

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 13, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BESS ABELL

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

PLACE: Mrs. Abell's home in Washington, D.C.

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B: We had gotten last time into the White House years and just to sort of take areas at random, once the shock and the travail of moving into the White House was over, do you know if Mrs. Johnson ever consciously sat down and thought about what kind of first lady she was going to be?

A: She said, as I'm sure you remember, "My role as first lady will emerge in deeds, not words." Yes, she did sit down and think about it seriously, but I think that that was after the election in 1964. She looked on her life at that point--December, 1963--as being very short-term.

For example, the furnishings up in the west hall, which was the family sitting room, were really almost threadbare. The upholstery in that end of the house takes very rough wear because the west sun streams in there and it doesn't last very long, but Mrs. Johnson just wouldn't do anything to the furniture until after the campaign. She said, "There may be another first lady living in this house. "She wanted to do everything she could to help her husband, and as that year progressed that was a great deal of campaigning.

B: Does that uncertainty indicate just general uncertainty, or does it mean that she had some doubts as to whether or not Mr. Johnson would run in 1964?

A: Maybe it was just superstition.

B: That politicians' habit of not counting those chickens....

A: Yes.

B: To carry this on then, after the election she began to give more thought to what she would do?

A: She wanted to have a project so that her time wasn't just spent posing for publicity pictures and shaking hands and giving tea parties. She wanted to have a project, something that she could identify with, something that she could constructively do,

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something that would be involved in some way in the President's program. And I honestly don't know how many different things that she considered.

B: What were some of the things that were considered?

A: I think that something in the realm of education was considered very seriously, but Liz Carpenter would really know more about that than I do because she was much more involved in Mrs. Johnson's thought process on that than I was.

B: And eventually she ended up with the beautification project.

A: Yes, there were many meetings up in the Queen's Sitting Room with people like Mary Lasker and Stewart Udall--I don't know whether Alan Boyd was in on those or not, he may well have been somewhere along the line--just planning and thinking toward what she could do, what form it should take. She didn't want to approach beautification of the whole country, it was too big a job to tackle, so she took Washington, which had been her home for more than twenty-five years and established the First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful National Capital. And there was of course a great deal of fall-out from that all over the country with other groups being formed in other cities--governors' wives taking it on as their project, and mayors'--

B: Did that fall-out just occur, or did the White House have to encourage it?

A: The White House did a great deal to encourage it. Whenever Mrs. Johnson had an opportunity, for example, to meet with a group of governors' wives, there would very likely be talk about beautification. A lot of it was natural fall-out, a letter from a mayor saying, "I want to do this. Can you help me," or, "I want to do it, and this is what I'm doing."

B: Was Mr. Johnson involved in the selection of this topic?

A: I'm positive he was, yes. She wouldn't take on anything like that without not only his consent, but his enthusiastic approval.

B: She later on also got actively involved in anti-poverty affairs. I recall visits to some of the anti-poverty centers and so on.

A: That started of course in 1964 too before the election. She wanted to visit and do things that would call attention to contributions that her husband and the Democratic Party had made to the country. I believe her first trip into a poverty area was to my state of Kentucky in the summer, probably in June of '64, when she landed in Lexington and then drove up into the mountains and visited a farmer. We had to walk about a mile back up the creek road. And then we went to a little one-room schoolhouse, which was getting some school lunch money.

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One of the things that impressed me so much that day was the teacher saying how much just that one glass of milk a day meant to the diets of those children. They had grown two inches more, on the average, than children who didn't have it. I think Mrs. Johnson went to a one-room schoolhouse too so she felt at home there.

B: Did that kind of thing affect Mrs. Johnson deeply too? Did she comment privately after such visits?

A: Oh, yes. All of these things made a great impact on her. She would meet people on these trips--gee, I've forgotten the name of the lady who was the head of the school system there in Lick Branch, Kentucky, in Breathitt County. Later on, for example, when she would have one of the "doers" luncheons, she would reach back in her memory on those trips and bring those people to Washington. One lady I think did come to Washington for two of the luncheons, quite some time apart.

B: Did she really have to reach back in her memory? I've heard of a card file that's kept on that kind of thing.

A: I'm not aware of the card file, but I'll tell you now, she'll remember the lady's name. I don't!

B: On trips like that how would you select places? I mean, why Lick Branch, Kentucky?

A: This was done with the assistance of some of the people in the departments who would know--the Agriculture Department that was giving money to farmers for crops could help you on selecting the farmer.

Actually on that trip was a guy from Commerce, but it doesn't seem to me that he was there because he was from Commerce--I think he was there because he was a good advance man. Education is not under Commerce, is it?

B: No, but these details are really immaterial, but the departments helped.

A: She leaned on advice from the departments to pinpoint these things. You might have a choice of eight things in eight different states. But that was the input that helped you select where you were going. I will tell you it wasn't selected because of ease of transportation.

B: I gather as much, the mile walk back to the area.

A: And the bus rides. It's "one of those places you can't get there from here."

B: I've seen references to what seems like a rather surprising reference that Mrs. Johnson was

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somewhat shy, at least in the early years of her marriage, particularly about making public speeches. If that's true, was there any of it left in the presidential years?

A: You get easier about things by doing. I've heard her tell many times the story about Miss Lucy George, the wife of Senator Walter George of Georgia; she asked Miss Lucy, "Do you campaign with Senator George?" And she said, "Oh, yes, I go around with him all the time. I don't make any speeches, I just sit up on the platform to show them I don't have a club foot." This was really I think what Mrs. Johnson did in the earlier days of campaigning. She met, shook hands, greeted, licked envelopes, typed lists, oftentimes I'm sure was a helpful secretary to her husband.

But I really don't know when she started making speeches. I don't know how much of it she did before the campaign in 1960, but that was her first foray into it. But before that she had taken a course, the Capital Speakers Course from Hester Belle Provenson, who in subsequent years used to help coach her before every big speech. Mrs. Provenson would come over and spend an hour with her at the White House and she would go over the speeches with her. But in seeing films of Mrs. Johnson, I always thought that she was pretty good in 1960, but then in seeing the comparison you realize how much she gained by doing, how much she learned from it and how greatly she improved.

B: Did the speech coaching continue on through the White House years?

A: Yes.

B: You also had on your staff a Miss Simone Poulain, if I'm pronouncing it correctly.

A: You're pronouncing it correctly, but she was on Liz Carpenter's staff.

B: I ask because I believe she had some experience in television and radio work. Did she help in that kind of thing too?

A: She would work with Mrs. Johnson on television programs like the program that she did with Howard K. Smith. She also worked with Liz Carpenter. Mrs. Johnson worked on her speeches with whoever was handy sometimes.

B: I was just getting ready to ask if you ever did any speech writing or work like that. I'm uncertain of the division of labor over in the East Wing.

A: The only things that I wrote at all were the little remarks that Mrs. Johnson would make before introducing the entertainment after State dinners. Other than that I had no hand in it at all. They were always very, very short because she didn't want to have to be worrying and thinking about a speech all the way through a State dinner. That was left to the heads of state, and so it was usually something very short, not more than a couple of

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paragraphs at the outside.

- B: What was Mrs. Johnson's reaction when she as first lady was compared to other first ladies? I remember seeing in the press a lot of comparisons of Mrs. Johnson and, say, Mrs. Roosevelt, and most of all, Mrs. Kennedy.
- A: It's very hard for any first lady to be compared to another. I guess maybe you'd feel like the second wife. Nobody really likes to be compared to anybody else. I never really heard her remark on it. I'm sure that it probably didn't please her, no matter how she was compared. I remember something that she said earlier this year, I think in January before they left Washington when she was accepting an award and very, very much in the twilight of departing the White House. She said, "Just because I planted flowers doesn't mean another first lady has to water them." You know, "Don't compare me." She also pointed out to many of us that the first lady is not elected, she is selected by one person.
- B: Did Mrs. Johnson by any chance sort of deliberately try to avoid anything that could be considered as imitating Mrs. Kennedy?
- A: She didn't deliberately avoid it, no. She continued Mrs. Kennedy's program of adding furnishings and paintings to the White House collection. She was deeply interested in it, but she didn't want to make that her cause. That's going to be a continuing project, and I hope that every first lady will be equally interested in it. You may have one marvelous table, but that doesn't mean that sometime in the future one that's better isn't going to come along.
- B: Actually it's institutionalized now, I believe. There is a White House commission.
- A: Yes. It was very informal under Mrs. Kennedy, and President Johnson by Executive Order set up the Committee for the Preservation of the White House that had some private sector members appointed by the President and then some members because of their positions, like the head of the Smithsonian and the head of the Park Service, the director of the National Gallery.
- B: Was there any effort made in '64 or '65 to find something for the girls to do--for Lynda and Luci? That may be awkward phraseology.
- A: I know what you're saying, but I really don't know if there ever was a concentrated effort on that. Luci, because of her own problem in this left-eye dominant and you're supposed to be right-eye dominant, was a very poor student at National Cathedral and made very, very poor grades. Dr. Robert Kraskin found that Luci had this problem and she started taking the eye exercises and solved her problem, and it was just amazing how her grades went up from C's and D's to A's and B's in a matter of months. And she then had an interest in working with the children who had that sight problem and the learning difficulty that comes with it.

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Lynda, on the other hand, when she graduated was interested in finding a paying job. You know, it's very hard to hit the pavement and hunt for a job when you're the daughter of the president.

B: She eventually ended up on McCall's magazine.

A: Took it very seriously and I think wrote some quite good pieces.

B: Were you close enough to see what it was like for the Johnsons to be raising a pair of teen-age daughters in the White House?

A: Mrs. Johnson and the President I think never wanted to shelter their children from public life. There are many people in the political arena who want to keep their children away from it, not let it touch them. But the President and Mrs. Johnson felt that there were so many benefits that would come to them that they wanted to involve them in everything from campaigning to official trips abroad with their parents and State dinners at the White House.

Mrs. Johnson would from time to time ask one of the girls to stand in for her to receive a group at a tea or coffee. She always wanted them to come to the State dinners when they were in town. She would also tell them when she invited them that if we ended up with too many people they'd have to eat in the Navy Mess with the staff, and they were both good sports about it. They'd put on their best dress and go and greet and meet and have a marvelous time with the guests during cocktails; then the guests would go in to dinner and the girls would join the military social aides and me and go over and have dinner in the Navy Mess and then make a beeline back and then greet some of the guests who were coming in at ten o'clock for the entertainment.

B: You would kind of guess that perhaps the girls saw more of their parents in the White House years, living over the office, as it were.

A: That's true. Mrs. Johnson, of course, saw much more of the President too because he would be working in the house and then he'd go to the office and come back for lunch. I guess it's probably the only time in his life that he ever had lunch at home.

B: Did the girls' dating activities cause any special difficulties?

A: It caused a lot of difficulty for them. I don't know, that's a question they can answer better than I can. Both of them, when they finally nailed down their husbands, did it really in the confines of the White House rather than outside the White House. It was much easier for the daughter of the President to see a movie in the theater there or to play bridge up in the solarium than it was to go out to a restaurant.

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- B: I guess it's the only way to get away from the Secret Service agents.
- A: It's the only way to get away from the Secret Service agents, and it's one of the effective ways of carrying on your romance privately and not on the social pages of the Washington papers.
- B: Yes. Lynda at least got an awful lot of publicity from her dating George Hamilton there for awhile.
- A: I liked George very, very much, and I think he really came along at a marvelous time in Lynda's life. I think through George she learned that there was more to being a woman and a person than just being a good student. It was really because of George that she began to take an interest in clothes and makeup, etc.
- B: My wife tells me that she wants George Hamilton to introduce her to that makeup man and hairdresser, whoever he was.
- A: George Masters.
- B: There was some indication at the time that Mr. Johnson was not overly fond of George Hamilton.
- A: I read all those things, but I never heard the President say anything but nice things about George. I truthfully have no knowledge of how he felt about the possibility of Lynda marrying George. He has always said that he thought his girls had good judgment, and they were going to have to live with the man they married, not him, and he thought it was up to them to pick out who that man in their life was going to be and not up to him and Mrs. Johnson. But I've only heard the President say nice things about George, and in my dealings with George I always found him to be a real gentleman and not in any way taking advantage of his association with Lynda, although I'm aware that during that period his price per picture went up astoundingly.
- B: The Johnsons seem obviously perfectly happy with Pat Nugent and Chuck Robb.
- A: Absolutely, they really are.
- B: You must have known then-Captain Robb before Lynda.
- A: Yes, I did, because as social secretary, I interviewed the guys who were prospective social aides, so I in effect hired him and brought him to the White House where they really did meet. Chuck was around the White House for I guess almost a year before he and Lynda really had a date.
- B: I hope this kind of questioning doesn't seem unduly nosy, but a family like that just really

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doesn't have much privacy.

A: Alas, no.

B: I'm sure that that was a burden to all of them and to all of you at times.

In '64 was the big campaigning year. Surely you must have been involved in those activities like the train trip in the South?

A: Oh, the train trip in the South! What an undertaking that was!

B: I can imagine. When did that idea first start?

A: I don't know. Johnson had taken a train trip through the South as a candidate for vice president in '60, and a lot of the very wise heads in the Democratic Party really didn't want the Johnsons to go into the South. They felt that that was the part of the country that he was going to lose anyway, and why make the effort! I think Mrs. Johnson felt very strongly about this, and I think the President did too. This is the part of the country that they're from and that they're associated with, and they didn't want to write it off. They didn't want to write off all the Democrats that were down there working for the party and for them. They just didn't want to say, "This is a part of the country and we've just X'ed through it, because there's nothing in it for us."

B: Did they do some quiet checking as to what the possible reception might be?

A: Oh, sure, and it wasn't always good. This was really our first experience with pickets. But the train trips involved an unbelievable number of people. It started out with an advance trip, which Liz Carpenter and Joe Moran, who was the head of the advance men, and the Secret Service and probably the communications people took in a plane, which was going to a lot of the big cities. And then we sent out about ten or so advance women who would just move into a town and stay for two or three weeks.

B: Who were these women?

A: One was Judith Moyers, Bill Moyers' wife. She ended up in New Orleans. I think that Lindy Boggs, Mrs. Hale Boggs--the congressman's wife from Louisiana--went down. Cara Burney, a friend of Mrs. Johnson's from Texas, went down. I don't have that list in my mind to pull out, but these women went and stayed in the towns. And then there was a team of advance men who went out to each of these little towns.

One of the assignments that fell my way was working on a food train and the cars for the trains and the balloons and the give-away items, working with the hostesses. It was really quite a major undertaking, and what I kept looking for for that last car was just a car that wouldn't have any partitions in it and would also have a big back platform on it.

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We were told that there wasn't such a thing; that those cars just went out with bustles, were not available.

I mentioned it to the President one night and he said, "It's just vital." It was absolutely madness on his train trip through the South in 1960. His last car, starting at the back, was the open platform, then a tiny living area, then two small bedrooms and a dining area and a kitchen. And so all these people who would get on at Stop A to ride to their hometown, Stop B, they were all in that car, the same car where he was eating and sleeping and working and his secretaries--it was just wild. He said, "You've got to have that kind of car," meaning an open one with no partitions.

We called and we visited and we toured around all the railroad yards, and it just wasn't available. Then the President called me one Sunday and he said, "You call Buford Ellington"--who is now governor of Tennessee but at that time was working with one of the railroads, I think L&N-- "you call Buford and he'll find you that car."

So I called Buford, and he said, "I never heard of a car like that in this day and age, but we'll see if we can find it." He called me later that night, or maybe early Monday morning, and said, "They've found one over in Pittsburgh, or Philadelphia, on the junk heap, and they're going to put it on the back of a train and get it down to Washington for you this afternoon."

So we went down to see the train and it was really a shambles, but it was exactly what we wanted--just an empty car with a great big platform on the back. We had a nice architect come down and design us a striped awning for the back of it and took one of the calligraphers from the White House down and he drew up the side of the train and how we wanted it painted red, white, and blue. I got the upholsterer who worked on putting fine silks on all the White House furnishings to go and buy the cheapest red and blue cotton he could find and recover all the seats, and we painted it blue on the inside and tacked up pictures of the Johnsons campaigning, and it was just great. It was very hot also. The car, as I said, was really off the junk heap and it did not have any modern air conditioning facilities and had to be air-conditioned with ice. One of the additional jobs of the advance men at each of these stops was to get the iceman to load the ice on the base of the train, so as soon as we pulled into a station somebody out there in the crowd was assigned to load the ice aboard to keep us going till the next stop.

B: Was Mr. Johnson involved in all the planning for this?

A: Yes. Not down to the minute details, but he was very much involved and I'm sure was on the telephone with people saying, "How's it going to work?"

B: Did any of the male politicians worry about the females running this show?

A: Oh, yes. Kenny O'Donnell--I don't know whether that's true of Larry O'Brien, less so, I

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think, but they didn't want Mrs. Johnson to do anything. They really just were opposed to it. I think all of that is just what kind of women you're used to and what kind of respect you have for them--I think that they really didn't think that Mrs. Johnson could make a contribution. They didn't know any women like her.

B: Was it difficult to arrange for those people, as you mentioned awhile back, who got on at one town and rode to another?

A: All those things were difficult, but most of the time it worked. It really worked as a pretty smooth-running machine. It was hard to remember which town you were in at times. The President rode with Mrs. Johnson from Washington to Alexandria. Lynda took I think the first two days of the trip and Luci took the last two days of the trip. There were myriad details that had to be worked out of getting the people to Stop A so they could ride to Stop B and be introduced, but it really worked very well. The last car, as I say, was our living room car; then the next car was Mrs. Johnson's car, and in the dining area of that car worked her two secretaries, Ashton Gonella and Mary Rather, who came up to make that trip with us. And then the third car was a car with four offices in it; I had an office here; Liz Carpenter had an office; and there were two others; and then a large living room space there. And that is where the people for Town B would get on at Stop A. They would get on that car, and there was always somebody there to greet them. John Ben Shepperd and Buford Ellington and Bill and Hazel Brawley.

B: Brawley?

A: Bill Brawley used to be in the Post Office Department, I don't know whether he was then or not. But he and his wife, he's from South Carolina-- he was then at the Democratic National Committee, that's one of the reasons he was there, and his responsibility was the southern states. So there were always two of them there and generally four, they would greet and introduce and give coffee and rolls, etc., and gather everybody aboard.

Then during the ride from Town A to Town B those people would go up into Mrs. Johnson's car and meet her and have their picture taken with her and give her anything that they had for her, like a bouquet of flowers or a homemade cake or a bushel of apples or a mincemeat pie. They would then move into the last car, the living room car, and at Stop B they would get off and be introduced by Hale Boggs.

We also had to get rid of all that stuff that was presented to Mrs. Johnson, or we would have had to add a number of cars to the train and it was plenty long enough.

When you got to Town C, Mary Rather or Ashton Gonella would have written a note, that Mrs. Johnson would have signed, to the old folks' home or the orphanage or the hospital, saying, "I was given these lovely flowers on my train trip through the South and I hope that you will enjoy them." And then those were given to the advance men at Stop C to take to their destination.

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We couldn't do that with food, however, because the Secret Service was such a bear about it; they made us throw away all the food for fear somebody--we could eat it on the train if we wanted to, but Mrs. Johnson or Lynda or Luci weren't allowed to have that food, but the rest of us-- if we decided to take a chance they really didn't quarrel, although they didn't approve.

There was one fly in that smooth-running machine though. We got ahead of ourselves and gave away the bouquet of roses before it had been presented.

B: What's this? What did you do in that case? Hurriedly find an old bouquet?

A: I think it was handed to a motorcycle cop; we got it back just as the train was pulling out.

B: Mrs. Johnson must have been in effect on stage for the whole trip.

A: Yes, she was, and it was really an exhausting trip for her, but there couldn't be an easier way to make all those stops than traveling with your office and everything with you.

One of the great burdens, I think, when you go on a trip like that is getting back home and writing all those thank you letters for all those bouquets and all those mincemeat pies. And these were all done; they'd be mailed at the next stop.

B: Which also must have impressed the recipients, the speed.

A: I'm sure it did.

B: Did you have what amounted to contingency plans for possible trouble? You were, after all, moving through the Deep South, which was not exactly congenial in some places.

B: I feel very stupid, but I really don't know of any. We did have one threat to Mrs. Johnson when we went into northern Florida, and the Secret Service were terribly edgy and nervous at that point. We were crossing a long, long bridge--a long, low railroad bridge--and they had gotten a threat that it was going to be blown up. I think there was a helicopter overhead at that point and there was a boat on at least one side of it, maybe two sides. I don't know whether they sent another train over it before entering or not, but anyway we crossed that. It was a long bridge, something like seven or fourteen miles over the water, but we got over it safely.

B: You actually got a better response, I believe, than at least the general public had anticipated. There were a lot of local southern politicians who came when people had expected they wouldn't.

A: Mrs. Johnson handled it very well. She handled the ugliness very well, and I think she

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came out the winner. Like when Bruce Alger hit her over the head with a sign at the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas on the eve of the '60 election, which everybody said carried Texas for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. People in the South don't like to see a lady slighted like that, especially one of theirs. I think Mrs. Johnson's southern accent got thicker as we moved through the South too; certainly Luci's did. Luci got such a southern accent that I wouldn't have believed, but it just came out. It was something that Mrs. Johnson had been moving away from with the speech coaching etc., but she got back there into the South where she had spent those summers as a child and it all came back thick and fast.

B: I recall the well-publicized episode of a picket or a heckler of some kind whom Mrs. Johnson handled very well with her statement about "it's time now for me to have my say," or something to that effect.

A: Yes. "You've had yours, now it's time for me to have mine. In this country we hear all views. I've heard yours, and now I want you to be polite and hear mine." That worked a couple of places. It was not successful in--where, Charleston? It was wherever Mendell Rivers was.

B: Charleston was his hometown.

A: Charleston. But I thought his speech was ghastly anyway.

B: Did you get effective help generally from the congressmen and other local politicians?

A: I'm not really the person to ask that. We did some places and we didn't in others. I'm just not useful on that answer.

B: And I guess Mrs. Carpenter had most of the responsibility for handling the press that was with you.

A: Yes, and I think there were a hundred and fifty press.

B: As I recall, more than you had originally anticipated.

A: Oh yes, we had European press traveling with us. One of the classic stories of the trip is that two French reporters who got on and were not seen again until we arrived in New Orleans.

B: What happened to them?

A: They were on the train but we never saw them.

B: Just gave them a free ride. Did you end up with enough food for everybody?

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A: Yes. We had sweet rolls and coffee in the living room car in the morning, and then we switched to soft drinks and nibbles around noon, and we served cocktails and soft drinks around four-thirty or five. We had different hors d'oeuvres every day, all things from the South--little bitty fried chicken legs. Betty Talmadge, Senator Talmadge's wife, gave us some of her hams. She has a ham business. So we had ham biscuits when we were rolling through Georgia. And we had shrimp when we were heading along the Gulf Coast, all kinds of good things.

B: What about full-sized meals? Was everybody on their own for that?

A: No. The dining car was full all the time.

B: Anything else about that trip stand out?

A: The entertainers that we had, not on the train with us but they flew ahead to the major stops, and they were the Brothers Four, the Bitter End Singers and Bob Newhart. They really never met Mrs. Johnson because they would leave just as we arrived, and head for the airport and climb on the plane and head for the next stop. I think when we got to New Orleans we managed to get one picture of Mrs. Johnson with everybody.

B: Did you select that group?

A: Yes.

B: Did they volunteer their services?

A: Yes.

B: Did more volunteer for that kind of thing than you could use?

A: What you had to do was to call up and ask the Brothers Four, "Do you have two days of your life that you can give us?" Both the Bitter End Singers and the Brothers Four had done a program for us at the White House. They had been a part of the big Salute to Congress, a show that the President had on the lawn in '64, and at that time they said: "Gee, if there is anything we can do, we want to."

B: When Mr. Johnson met you in New Orleans, did you get thanks from him for all your labors?

A: I never saw him really, except on the platform. I think that he was really pleased with how it worked out.

B: It seems to have been a remarkable success, but it must have been a great relief--

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A: Yes, but we lost all the states.

B: As everybody told you beforehand, you were going to lose those anyway. I was living in the Deep South at that time, and there was a great deal of covert admiration for the attempt--words like gallantry and courage were used.

A: Don't you think that there was a certain amount of benefit that came to the Johnsons by the fact that people were rude to her and people in the South being offended by that?

B: I think so. I heard talk at the time, as you mentioned earlier, of even the worst of southerners don't cotton to that kind of treatment of a lady. As a matter of fact there were those who suspected that that was one of the motives of the trip, imputing some sort of Machiavellian techniques.

A: I don't think you ever take a trip to get spit at.

B: Was it really bad at times? In my memory the publicity seems to have been muted on the bad times, if there were.

A: It was very bad in Charleston, it was very bad in one other place. But I think after Charleston most of them were really very quiet, they would have their signs they would put up. One little town, one little stop, away in the back of the crowd there were two boys holding a big sign that they had that was stretched out, I think it was on a sheet so that they had to hold it apart to keep it straight, and it said: "Black Bird, go home!"

And as Mrs. Johnson talked and her southern accent got deeper and she talked about all those summers that she spent in Alabama, and she introduced some of her Alabama kinfolks, that sign kept getting lower and lower and lower until finally those two boys put it down in the dust and walked away.

B: At the time your husband was working with the Five O'Clock Club on the anti-Goldwater deviltry group. Were they involved in the train trip too?

A: I don't know.

B: It must have been a great relief to have it finally over with.

A: But we missed it! We really missed it. We wanted to take another train trip. We loved it.

B: Was there serious talk of another trip?

A: We ended up with a flying Lady Bird Special, which went to three places in Texas and into Oklahoma and Arkansas. On that one we took a few hostesses. At each stop the

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hostesses would get off the train or plane and hand out candy that said, "Hello, Lyndon" and balloons and pennants, etc. We had a marvelous time. We really adored it. And all that music! We had a tape recording that played over and over again on the back of the train "Happy Days Are Here Again" and "Hello, Lyndon" alternately. We'd turn it on when we'd start slowing down going into a town and then turn it on as we headed out of town.

B: Did you think of another train trip, say through the northern states?

A: Yes, we talked about going out through Pennsylvania and Ohio, but we never did it and ended up with the airplane. It was a very expensive undertaking, as you can imagine.

B: When I heard of the thing my first thought was how on earth do you take a train trip nowadays!

A: It was really great. I think that everybody who was along on that trip, from the guys from the White House garage who were along to handle baggage and junk that came aboard, to the European press, the photographers, the staff that was along, we all loved it.

B: Did a train crew from this area go with the whole trip?

A: Yes, as we moved from one area to another they coordinated it, but I think that we worked mainly with the Southern Railroad. No, we worked with Atlantic Coastline too very much. But one train company was responsible for the food and dining operation, I think maybe that turned out to be Atlantic Coastline. And they loved it, adored it. And afterwards everybody wanted to have a party for all the people who were onboard.

B: Did you?

A: Joe Moran had one, not for everybody but for a lot of the staff who was along and a lot of the advance people.

B: Do you remember any other little anecdotes out of the trip or the rest of the campaign?

A: No. There was Atlantic City and there's nothing really I can think of about that except a party that Mrs. Johnson had for the lady press who were there. Mrs. Johnson had a party, I think it was at the convention in Atlantic City, for all the members of the ladies' press, who were inside covering the convention. They were all seated at round tables and had an empty seat at each table. There was a hostess at each table like Mrs. Willard Wirtz or some other cabinet wife, and then an empty seat at each table. Mrs. Johnson moved to each table and spent about five minutes--this was our way of getting around to all those requests for interviews. Everybody got to spend a little bit of time with her, and all the cabinet wives who were there and all the other ladies who were acting as hostesses really knew Mrs. Johnson well enough that they were not only a subject for an interview about

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themselves but they also could answer a lot of questions about her.

And then we had the presidential box at the convention, at the arena, whatever you call it, and you always had to have interesting people in there.

B: You had to have interesting people in there?

A: We tried to have people in there so that the television would have something to move to, somebody to look at.

B: I see.

A: And Luci came up maybe two days early because there was no Johnson family up there. There was of course some talk that the delegates would insist that Bobby Kennedy be on the ticket, and a beautiful film about Jack Kennedy which ended up with the funeral and everybody in tears was to be shown. There was a lot of thought that this would just have the effect of stampeding the convention. I can't remember whether that was shown before or after--

B: I think in the end it was shifted to the last day after the nominations.

A: But it was an interesting task, to get people in and out of that box.

B: What constitutes interesting people in that sense? Show business?

A: No, I don't think it was ever show business. It was any Johnson family who happened to be around; it was cabinet members and their wives. I think that Ethel Kennedy sat with Mrs. Johnson one night. I've forgotten, I can't reach back and pull it out.

B: In this kind of thing, with the enormous amount of work and physical strain of conventions and the train trip, does Mrs. Johnson ever get tired, cross, lose her temper? She apparently never did in public.

A: She's so in control of herself and her emotions. Does she get tired? Yes, absolutely, bone-tired! But she somehow had that self-discipline to push a little bit harder and get out there and do.

B: She never had a tendency to get cross with people who just happen to be close to her? I suppose what I'm doing is sort of unconsciously comparing her to her husband.

A: You can't do it in that regard. She would soften the blows that a lot of people would get from the President; a tongue lashing that would come from him would sometimes be followed by sweet words from her.

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Did she ever lose her temper? I honestly can't remember. Liz Carpenter told me that the angriest she ever heard Mrs. Johnson was when she was in her bedroom at the White House and she had walked into the room, or was in the room, and the maid was drawing the shades in the room to darken it--but it was still twilight. And Mrs. Johnson said in a very strong, forceful voice, "Don't ever pull the shades until the last drop of sunlight is gone. I want to enjoy every bit of it." She said that was the maddest she'd ever seen her.

B: And that's not very mad.

A: She really does enjoy the daylight hours. When she'd take a nap, whether it was in a hotel room in New York or in her room in the White House, she'd never pull the shades.

B: I think that's probably a stopping place for today.

A: Okay. [End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Bess Abell of Washington, D. C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on May 28, June 13 and July 1, 1969 in Washington, D. C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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Signed by Bess Abell on December 21, 1983

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