

INTERVIEWEE: LONNELLE AIKMAN

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

April 28, 1969

(This is the final interview on Tape 2 of the Grosvenor tapes. It follows the interviews with Bart McDowell, Volkmar Wentzel, and a short segment with Dr. Grosvenor.)

F: The following is with Lonnette Aikman, who is with the senior editorial staff of National Geographic.

Your worked with Mrs. Johnson on The Living White House?

A: Yes.

F: Would you tell us something about your relationship with her as a person, and also what, if anything, she did about contributing to the volume?

A: She did a great deal in the way of contributions toward this volume. For one thing, her personality and her relationship with the press in general has always been so pleasant that you started out with her with the feeling

of understanding on both sides. She is and was with me in talking over various phases of this book and photographs and other things which would come into it, out-giving and warm and helpful but without in any way making pressures toward guiding what one might want to say.

F: She respected your point of view.

A: Oh, indeed. She not only respected it, but I think this was her attitude in her relations with the press in general. Of course, all during the years in the various posts that her husband held, she had a great deal of experience with the press, and it showed up very well and very helpfully in the way we talked together about various things.

I mentioned photographs here a little earlier. Of course, I don't have to deal with photographs. My job was simply the text, in the makeup and that sort of thing--Bob Breeden will explain to you. That's very important in all our books because pictures play such a big part. In fact, I was just reading a few minutes ago in something else that I was writing of the problems the Special Publications Department had in getting pictures for this book. It was the Johnsons who were so very generous with their facilities and aid in getting the kind of human pictures we wanted for a story of this kind, because of course The Living White House deals with what went on behind the scenes in a general way with the various families who lived there.

F: The National Geographic doesn't really try to build up a kind of research archives, photographic archives, does it?

A: Oh yes, we have enormous photographic archives on everything, but there just were no pictures made of the White House because Presidents did not permit it. In fact, in the earlier times reporters had nothing. I can't remember right now the name of a woman--I think her name was Olivia--who

had something on Mrs. Harrison that was published. You know, in earlier days women correspondents in Washington who wrote for publications in other cities of course wanted material about the White House, but hardly anybody got it. I can look up this particular thing, but I think that's a start and wouldn't interest you. But I'm just telling you some of the background as to why it was so helpful for Mrs. Johnson to deal so directly with us.

F: Did you check copy with her as you went along?

A: No. I wrote the copy as I saw it. Of course, so much of our material is factual in background that this particular book did not deal with presidential lives and families in chronological succession. In fact, Mrs. Johnson made it clear earlier that she thought it would be more interesting to have more ideas put together, so we worked out a formula-- I'd say perhaps Bob Breeden and his assistant Don Crump worked out a picture formula that I followed somewhat with the text, followed it pretty directly actually with the text. And in that--you're familiar with the book?

F: Yes.

A: Then you know it was divided into sections on such things as entertainment, in which case it would be chronological. The discussion of entertaining at the White House would be chronological because you couldn't follow it any other way. But there would not be one administration and everything it did. It would be entertaining by the different families--and then there would be the family life and all that sort of thing. You don't need me to fill you in on that.

I had a most pleasant and the longest interview with Mrs. Johnson on the so-called back porch, you know Truman's porch, looking toward the monument. I couldn't have had a happier setting and it happened that Mr.

Johnson was delayed in getting home for dinner that night so I talked with her, which is very happy making for a reporter. I talked with her from about, I guess it was a little before 8:00 until after 10:00, maybe I left at 10:00 or so.

F: No difficulty in making conversation?

A: Oh, heavens no! You see, I asked Mrs. Johnson about her interests, and we talked about what she wanted to do. It was then that she told me about her beautification projects, and we talked about her interest in the children and how she felt about them. I covered a good deal of this in my report on that, because it was interesting and illuminating too. Also, she was very concerned, and had not long before launched the Head Start Program, which was excellent and a marvelous thing. People still now tell me in Washington, "Oh, there're some flowers. I wonder if those were the ones that Mrs. Johnson planted."

F: Did she see the final copy before you put it to bed?

A: She saw the final copy. We wanted her to. You see in a way we do the sort of authorized biography and we wanted it both for accuracy and tone and that sort of thing. I didn't have any problem about the tone because we're not doing exposés. We don't want scandals. We just want to know how normal life was and that sort of thing. As I told you a few minutes ago, her corrections were very--I wouldn't say they were so necessarily small, but they were very few and it concerned her family and one or two slight factual things which had to do with Luci's wedding and the people who were invited.

F: Details primarily.

A: That's right, small details.

F: Did you receive any of the criticism that some of the press leveled that

this book was weighted in favor of the Johnsons?

A: Oh, I certainly did, and I was very sorry about that because that was not our purpose. That's one of the reasons I explained about the photographs earlier. This criticism is, I think, unfair because we didn't have the photographs before. And of course we didn't have color photographs at all. While there are a good many historic photographs that we used, the black and white, we wanted this to be a book in color--or much of the illustrations in color--so that it would be lively and the way things really looked. So we had to make use of the pictures that were available. Of course, what will happen now with the Nixons--undoubtedly we haven't gotten launched on that so we're a little uncertain about it--but naturally photographs of the Nixon family and their doings will come in. So there will be a greater spread of the coverage and hopefully we will not get criticised for that.

F: The understanding should seep in sometime, shouldn't it?

A: You see, there is a great deal in the text. Mainly the criticism is centered about the photographs. As I say, we didn't have them. Of course, we had the history, so I was able from the time I started with John Adams, to give what I consider a very balanced presentation. But people thumb through a book and they see the pictures first and they just never take the time to--

F: How long did it take you to put this together?

A: It's hard to say about that.

F: You were starting to a certain extent from scratch.

A: Oh yes, this was from scratch. We didn't use any material from the guidebook. The guidebook was a totally different thing. What I had to do was an immense amount of research for all the Presidents, in their

lives at the White House, in the different fields that we covered.

I think you'll be interested in knowing what happened at the party which Mrs. Johnson gave when the book was presented to her by Melville Grosvenor, with the staff that worked on it and, more important, the guests that she invited. Are you familiar with this?

F: No.

A: It was considered pleasant and helpful to the book and also of great interest to all the people not only involved in producing the book, but all the people who lived in the White House. So the Johnsons invited the descendants and relatives of all the presidential families, and I have in my files here hundreds and hundreds of clippings that told about the different presidential families who were there for that particular party.

I also have, which I will give you, a xerox of the speech that Melville gave in presenting this book to Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson's response. Then after that was done in a sort of formal way we all went out into the State Dining Room and then there were news people there and they circulated and they interviewed other members of presidential families. That's why this got such wide coverage. We got around a thousand clippings, which means that there must have been many, many more all over the country. One reason for that is that the mostly women who cover the distaff side of the White House here wrote them; a lot of stories were duplicates, you see they were not different ones. But they were published in the different states where--different states that had had presidents and presidential families.

F: Or where the children live now.

A: And the whole thing, yes, and that's why this thing sort of burgeoned--

F: Sort of a publisher's dream, in a sense.

A: That's right, and it was very wide coverage, I can show you some of these clippings, and also some of the anecdotes that came out of it.

F: You are a member of the Women's National Press Club, right?

A: Yes.

F: You've had then a number of opportunities to observe Mrs. Johnson in her relationship with the press and also, for that matter, Liz Carpenter.

A: That's right. I have known Liz Carpenter for many years. I knew her long before she was in the White House. Of course, Liz has done a spectacular job in her handling of the press there.

F: This is the first time that you've had a press secretary to deal with so-called women's interests.

A: No. Let's see, Mrs. Truman had a press secretary, whom I knew quite well. I can't think of her name because I've got other things whirling around at the moment. But she handled things for Mrs. Truman because Mrs. Truman, unlike Mrs. Johnson, did not deal directly with the press.

Mrs. Johnson went on innumerable trips, partly in line with her activities, and the press went with her. I was invited on one of the airplane trips around the country, her beautification program, but I wasn't able to go because I had a broken ankle at the time. I've always regretted that I was unable to do that. However, one of our staff men here went on the one to the Big Bend country for an article.

F: Nat Kenny?

A: No, it was not Kenny's article. I guess Nat was there too.

F: Andy White?

A: Andy Brown.

F: I mean Brown.

A: Yes. Have you talked with Andy?

F: No, but I know Andy real well.

A: He was the one on that. Anyway, getting back to the Woman's National Press Club, we had a farewell dinner for Mrs. Johnson at which she was presented the golden candlestick that had originated with Mrs. Roosevelt.

It was a very interesting party. I think it was very illustrative of the relations that Mrs. Johnson had with the press because every woman that I have talked with who just automatically and normally covered Mrs. Johnson and her activities at the White House and who indeed had covered various phases of various President's wives all had a good time and enjoyed this. There were a series of skits put on by several of the women who regularly attended all these trips that I didn't go on, because you see my story was the White House, and there wasn't much point in my going around the country, much as I would have liked to do it. There wasn't time enough and I really couldn't justify it. So at any rate I want to give you a xerox copy of this because this will tell certain anecdotes and I might suggest that you get in touch with some of these women who did go on so many trips with her.

I can tell you that when Mrs. Johnson entertained the press, and I mean the women's press on her side of the House, she often showed films. And I'm sure at the Library you will have these films which will show her travels. Of course the women who went along enjoyed seeing themselves and doing these things which may have seemed hardships at the time, but you smile about afterwards. They all enjoyed that very much. I have never heard anyone who was on these trips say anything but nice things about Mrs. Johnson. I don't mean to make this sound like a panegyric, but I really feel that.

F: The antagonisms, frustrations that existed between the White House press

and the President didn't carry over to the women's press and Mrs. Johnson?

A: No, it didn't carry over. Of course there weren't the high political tensions involved in this. This is not war, this is peace, and this is pretty flowers, and this is all the things that nearly everybody's for. Consequently there really wasn't controversy attached to it.

F: Well said.

Tell us something about Mrs. Johnson's parties for the women's press.

A: There was an annual one before Christmas every year, which was enlivened by various entertainment, often the showing of films of the girls who had been along on her trips. She frequently too gave us souvenirs. Everybody likes to get souvenirs you know, and at the last party that she had she gave us--there were two pictures. You're familiar with those. They are the Christmas cards over two years back and I have another one I haven't framed yet from the last time. But she gave us each a wastebasket that had--I forget what they call it, but it's a technique for having pictures of the Johnson family in various ways--the two girls and the Johnsons at the White House and various things. So we enjoyed that. Not that you can buy the press with a few gifts but it's pleasant to have souvenirs of pleasant occasions.

F: Right.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Lonnette Aikman

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, Lonnette Aikman 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 recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on April 28, 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:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Lonnette Aikman
Donor

Oct. 17, 1977
Date

James B. Rodes
Archivist of the United States

Nov. 4, 1977
Date