. Well, that was all part of her era, and as I say, it didn't take root--well, it took root then, but it's taken us this long to kind of blossom. But that, I think, is the general thing, the whole business of saving--not just giving up on the cities but trying to turn them around, was very much a part of her message that [inaudible].

G: Did you notice, when she went out on tours and made these visits, would there be then an impact that would reflect itself in the mail that she got--

W: Oh, yes.

G: --subsequently, a kind of waves of interests that her traveling would evoke?

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W: Yes, and also a lot of the kinds of issues that would be termed in a way generic issues, like there were a whole series of issues there, for instance, in some historic area like--I remember one area as the *Vieux Carré* area in New Orleans.

G: New Orleans, yes.

W: Right, and that was an issue that kept coming up. And then there would be other areas that, similarly, had some historic thing that was being threatened, and somebody would write me and say, "I saw in the paper how you visited New Orleans or so-and-so. Well, you should see our city, and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah." You'd get that kind of--people would pick up on it and say, "Won't you come here and help us?" or that kind of thing or, "Will you come and visit?" or whatever, or "Will you do something to help?" [Inaudible] You know, support, blessing, role, whatever. But yes, there would be a lot of that picked up on the trips because the trips--and one of the things that's very important, I think, and this is where Liz's genius really came into play, was--I mean, those trips really got a lot of publicity, and we had a big press corps that would travel with us, and she got--for a First Lady, she really got a lot of publicity and a lot of mileage out of those trips, made it to newspapers, and not just the *Washington Post*. It made it to places all over the country, so people did indeed read about her going to these places and in many cases take heart, in her praising some specific [inaudible] downtown renaissance.

G: What about the Grand Canyon controversy in the mid-1960s? I gather there was quite a bit of mail that came in about that. Was that one of the kinds of issues where she was able to influence public opinion, or did public opinion shape her?

W: Yes, the other way around really. That issue was one where Udall of course was being [inaudible], very much involved. The Interior Department, Bureau of Reclamation, was the

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culprit in that particular case. They were proposing to build these dams in the upper reaches of the Grand Canyon, and the Arizona delegation, of course, was strongly behind them and had, in my opinion, rationalized in their own minds the damage that these things would do and decided that they should be built. And Udall started out as a part of that, and I can remember the tenor of the letters that were written on that issue, and which I did not write--that was one of the issues when Sharon, because of having worked for Udall, wrote those early form letters. At first, they were not apologizing, they were defending those deals, and eventually I think Mrs. Johnson--it was not ever clear to me how--I think it was over a period of time--that I think she became more and more concerned that indeed, these dams were going to be very destructive. It seems to me, as I remember--I think that she may have said something to Udall, which changed his mind. I've forgotten now what the sequence of events were, but yes, we just got deluged with mail on that, and that was one of those issues where I just felt like the government was wrong on this one, and there was no excuse for building these dams. All of the rationalizations about it just didn't hold up, and there was the side corollary issue of the stupid IRS that started to yank the Sierra Club's tax exemption because the Sierra Club had run this ad in the *New York Times* that said, "Should you flood the Sistine Chapel so that you can look at the murals on the ceiling?" And that was a tremendously effective ad, and because of that, the IRS stupidly pounced on the Sierra Club and yanked their tax exemption, which of course, just fueled the fire tremendously.

Anyway, at some point, and I really think--I'm not sure of this, but my recollection is that I think--I have the feeling and my understanding was, that Mr. [Mrs.?] Johnson had persuaded Udall to re-think the thing, and maybe he did on his own, too. That's what I don't

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know. But anyway, the administration's position modified some, and of course eventually the thing got defeated. I mean, those dams never did get built. They got defeated, but it was a very high-intensity issue because it was one that people just really responded to in a very big way.

G: Do you recall any other issues, that in the ebb and flow of events stick out as areas where she had an influence or where the public was particularly concerned?

W: Oh, yes, another issue that was a real biggie was the Cross-Florida Canal, which was another huge boondoggle water project that the Florida [Corps of ] Engineers were proposing, and that was one which just again unconscionable from an environmental point of view. I know she was very concerned about it, but my recollection is that that came later, and my recollection is--it seems to me that Sharon and I in--often with those kinds of issues where they were indeed an agency project, we would write letters that would essentially say, "Mrs. Johnson is very concerned about this," but then also refer them to the agency. I can remember, and I think it was over that issue, that we got our wrists slapped by the West Wing for meddling in the legislative thing, and I can't remember ever quite--I think maybe Sharon put in a call to the Corps or did something that was really quite innocuous, but whatever it was, it got back to the legislative people, and they were quite put out with us for meddling because they were not necessarily on the same track with us.

G: How did the West Wing generally feel about what Mrs. Johnson and her side of the White House was doing? I don't mean the President so much as the--

W: The staff.

G: --the staff.

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W: I think that in general they liked it as long as she didn't meddle in legislation, and then you get into that whole turf kind of stuff that staff people have. I mean, in general, what she was doing was getting lots of good publicity, and generally it was positive. But I have the feeling that the staff were less than delighted with the idea of having the First Lady or her staff getting their hands on their projects, and I think that's a very classical staff--

G: Oh, yes.

W: --kind of reaction. And as I say, as long as it was sort of harmless stuff--like I can remember the Congressional Relations Office, somebody over there calling me and saying that they'd had a request from some congressman's office for a letter from Mrs. Johnson to aid constituents for some local beautification project, and would we please draft it? And I'd say, "Yes," and then they were saying oh, how great they thought our responses were. So they liked that kind of stuff. But anything where we might be getting crossways with more political, really, truly political stuff would be viewed with concern, and I mean I understand that in a broad political sense of, it is sort of the old problem of the loose-cannon-on-the-deck thing.

One funny thing I want to tell you about the beautification thing--[inaudible] because it was my first experience lobbying. There was a big reception at the White House, and I can't remember now what the purpose of the reception was, but this was during the time that the House committee was considering the billboard legislation, and we were very concerned because one of the problems always was that the committee staff of the House, which were completely in bed with the billboard industry. And so we invited the committee staff to this reception as a way of lobbying them, and I was assigned to take on the woman staff member, who was a real dragon, I might say, and I've forgotten now what

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her position was on the committee staff, but I'm sure she was a fairly lowly person. She was not a counsel or anything like that, but nonetheless she was my assignment, and I remember diligently doing everything I could to try to be nice and friendly and so forth, but knowing very well that I was not getting anywhere. It was the sort of a thing where you know somebody's mind is made up, and inviting them to a White House reception and making a big fuss over them, and introducing them to Mrs. Johnson and doing all those kinds of things, was just not cutting it. Well anyway, that was my first exposure to lobbying, and I just remember that because that was the kind of thing that was part of the overall effort to really get that legislation passed, but unfortunately it passed with the compromise.

G: We're coming, I guess, down toward the end of the tape. Is there any summary thought or, as you look back on the whole experience, what it meant to you working for Mrs. Johnson and what you think she meant to that period, and subsequently in American history?

W: I think she was tremendously important in that period as a positive force, both in terms of the future of the environmental movement and really being receptive to it, in a way. Bringing them in from outdoors and inviting all those people to the White House conference and subsequently to other events, as other legislation was passed--national parks, and so forth--really did a great deal to bolster their self-esteem and their clout and their feeling of, "Maybe we're finally getting somewhere," and that was tremendously important. And I think in a broader sense, I am still struck by--whenever I meet anybody, even now, and they know, or find out, that I worked for Mrs. Johnson, [inaudible], I've never had anybody, Republicans or Democrats, do anything except say how much they think she was a real positive force and how much they really admired her. That's really

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fascinating after all these years, that people both remember her contribution and, of course, in Washington, obviously, that is more likely going to be the case than it is down in Iowa or someplace. But also they think very highly of her even though they may from a political viewpoint, be on a completely different side of the fence. I guess for myself it was such a great experience to have been on her staff. A couple of years ago I went up to Yale to give a talk on the Alaska legislation [inaudible], and the women in the class, who were in the minority, wanted to meet with me separately to talk about potential careers and their frustration [inaudible].

Well, one of the questions they asked me was, "Do you have a role model?" And it was interesting, because I had never thought about that in terms of myself, so when I thought about it, I thought, "Well, of course, I do. I have three of them. I have Liz and Mrs. Johnson, and Bess, and you couldn't have three more different personalities--each totally different--but three first-rate people to show you that it is possible for a woman to really do something. That really brought home to me the impact that, in a different way than I had thought of before, of that job because I still [inaudible] I think it is just incredible like some of the [inaudible]. But yes, it was really very special and very rewarding in the sense not only of its being in the White House and all of that, but in the sense of being around some very competent people whom you could really respect.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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