INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 14, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. E. L. (BOB) BARTLETT

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENY

PLACE: Mrs. Bartlett's home at 2343 49th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: This interview is with Mrs. E. L. Bob Bartlett, wife of the late Senator Bob Bartlett, a Democrat of Alaska.

Mrs. Bartlett, you have very generously consented to let us interview you about your husband's associations with Lyndon Johnson and the very important events surrounding the granting of statehood for Alaska. I'd like to just mention some of the dates of your husband's positions so that we may relate them to periods of Mr. Johnson's service. Senator Bartlett was the senior senator from Alaska and had sat in Congress since 1945, when he had won election as a non-voting delegate to the U.S. House in the 79th Congress. He was an advocate of statehood for Alaska throughout his entire delegate days, and of course when Alaska was admitted to the Union in 1958, he was elected to the Senate and was re-elected in 1960 and in 1966.

Mrs. Bartlett, do I essentially have the correct information?

B: Oh, yes, except that I'd like to add this: when he suddenly decided to run for the vacated seat as delegate to Congress from Alaska, he said that he would run on two planks. At that time he was a young

man running against two old-timers and given little chance to win. His two planks were: first, statehood for Alaska, which was practically unheard of at that time; and the second one was a tuberculosis sanitarium for Alaskans, primarily Alaskan natives, where tuberculosis was decimating the Eskimo population.

Within four years he had a hospital in Seward, Alaska. It was a very dramatic episode in his life and Alaskans, because within ten years the occurrence of tuberculosis had diminished to such an extent that the hospital was closed and local hospitals in the villages were established.

M: Where had this TB come from?

B: The white people.

M: As they came into the state they brought it with them?

B: And they had no--

M: No resistance.

B: No resistance. It took longer to get statehood.

M: To begin this interview, do you recall when the Senator first met Mr. Johnson and what his impressions were?

B: No, I don't rememember exactly when he met Senator Johnson, but it was early in their careers in the House. He spoke of and was impressed by this tall, lanky, energetic man from Texas. I remember that in his words.

M: You've indicated to me in our conversation off the tape that you and your husband made a point of getting to know all the congressmen and senators so that you could personally talk with them about statehood

for Alaska. Was Mr. Johnson among these people that you got to know in this early period here?

B: Yes. Bob made it a point to become acquainted with him and knew that it was a rather hopeless proposition because of the division between the North and the South and the feeling on statehood for Alaska, which seemed to be a dream in the sky at the time.

M: Did he see Mr. Johnson at that period as a potential leader and helper in statehood for Alaska?

B: Not as a helper for Alaska, but probably by the time 1948 rolled around he knew that Lyndon Johnson was a very strong character and would be a leader in the United States. Everybody else did, too.

M: We may be jumping around in time a little bit here, but let me ask you before we get into some of the strategy on statehood, when do you recall that Lyndon Johnson first indicated an interest in statehood for Alaska? I would preface this by saying either pro or con.

B: I would say that the first real visits that they had on the subject of statehood for Alaska were probably in 1948. At that time the statehood bill was reported out and President Truman issued a special message to Congress on statehood, embodying his wholehearted support for Alaska's statehood, and he also urged Hawaii's statehood. He felt that it should be absolutely a nonpartisan project of the Congress.

M: Did Mr. Johnson state how he felt to Senator Bartlett?

B: He must have, because Bob would not have neglected any leading senator, and that was the year, I think, that Lyndon became senator.

In person, my husband wrote many memos and many letters about this, but he felt that personal confrontation was much more valuable and he would wait and wait in order to speak to the man himself. This is probably why he got to be so well-known to the rest of the congressmen.

M: Do you recall anything that your husband said about his early conversations with Senator Johnson, even as a delegate, regarding his attitude toward statehood for Alaska?

B: Repititiously, he felt that there wasn't very much hope in having any support from Lyndon Johnson because it was an absolute fact that the South, all the South I think in 1948, was against statehood for Alaska and statehood for Hawaii. Statehood for Hawaii on account of the mixed population, and therefore statehood for Alaska because if they let Alaska in, they would have to let Hawaii in.

M: Were they as much concerned with the minorities in Alaska?

B: No, not at all. Well, maybe I shouldn't say not at all, but this was not a problem. Our minorities were very small.

M: The other consideration of course would have been that these tend to be very liberal people towards such subjects as civil rights, too, I would imagine. Did this occur?

B: Frankly, very little was said about civil rights in Alaska in those days. And there's a reason for this. In the western and northern part of Alaska there were very few of the natives, as we call them, the Aleuts, the Eskimos, and Indians, except in their villages. In southeastern Alaska we were well integrated, but the percentage

was so small that it wasn't really recognized as a problem.

M: Mrs. Bartlett, from my notes--and you certainly may correct me if I'm wrong--I gather that very serious attention began being given Alaskan statehood in Congress after World War II. Of course you've indicated President Truman's message. This was of course almost simultaneous with Senator Bartlett's election as delegate to Congress. Previous to his election and of course during his time as a delegate, almost the entire initiative for statehood had come from the delegates to Congress and from the population in Alaska.

I know this is a very broad question, but can you tell me what were the significant reasons to your husband for wanting statehood for Alaska, and for the immediacy of the accomplishment?

B: We were set up differently--our territorial government--from Hawaii. Hawaii had a much more liberal governmental setup. They could collect a greater percentage of their taxes; they had a more liberal form of government from Alaska. Though Alaska was an older territory, we were a much more restricted territory. We had no control of our resources, and we had a much more restricted way of government. We were more tightly controlled by Congress than Hawaii. And we were becoming restive about this, because the resources in Alaska are enormous. We recognized this at the time. We didn't recognize oil, but we knew we had oil because in those early days we had several of the big oil companies prospecting but gave it up.

It's a very old thing, but it was used pretty extensively in Alaska at that time, that we had taxation without representation.

You know, a delegate has no vote in Congress. He serves on all the committees and he can propose legislation, but they wanted more. There was a suggestion that maybe the Alaskans would be content if we could elect our own governor. Well, we weren't. We wouldn't accept that kind of a compromise.

M: You've mentioned some of the objections to statehood as they were voiced in that period, and I'd like to know what your husband's answers were to them. One of them that seemed to stand out was that the population was so small, and it would be unable to support statehood. Of course along with this was the fact that it was not contiguous with the United States.

B: Right. As far as not being contiguous with the United States, neither were California, Oregon, Washington contiguous with the United States when they came in. And that was a lot longer way to go in those years than it was in the age of air where we could go in six hours, or eight hours at best. That was our answer for that; [there were] other answers to it, but that was the most solid one, I think.

M: The size of the population being so small?

B: We agreed that the size of the population was small, and it was not growing very fast, not as fast as many people hoped for. But some of us were afraid that it would grow too fast because a country that depends on natural resources is not set up for the services that are required to make living a comfortable and possible thing. It was hard to get equipment; it would be hard to get the supplies.

We had spent so many years without being able to build up an

industry other than the gold mining and the fishing that we were a seasonal country. In the early days people went for the summer, for the fish and for the gold. As the gold dropped off with the last world war, it left only fish. And so the people came from Washington, from California, from the whole coastline to take our fish, which they brought back outside, we called it, to the lower states for processing. So it left us no industry to speak of. The few people that did spend the winters there spent them for two reasons. They either made so much money that summer, or they didn't make enough money and they had to go outside to make a living in order to come back in the spring and go mining or fishing. The only winter occupation, of course, was the fur, and this has dropped off now, too, because a greater portion of the fur industry is in Europe--cheaper labor, and so forth.

M: One public idea about Alaska that I'd just like to ask you--I'm sure that this wasn't voiced probably by too many serious people, but [there was] the conception of Alaska being a very large piece of ice. What was the answer to this? You did mention it having the effect of having a great deal of seasonal people.

B: Yes. One of the results was that transportation was very expensive, and this made our cost of living high, so high that in 1948--this could be checked--my husband got a bill through Congress to raise the cost of living for government personnel twenty-five per cent in Fairbanks and less as you come further south. This has remained, and probaly will always remain, because the cost of living is higher

on account of transportation. This causes some difficulty with the people who live there and are not with the government. It means to become a success industrially or commercially in Alaska that you have greater problems and need a little bit more ingenuity. The last world war gave us our push up.

This has been said time and time again. Billy Mitchell said that "He who controls Alaska controls the world." And he was right. Russia's only fifty-three miles across in one place. There's no doubt about the fact that all of the military in Alaska knows day-by-day and night-by-night the location of our radar and missiles, the location of foreign ships. These were completed about six years ago.

M: This brings up another objection that was voiced at the time: the fact that it was an area that was very crucial to national security and that it should be controlled by the federal government instead of put under state control.

B: Yes. What then would we become! Would we become a military part of the United States? This is contrary to our constitution, contrary to our philosophy.

M: What did your husband feel was the reaction to his ability to answer these objections? Did they seem to be strong enough answers for people of that period, or did they just retain these objections and say those were not answers?

B: Oh, no. They didn't retain these objections. He was able to persuade so many of the high level military men of that time, during the war and after, that they appeared for statehood in many of our hearings.

I can give you the names of those people, but I'd have to look it up. They felt that, contrary to the fact that it would be a dangerous thing, it was a fine thing to have a firm economy in Alaska that would take care of its own people and that would also be available to the military in case of attack. Furthermore, we were so close to Russia and to Japan, and you know Japan occupied Alaska, three islands in Alaska, the only time any place in the United States has been occupied by a foreign country. They felt that this would strengthen the country, that it would strengthen the economy of the people, that they would be able to enter into the building of the areas around the bases.

And this has come true. The bases brought prosperity. Thousands of young people came to Alaska to work on the bases. The bases are almost all there yet. Some of them have diminished in value, but on the other hand the radar screens have gone up all through the country and flying over, you see all kinds of military operations.

One thing that the Alaskans were quite upset about, much as they liked the prosperity when construction came, they were afraid that too much land was outright given to the military. As the last ten years have gone by, this has diminished. The military has, little by little, given up a great deal of land that they didn't really need.

M: Were his answers to the arguments on the small population and the contiguity with the United States and also the lack of revenue credible arguments to the objections that were voiced? Were they accepted at that point, too?

B: No, they weren't accepted at that point. Those were the hardest problems through the years. These were the problems that came up time and time again, but those were not any of the problems voiced by Lyndon Johnson. Of course he came from a western state, too, and probably remembered through his history.

M: Do you recall what his objections were in these early periods?

B: It's my feeling that his objections were the objections of the southerners; that they didn't want two more senators of whom they were unsure either on the civil rights question or--as a matter of fact, I think that was his only objection. He was a man of politics and an expert one. He had to voice the voice of his people, and that was the feeling there.

M: Senator Bartlett is credited with shaping the strategy that finally achieved statehood. This is really sort of the heart of the matter. I wonder if I can just ask you: What was the strategy? What were the compromises that had to be made over the years, the deals, the horse-trading, as they call it?

B: In 1952 of course we had a new president, and in his State of the Union Message he said that Hawaii should have statehood and he didn't mention Alaska.

M: President Eisenhower?

B: Yes, President Eisenhower. So this started one great problem. It meant that first of all they had to try to persuade President Eisenhower that statehood for Alaska was essential. I think in 1956 he said in his State of the Union Message that "We must have statehood

for Hawaii and Alaska," but he was for statehood for Hawaii first.

At that time a new member of the cabinet came in--his name was Fred Seaton from Nebraska--who had been a senator from Nebraska, taking an appointive place. I've forgotten who died.

M: We can check that.

B: In Congress he [Seaton] had been a very hard worker for statehood, he was convinced that it was a necessity to have statehood for Alaska. I'm sure that it was through his efforts that President Eisenhower changed his mind and said that we should have both statehood for Alaska and for Hawaii, giving all the reasons that both statehood advocates of Hawaii and Alaska gave. He really worked for it, too.

M: He would have been more or less working on the Republicans.

B: Yes.

M: And he was in a cabinet post, you said? He was in Interior, wasn't he?

B: Interior, under which this bill had to appear.

The President said in his advocacy of statehood it had to be nonpartisan. This is probably the first release from pressure that Lyndon Johnson may have felt. This is the beginning of great publicity for the statehood movement. This is the beginning of the heavy organization of people throughout the United States, people who carried weight, like unions, like the Federated Women's Clubs. [?]

I would say that it was probably in 1957 when Bob would have had the closest relationship with then-Senator Lyndon Johnson.

M: Let me go back a little bit and ask you: during this period through

the forties and the fifties, who was aiding your husband the most as far as congressional people, or other people too? You mentioned how public sentiment sort of became an added factor here.

B: Public sentiment didn't become a great factor in Congress until [1948]. It was an accepted factor, but it wasn't a great factor in Congress until 1948.

M: Do you recall some of the individuals who really came to be an aid to statehood?

B: A fine gentleman, a congressman from Florida who was then in the House of Representatives, was the chairman of the Interior Affairs. That was Senator Peterson, who worked very hard for statehood and worked very hard after all among the southerners as well. He was very liberal in his thinking. I can't think, but would be able to, with more research, name the votes that he was able to produce for statehood in the committee. You have to pass the committee before you ever get to the floor.

M: Right. Did your husband aim at working at the committees that would be concerned with this?

B: Oh, yes. He was a member of that committee, and his greatest object at the time was to get that committee to let the bill out.

Then the next chairman of the Interior Affairs Committee was also from Florida and his name was [Chester] McMullen. And he, too, worked very hard, but he stayed chairman for only a couple of years and retired. In 1950 there was only one dissenting voice in the committee, while J. Hardin Peters on was still chairman, and that was a northern congressman, [Frederic] Coudert, C-O-U-D-E-R-T, of upper New York.

All of which is very curious. You accept the objection from the south and then you find the northerners . . .

M: Do you recall hearing your husband talk about some people whom he managed to sway or persuade to support statehood that he felt were really accomplishments? [Do you recall] who some of these people were that he persuaded?

B: I think anybody that finally voted for statehood must have been persuaded that Bob's arguments were correct, because when he started out with statehood for Alaska it was a gleam in the eye and not taken seriously at all. The first statehood bill was entered July 21, 1945, and the measure found some attraction only in Washington but no action was taken. This was in 1950.

Time and time again he visited with Sam Rayburn, not only about legislation for statehood but about many difficult problems. Alaska, as I said, was almost completely restricted in running its own government. Among other objectives, Bob tried to get more freedom for the state, and he went always to Rayburn first and accepted a great deal of advice and accepted a great deal of help. The Rules Committee through those years were very difficult to handle. They were very conservative, very hard to give any extra self-government to Alaska in the fear that this might help us in our fight for statehood and that we would grow stronger and stronger. I think that probably Sam Rayburn got to know Bob very well and gave him a lot of good advice.

Through him, he must have had a closer association with Lyndon

Johnson than many others did, perhaps not socially. As far as the work was concerned, I'm sure that they were so close that Lyndon Johnson must have known all that was going on in Alaska. I had a feeling that he operated as a southern member of the House and senator, but must have been interested and sympathetic with Bob. When we finally had statehood, Lyndon Johnson was especially helpful and kind to Bob. In fact, every difficult problem and bill that Bob had in those first few years, he would go to Lyndon and always had his ear and advice and help. I can think of no time in statehood that Lyndon didn't give him all the help he needed.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about how your husband kept this before the Congress? What was his work [approach]? How did he tackle the project?

B: He put in a bill practically every year. It had to come up in committee. It had to be worked on by the committee members. Committees change. People don't stay on committees, they move on to other committees, so there are new people that you go through this problem with. He must have been very persuasive.

M: Did he do this by writing at all, providing information?

B: Oh, yes. He sent much information to the offices, but actually I think--my personal opinion--that he felt that the most important way was to spend some time with them when he could get them. He himself was so busy, he was very careful not to take up time with other members of the House or Senator because he realized how busy they were. And I think that this consideration helped him see them more than if he stayed too long. This is one of the problems

in Congress. People sometimes come in with, what do they say, an ax to grind, and they grind it for too many hours when fifteen or twenty minutes would do the trick.

M: Did he repeat his visits to these people?

B: Yes.

M: And always trying to bring new light on the subject of statehood, or would he reiterate the facts as they were?

B: He didn't reiterate the facts. Something else would come up new, and then he would go to see them again. This was a changing picture, sometimes from month to month, sometimes just from year to year.

M: Did he keep a tally of where he realized that he was acquiring support for statehood among the members of the House and Senate?

B: A written tally?

M: Yes. Well, mental or written one, as he gained members' support.

B: I don't know about a written tally, but I'm sure that he remembered very well where he was well received and would follow through. He was the first to suggest that leaders in Alaska come down for the hearings, to then either appear at the hearings or make visits to the congressmen and senators from states from which they came. At that state of the game most Alaskans had come from some place else. There were very few Alaskans who were born in Alaska. So they had a leverage. If they came from North Dakota, they would go to see their North Dakota congressmen and senators. And this was of great help, a very effective operation, I think.

M: Was he worried that any people would change their minds on statehood, or did he think once he convinced them that they would be his camp?

B: Oh, yes, [he was] very much afraid, especially as far as the southerners were concerned. There were a few southerners, as you know, who switched to statehood because of pressure from friends from their home towns or something like that. Bob was often afraid that we might lose those people. I don't think we did. Toward the end we gained Senator [Robert] Kerr, who had voted consistently against statehood, but in the final [analysis, did not]. Senator [George] Smathers always voted against statehood. Senator Holland always voted for. Senator Holland was a very strong support for statehood.

M: Who did your husband feel was the biggest opposition group, bloc or individuals?

B: The strongest opposition was probably Senator [Richard] Russell.

M: Did he attempt to see these people?

B: Oh, yes. Senator Russell and Bob became close friends.

M: Their difference of opinion didn't deter their friendship?

B: Oh, no. I'd say that there was no lack of friendship in the whole Congress.

M: They knew what your husband was aiming at, even if they didn't agree.

B: Yes, whether they agreed with him or not didn't make any difference.

M: Were there some very bitter words said in this? Sometimes on the floor of the House and in committee meetings and in the Senate, strong things are said, although it doesn't really affect personal relations.

B: Yes. But in the House I don't remember that were strong fights. There was a Congressman Miller from Nebraska who was adamantly against statehood for Alaska, but, again, if there were hard feelings they were well covered up. In the Senate there were bitter words from Andrew Schoeppel, now dead, but that was overcome as the years rolled by.

M: What other people from Alaska were instrumental during--this is again still in the early period, the forties and the early fifties.

B: In the fifties prominent Alaskans, maybe fifty, organized what they called Operation Statehood, they were determined to get statehood. They spanned out and organized a committed that probably numbered a hundred. The other fifty people were people in the United States, very prominent men, the names of which I could get you if you wanted them. As a matter of fact, I'm practically positive that Eisenhower was on that committee when he was president of Columbia. On this committee each member took it upon himself to write letters to their congressmen and senators, to other people of influence; they published pamphlets, magazines, and books, urging statehood. And toward the end of the fifties statehood was a going concern as far as interest was concerned. It was in the newspapers all the time, had a lot of publicity, and with publicity came the participation of people in the streets, everybody. The way we looked at it, everybody wanted statehood, and few people could understand why Alaska statehood did not pass the various times when Hawaii statehood did. The reason being, as I must have mentioned before, that the

opponents of Alaska statehood felt that if they passed Hawaii's statehood, then they'd have to pass Alaska's statehood.

M: Were there very many frustrations during this period?

B: Hardly anything else.

M: I'm trying to get you to talk about these early periods just to get a feel for what your thinking was on it and what the problems were. Was it sometimes disheartening with the lack of success that you had.

B: Yes, it was. We wanted it as badly as a pregnant woman wants a baby.

M: Were there any areas where your husband could in some way help other members of Congress and thereby obtain their support for statehood?

B: Very few ways, but when there was a talk to really quite personal friends of his about a bill that was in question and whichever congressman it was thought that just a little bit more help [might make the difference] of course Bob was very pleased to do anything he could. We were always on the asking side, though. There was certainly nothing that he could do that he didn't do.

Another thing that may have helped was the fact that we had so little control of our government and resources, that practically everything we wanted to do, instead of a state doing, we had to come to Congress, just as Washington, D.C., for instance, still has to come, more or less, to Congress for every single thing. And Congress gets pretty sick and tired of this, too. This may have helped a little bit, the fact that this would be turned over to the state.

One of the big problems of statehood was [that there was] such

a lot of country for one state. One [suggestion for the] problem was brought up by Governor [B. Frank] Heintzleman, an appointee of the President--our governor was appointed by the president--and that was to divide Alaska in half and leave the rest for the military or for the Interior Department to administer, or what have you. Of course Alaskans, including my husband, came out strongly against that. It was all or nothing. It's a good thing, too, because all the oil is on the north slope, which is where Governor Heintzleman would have [divided it].

M: He would have divided it north and south?

B: Yes, just a line across.

I think the growth started in Alaska for a commonwealth. This was a group of businessmen that dreamed this up. We wouldn't have to pay federal income taxes. This would give a boost to industry and commerce, and we would have a certain amount of our own regulation of governmental agencies. As a matter of fact, there was a bill that came up for a hearing, but was voted down.

Then this wonderful statehood committee that worked so hard in Alaska and out of Alaska decided that if we had a state constitution that was a very model constitution, maybe this would help. So a constitutional convention was conceived and ran for several months in 1955. They hired experts in constitutions, I guess you'd call them--there are foundations that do this sort of research for you--and they came up to help the constitutional convention. Because it was in 1955, they had fifty-five members, which met at the University

of Alaska in Fairbanks. The constitution was accepted by the constitutional convention by fifty-four people. One elderly man didn't approve of it, and he wouldn't sign the constitution, so it was signed by fifty-four instead of fifty-five. Before he died, within a year or a year and a half, he signed the constitution.

M: What were his objections?

B: I don't know. He was that type. (Laughter)

M: All these various efforts must have been costly.

B: Oh, yes.

M: Did you have a problem getting financial backing? How did this develop over the years?

B: The legislature raised the money for the backing of the statehood committee.

M: What about all the other attempts and the organizations that were arranged and set up?

B: They raised their own [money]. People really wanted it. As far as the committee was concerned, I spoke of about fifty members of the committee in Alaska, they paid their own travel expenses. If they couldn't afford to pay their own travel expenses, they passed the hat and people got them back here.

M: Was your husband ever involved in getting financial support for these various activities for statehood?

B: You mean in Alaska?

M: And here. I mean, just to support all these various efforts.

B: No, I don't think so. He only asked for statehood. I don't think

he asked for financial assistance.

M: I meant this more privately, not really before Congress.

B: Yes, I meant that, too.

M: Did your husband go outside of Congress, too?

B: Yes, he traveled and spoke to groups at invitation all over. Because he was a delegate he didn't have a vote, but he was a member of practically every committee.

M: How did he manage that?

B: I guess they made up for the vote that way. So he knew what was going on in every committee, too, and you almost have to belong to a committee to know what you're doing. There just isn't that much time to study. This must have helped him a great deal, too. It brought him in closer contact with all of the men that met on these committees, and he made friends that way that he might not have made otherwise. Ordinarily, you don't know everybody in Congress. That's quite a few people.

M: As you've already mentioned, Mrs. Bartlett, the Senator was continuously introducing bills to change the status of the territory, besides the bills on statehood. Many of these were unsuccessful, such as control of fisheries and a governor who was a resident of the state. Did the Senator regard these possible achievements as another means of keeping this before the public, or was it primarily just to relieve the status of the state?

B: To relieve the status of the state. We were growing slowly, and no matter how much growth there is, the need of services grows along with it. It would be more attractive to people to come to a state

where they felt they had something to say with their own governorship than if they went to some place where they were serfs.

Furthermore, in the fifties a great many of the young people who had served in the bases in Alaska, especially around Anchorage and Fairbanks, liked it a great deal. There were thousands and thousands of young servicemen, and it's a man's country. They wanted to stay there. But they had grown up in states, and so they were very strong in their support for statehood. They wanted to have as much there as they would have had if they went back to Louisiana.

M: In introducing some of these bills did your husband realize the impossibility of some of them, that they were just not going to pass?

B: Yes, but you have to try and you never know. You have to try. If you quit trying, nothing's going to happen.

M: I have about twenty-five minutes till one here now and I was wondering if you'd like to cut here before we go any further or try to do some more.

B: Yes, probably.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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