

INTERVIEW II

DATE: OCTOBER 21, 1970
INTERVIEWEE: SHERMAN BIRDWELL
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

Tape 1 of 2

F: This is an interview with Mr. Sherman Birdwell in his office in Austin, Texas. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz. The date is October 21, 1970.

Mr. Birdwell, I believe the Birdwell acquaintance with the Johnsons goes back before the days, even of Lyndon Johnson on this earth, or Sherman Birdwell.

B: That's right.

F: How did that come about?

B: Mr. Sam Johnson, who was Lyndon Johnson's father--

F: This is Sam Ealy--

B: Sam Ealy Johnson was born in Buda, Texas, Hays County. Buda is located about twelve miles from Austin, and that's where my grandfather and my father had established a store way back in . . . about 1889. I was born there. After Mr. Sam, Lyndon's father, was born there--my grandfather was Dr. Dan Reagan, R-E-A-G-A-N; he was distantly related to Senator John H. Reagan--the families were just very close. After Mr. Sam moved to Blanco County, or maybe it was even Gillespie County, but near Stonewall, the relationship continued on. Because in those days, when people took vacations,

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particularly if they liked to fish or hunt, they went to the Hill Country. I remember going on many hunting trips with them up in and around Johnson City, Stonewall, camping out with the Johnsons. They would take a wagon and team and go up and stay maybe a couple of weeks during the hunting season or during the fishing season, and these were their vacations. So the close early family relationship just continued on.

F: You are just about the same age as President Johnson.

B: Yes, sir. I was born in March of 1908 and he was born in August of 1908.

F: Do you have any idea when you first met him?

B: Not precisely. My early remembrance of when I first met Lyndon Johnson was he came through Buda with his father and, because of the close family relationship and the old time acquaintance, why, they stopped in to see us. I'm sure that's the first time I met him.

F: Probably two kids who just stood off and eyed each other.

B: That's right. We were probably both about eleven or twelve years old.

F: I believe he and your mother used to get in political arguments.

B: Yes. A little later on the Fergusons were quite a political power in Texas, and the Johnsons had always been very close to the Ferguson Administration and Jim Ferguson. My folks were anti-Ferguson, and my mother loved politics and loved to talk it. Even at an early age, why, Lyndon was wrapped up in politics, and he and my mother

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used to have the biggest arguments about Jim Ferguson. I was more interested in, "Let's go out and play catch, or play baseball, or go down on the creek and go fishin'." But Lyndon would rather sit and argue with Mother. He had always called her, ever since I can remember, Mother Birdwell.

F: So they argued Ferguson, then through the years.

B: Yes.

F: And he had an early interest in politics.

B: Yes.

F: Did you see much of him in those days or just when he came through Buda?

B: Didn't see a great deal of Lyndon. He had a first cousin named Margaret Johnson, who was the daughter of Tom Johnson, one of Mr. Sam's brothers. I used to go see her at Johnson City, and I'd always see Lyndon at those times. In fact, we double dated. In fact, in the Christmas of 1926 I went up there. They had a big snow and got snowed in, and [I] had to stay about two or three days till I could get out of there. I stayed over with Lyndon and his folks in [their]house, lived with them a couple of days. We had snow fights and went to dances.

F: Did Margaret get snowed in with you?

B: Margaret, of course, was staying with her parents that lived in Johnson City just on the edge of town.

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F: What became of her, incidentally?

B: Margaret is now dead. She went to San Marcos State Teachers' College, it was known as in those days, and later on married and moved to Cotulla and died down there quite a number of years ago. I've forgotten how long ago. But she was a very beautiful, vivacious, personable woman and was quite lovely. At one time, if we hadn't both been so young, I'm sure we would have been married, because I just felt that close to her.

F: Just met her at the--the timing was off.

B: Yes, the timing was off.

F: Did you have any idea then that this young man you were snowed in with was going places politically?

B: No, I did not. He never mentioned politics. In fact, he had not gone to college at this time. I think his decision about what he was going to do in life had not really been formulated. It was only until I believe in February of '37 that he first went to college after being out of high school.

F: '27.

B: '27. Being out of high school for a year or so.

F: Did you get to see much of Mr. Sam?

B: Yes. Yes, I saw just about as much of Mr. Sam as I did Lyndon.

F: What was he like?

B: Mr. Sam was not gruff or rough, but he was very direct. In those days,

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the husband was pretty much the ruler of the house. They wore the pants in the house, and he did. He was always very active himself in politics, having been in the [Texas] legislature quite a number of years, I think something like 12 years, if I remember correctly. He was always interested in politics and in some kind of trade. He liked to trade properties. He was in some cattle business, not too much but he was trading horses and trading around. He was a good trader.

F: That's a special breed I think you get around here.

B: Yes.

F: I know I have a relative out in Brownwood who has done fairly well, and someone asked me recently what he did, and I said, "He just trades." It was someone who wasn't used to this kind of world, you know, and they couldn't understand. "Yes, but what's his business?" And I said, "I don't know that he has a business. He just trades."

Did you get the feeling that he sort of shaped young Lyndon's ideas on politics?

B: I think he had a great influence on him, because he talked to Lyndon and to myself and the family about experiences in the legislature. Later on, he worked for the Railroad Commission, I remember. He was in the Weights Division. They used to weigh trucks. I know that sometimes Lyndon would drive them, sometimes, Sam Houston, Lyndon's younger brother.

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F: I can remember the efforts to get rid of the old 7,000 pound load limit.

B: Right. Right. But as I started to say, Mr. Sam, I'm sure, influenced Lyndon to a great extent in his interest in politics because of his conversation about incidents that happened and political figures of that time and era in Texas. Lyndon was always asking questions: well, what did he feel like about this question, or something like this. He was always interested in politics. When he went to college, he immediately began to show an interest in student politics, was elected president of the student association or whatever they call it, the student body. He worked on the college paper. He worked for the president. President Evans at that time was president of San Marcos College, and working in his offices put him very close to administration of the college.

F: Now, you didn't go to San Marcos.

B: Yes, I went one year, but this was the year that Lyndon was teaching school.

F: I see. But you went on to the University of Texas.

B: I went to the University of Texas, but I also went to San Marcos one year.

F: You didn't see much of him during this college period?

B: No, I did not.

F: Then what happened to you after you got out of college?

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B: After I got out of college, within a year I went to South America, to Chile, and I was there about two years. During this time, Lyndon had graduated from San Marcos and had gone to Houston, one of the high schools, and was teaching debate, elocution, and was very successful with his team. Very shortly--I don't remember how long he was in the school system in Houston, I think only one or two years--he left and became secretary to Mr. Dick Kleberg.

F: Well now, have you been associated with Mr. Kleberg somewhere?

B: No. No, I only knew the name, the Kleberg name of the King Ranch, but I did not know him. At that time I believe it was the Tenth Congressional District, but it was a long district that went from Corpus and took in this area from Blanco County.

F: Reached all the way down there. Or all the way up here.

B: After Mr. Lyndon Johnson had been secretary for about four years, this was the beginning of the Roosevelt Administration, and they established many of the New Deal programs, such as the WPA. An offshoot from the WPA was the NYA, the National Youth Administration. This was a program to help young people, boys and girls from 16 to 25, in part-time jobs, either in the school system that was administered by the school superintendents on a grant directly to the school, or in work projects for those that were out of school for whatever reason. Such work projects --- the first big one was the statewide project for highway beautification ---

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planting trees, building roadside parks, the beginning of the roadside parks that now dot Texas--were sponsored by the Texas Highway Department. They'd furnish supervision, trucks, tools, and material, and the National Youth Administration would furnish the boys. They'd pick them up on the trucks and go out to the towns where the young people were and build roadside parks, plant trees, do riprapping--rock walks down maybe to a stream, this sort of thing.

F: This was back when Jack Gubbels was active, wasn't it?

B: Yes sir, that's right. When Mr. Johnson was appointed Director of the National Youth Administration of Texas, Mrs. Roosevelt had a great deal to do with this appointment. Mr. Johnson met Mrs. Roosevelt, and she became quite impressed with him. She had a great deal to do with his appointment as State Director of the National Youth Administration.

F: Do you know where he met her?

B: I'm sure just at the White House.

F: Through Mr. Kleberg?

B: Through Mr. Kleberg and through invitations to go to the White House. I'm sure that the people that Mr. Johnson met up there--by people I mean congressmen and senators--had influence with President Roosevelt and his appointment of Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was appointed to State Director. My first contact was a call from Mr. Johnson to meet him at the old Post Office Cafe in San Marcos

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at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning. When I went there, I saw Jesse Kellam sitting there, and he said, "What are you here for?" I said, "I got a call from Lyndon to meet him here." He said, "Well, I did, too."

F: Johnson wasn't there yet.

B: No, sir. We walked in a few minutes before seven, but just right around seven o'clock, why, Lyndon walked in and we had a cup of coffee and visited, because I hadn't seem him in a number of years and I don't think Mr. Kellam had. Mr. Johnson said, "Let's go take a ride." So we got in his car. It was early in the morning-- this was wintertime, fall--it was still not sunrise. We got in the car and rode all around San Marcos and down in the old park there on the river, and he was telling us all about the National Youth Administration, its objectives, its program to help young people, its opportunity for young people to find jobs and stay in school, and he was so enthused about it. I was kind of finding myself [thinking], "Well, this is very interesting, but so what?"

F: He hadn't told you why.

B: No. So after an hour or so of really selling us on the National Youth Administration, why, he said, "I want you and Jesse to help me organize the National Youth Administration and help me operate it and run it."

At that time I was making the magnificent sum of fifty dollars a

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month. I had a college degree, I had worked in South America a couple of years, had kept my father in this large country mercantile store. But in those days, fifty dollars a month plus being able to get your groceries at cost was a big deal, particularly when you were living in an apartment furnished by your parents, so I was a lot better off than many people. When he offered me I think it was either \$100 or \$125 a month to help organize the National Youth Administration, I said, "When do you want me to start?", and he said, "Tomorrow morning." I said, "I'll be there."

The next Monday morning, the following morning, I was in the Littlefield Building.

F: To interrupt a moment, after y'all had been apart a number of years, how did you come into his mind?

B: I don't know except two instances. One, Mr. Hal Sevier had been appointed Ambassador to Chile, and I wanted to go back to Chile. I liked it. I spoke the language fluently, I could read and write it as well as I could English; I kept books in it for two years.

F: You had been with a mining company, hadn't you?

B: Yes sir, with a nitrate mine, operated by the Guggenheim brothers from New York. So I felt like I could be of assistance. Seemed to be interesting to me to be in South America, I liked it, liked the people--liked the chilenos. I had written Mr. Johnson asking his assistance as to what I should do with reference to trying to get in

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the Diplomatic Corps. I had no idea. He advised me to go see Mr. Sevier and talk to him and take letters or recommendation from various people that Mr. Sevier would know, which I had done. I went to see Mr. Sevier, and he said he had to go on down to Chile and kind of find out what the setup was. He was new, he'd just been appointed, but he was impressed and he said, "When I get back or when I find out what I can do, I'll get in touch with you." Mr. Sevier developed some kind of stomach disorder, and when he came back, he never returned to Chile. But during this time when I had written Mr. Johnson and he advised me what to do, I guess I reestablished the fact that I existed.

Lyndon tells me the story that when he was talking to his father-- he had great respect for his judgment--after his appointment as National Youth Administrator about who he should have in to surround himself with, to help him with this program, he mentioned my name. He said, "You know, I don't know Sherman too well. I've known him a long time, but I've never worked with him. I really don't know him. What do you think? Do you think he would be good?" And Mr. Sam, as related by Lyndon to me, said, "Well I don't know him, either; I've never worked around him. But I know his family, and I know this: people are like any kind or strain of cattle. If you've got good blood in them, their offspring are going to be good and you can bet on them. And I would bet my bottom dollar on Sherman Birdwell." Lyndon said,

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"That sounds good to me."

F: That brings up something. It has seemed to me that, unlike lots of young men who are on the rise who want to take on their elders, he always was very respectful toward what older people had to say and listened rather carefully. Not that he didn't make up his own mind, but he never got in a--sort of a--youth versus age controversy with anyone.

B: I think this is true. At this time when he was National Youth Administrator, Alvin Wirtz, who was a former State senator for Texas, had his office on I think just the floor or maybe two floors above where our offices were on the sixth floor of the old Littlefield Building. I know that Mr. Johnson used to go up and see Senator Wirtz and try out programs for size, so to speak. He always sought advice from people that he felt were knowledgeable about a program or a situation and who also were intelligent. He always has sought people who fell in this category and then after talking to different ones and getting different ideas, he came to his own conclusions. But he gleaned the best from each of these people that he would talk with and then wrap it around his best judgment and go forward.

F: Let's go back to that first morning you reported in the Littlefield Building. The NYA in Texas is new, right?

B: Right.

F: So you don't really have any organization. You're there to get started.

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B: Yes sir.

F: OK now, tell me what it was like.

B: Lyndon had made, of course, many friends when he was in school in San Marcos, where he met Mr. Kellam. It's also where he met Willard Deason, it's where he met Fenner Roth, it's where he met a number of people that he knew more intimately than he did me. He began to assemble these people and ask them if they wanted to work for him. These were the nucleus of the people that first went to work for the National Youth Administration, his boyhood friends, so to speak, particularly his college friends.

F: Did this break down into a good table of organization insofar as each person's responsibilities were concerned, or was it more like a family in which we just all worked together and tried to make things succeed?

B: It was a part of both. It was a family organization, number one, but each of us was assigned particular duties. I was finance officer for the state. At this time, Lyndon and Lady Bird lived out on San Gabriel Street in Bob Montgomery's home, which was vacant at that time. Bob was on loan to the government at this time and was staying in Washington. Lyndon had subleased or had rented his house and I know that after an all day session of work when we were first getting started, we'd go out to his house. He would take the material that was sent down, the outline and objectives that were

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sent from the National Youth Administration National Headquarters in Washington. Lyndon would take this book, and he would start reading very carefully, line by line, paragraph by paragraph. He would ask us, "Now what do y'all think this means?", and we'd discuss it--It means so-and-so. He'd get diverse opinions about the meaning, because different things would mean . . .

F: Kind of like learning your catechism.

B: Right! He was very, very detailed, far more than I knew Lyndon was. Of course, I didn't know him intimately before this time in terms of work experience. He got down to exactly what Washington was trying to tell us ought to be done and what it meant to us. Then we'd go put it in practice the next day. Those days everybody was enthused about the work. We were young and energetic. We felt challenged by this opportunity to help young people.

F: Wasn't any shortage of things to do, either.

B: Never a shortage of things to do and never enough time to do it. In those days, the Littlefield Building had its own electric system. They were not tied in to the City of Austin electricity. They had their own generators. It was direct current instead of alternating current, and at 10:30, they shut down their generators, which meant that at 10:30 [the lights went off]. If you worked past then, they happened to have left in each one of the offices the old gas burners that they used for lights before they even had electricity, that's how old the Littlefield

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Building is. Many and many and many a night all of us would be up there working, and they'd flash the lights that they were fixing to turn off the electric power, and we'd light those gas jets without a mantle or a burner on them and finish working and signing up our mail.

F: There wasn't any 10:30 curfew for you.

B: No 8-5 for the NYA people! Then we'd have to walk down six flights of stairs, because there was no power for the elevators. But this is the way we did.

F: Were you all on the same floor?

B: Yes, all of us were on the--

F: How many of you were there?

B: Initially, there were only about half a dozen of us to get started, and then Mr. Johnson gradually added to the staff as we became more involved in the program. But we started out from scratch, and we had to start out slow, because we were kind of an offshoot of the WPA. For a young person to be eligible at the initiation of this program, instead of the young person being certified for relief activity, all he had to do was be a member of a WPA family which had already certified for work relief. So if a boy or girl was a member of a WPA family, he or she was already available for assignment to our program. We had to get their assignments through the WPA. They were as busy as we were trying to get people to work, so we had

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great problems trying to work with the WPA because they had their own program. They had a good point. It was more important to put the adult to work earning more money than these boys and girls that got an average of about twelve or fifteen dollars a month for part-time work. They had to take care of their assignments and their work program before they got around to us.

F: All of you were nearly young enough to qualify for NYA yourselves.

B: Right!

F: Did that create any problems with the WPA people? Did they look on you as sort of a bunch of young squirts that were getting in the way and messing up the house?

B: Without condemning them at all, to some extent they did, but it was mainly because they had their program to do.

F: They did get a little competitive in this.

B: Well, they felt like their work was more important, and we had problems with reference to getting them to make certifications to us for these people to work and to assign them. They also were responsible for checking our payrolls. We had to send them through their office. Why, it was more important to them to check their payrolls first, so that meant our boys and girls were paid after the adult, after the father was paid. But this problem worked itself out in time.

F: Did you eventually move into sort of dividing the state into districts?

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B: Yes. Originally there were only two districts: one district was from Central Texas on a line all the way out to El Paso and another one east. Then we went into four districts. Then as the program expanded we went into, seemed like, twelve districts--I've forgotten. But we started out with just two broad, general districts.

F: Did the Director move around over the state, or did he pretty well stay in the Austin office?

B: Most of his time was spent in Austin. He went over the state, but most of his time was spent in Austin.

F: Did you have much trouble keeping him within the budget, because of course there was so much to be done, I'm sure you could have spent an unlimited amount.

B: I've actually forgotten the amount of money that was allotted to Texas. It was small by present-day comparisons. In the first place in our School Aid program, if my memory serves me right, I think an average of about six dollars a student was allocated to the school, depending on the size school and the number of students they had. The superintendent, at that time, would take the six dollars for one person--it was not designated for an individual, but it was designated for, we'll say, ten students, so he'd get sixty dollars a month--and divide it maybe three ways and have thirty people working where each one of them got two dollars a month, because this would buy better than a pair of tennis shoes, in those days, and some pencils

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and paper that people badly needed to go to school. This was the School Aid program, and it was allotted generally to the school superintendent. We had two separate divisions. We had the School Aid program, which was administered very largely through Mr. Kellam and Mr. Ziegler, who actually handled the detail work of allocations with his rather small staff. Then we had the Works program. I started out as Works Projects Director, but soon after that, we secured the services of Mr. L. W. Griffin, a West Point graduate who was one of the oldest people in the organization, and he wasn't very old--he was older than we were. He was head of the Works Projects. So we had two broad divisions within the National Youth Administration. Under the Works program, our sponsors were the State; the Highway Beautification program was its first and big statewide program. Then we had individual programs that were sponsored by counties and cities. These programs were, very largely, improving city playground areas. Right here in Austin, for instance, out at Zilker Park-Barton Springs. Most of that rock work was done by National Youth Administration. The building at the Sunken Springs, the riprap and cleaning out the pool and the seating arrangement all around there, the series of steps and everything, were done by the National Youth Administration. Later on in our program we got to such larger projects that the National Youth Administration built, the Pedernales Electric Co-op Building in

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Johnson City, the first such building of its kind in the United States.

We also built a similar one for Giddings. There we'd take these boys, go out and quarry the stone, shape it, and lay up the building. These were the types of work programs that we were in.

F: You got into university assistance also, at that level. Did you start out that way, or did this just develop as a--

B: No sir. The School Aid program was for those, as I said in the beginning, from 16-25, and it assisted both those in secondary schools-- high schools--and also the universities.

F: My undergraduate roommate got about fifteen dollars a month out of NYA, which in those days was the difference between being in school and not.

B: Right. Right. They got, I think, up to fifteen dollars in the universities and, I believe, up to six dollars in the high schools.

F: Was it a confusing place to work, or were things pretty well laid out, or was it just that you were so everlastingly busy and behind?

B: Well, it was not a confusing place to work, because everybody had so much to do that they just kept their heads down working at their own programs. You see, Mr. Johnson became Administrator, I believe, in August of 1935, and he resigned some time in the latter part of February or March of '37 to run for the unexpired term of Congressman Buchanan, who had died. So he wasn't Administrator too long. It was after he left, after his election to Congress and Mr. Kellam

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was appointed State Administrator, that the program really began to expand further. We had more money, we put more youth to work, we had more help for the student program. Mr. Johnson was there at the beginning of it, the initiation of the program, but about the time it began to expand was when he had run for Congress.

F: What did he do while he was there, specifically, besides coordinate your efforts? Did he have a specific set of duties himself, or was he just kept busy trying to keep projects funded and approved and so on?

B: Two things. One was to furnish the leadership and to develop the program, because we had no guidelines. Nothing like this had ever been done before.

F: You just made it up as you went along.

B: Right. Now that was number one. Number two, he made many trips to San Antonio, which was the headquarters for the State of Texas for the WPA. Mr. Harry Drought was the WPA Administrator. To work out a cooperative program with the WPA, he spent a lot of time in San Antonio with Mr. Drought. Of course, he had to make many trips to Washington to training seminars and program development as they developed them at the Washington level, because this was strictly a Federal program, this was not a Federal-State program.

F: All your money came out of Washington.

B: All the money came from Washington. We were paid Federal vouchers. It was strictly a Federal program, so instructions came from the source,

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which was Washington. But his furnishing of the leadership, his interpretation of bulletins and instructions from Washington, kept him very busy, and his work with the WPA, because we had to work very closely with the WPA and also with the Texas Relief Commission, which at that time was headed by Adam Johnson; a former mayor of Austin was head of the Texas Relief Commission.

F: After Congressman Buchanan died, did Mr. Johnson decide to run immediately? Did he agonize over it? Were you in on any of his deliberations?

B: Yes. At this time, I was living in Buda.

F: This was a big decision, because he's got a good job by the standards of that day.

B: Right. At that time, I was living in Buda. On a Sunday afternoon, either Lyndon or Lady Bird called me to come out to the house. This time they had moved to #4 Happy Hollow Lane, out near Camp Mabry. I went out there, and when I got there, there was Senator Wirtz, Jesse Kellam, and one or two others--I've forgotten who they are now. Senator Wirtz called me into the kitchen, and he said, "Lyndon has decided to run for Congress for the unexpired term. What do you think?" Being inexperienced in politics but believing in Lyndon and his enthusiasm and great ability, I said, "Well he'd make a wonderful congressman, and I think he can win. The Birdwell family will do everything they can to be helpful." At that time he said, "He's

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going to run, and he's going to need all the help he can [get]. We're going to announce it tomorrow." This was where, and it was the day, it was decided when Lyndon would finally run for Congress. Lyndon had spent quite a number of times with Senator Wirtz, who was an astute politician and a very respected attorney here in Austin, and with other people. But he was not widely known; he'd had no public exposure. So when Lyndon made his plans to run, of course he had lots of help, but his campaign was on a person-to-person basis. He was energetic, he had long legs, he'd cover lots of territory. He went all over every town, every community, and every hamlet shaking hands, "I'm Lyndon Johnson. I want to be your congressman." He'd look them in the eye. He liked to press the flesh, as he said, and look them in the eye. This was the reason for his tremendous success. He'd be going down the road, and he'd see a farmer over there plowing --several rows over, it wasn't just right at the fence. He'd stop the car and get out and go over there and stop the guy plowing with the team, you know, and say, "I'm Lyndon Johnson. I want your help."

F: He'd go for that one vote.

B: He went for that one vote, and people were impressed by it.

F: Did you work?

B: No, I was under the Hatch Act at that time. I was not permitted to work myself, but my parents did. Mine had to be more in the way of advice.

F: Well now, your parents knew everybody in Hays County, I guess.

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B: Right! Everybody, practically, in Central Texas because they'd lived here for so long. They'd lived in Buda and Kyle. My mother was born in Travis County, so we had lots of friends. My father was at one time a very successful, very large businessman, and he had many acquaintances here in Austin.

F: I suppose he goes back to the day, too, when the general store was kind of the gathering place.

B. Right. Right.

F: Social center.

B: Right.

F: Did you have a feeling that you had an uphill battle?

B: Yes, I think we all felt that way; I think we all felt that way. I don't think that Mr. Johnson had ever even met, or maybe just had met but was not closely acquainted with, even the Mayor of Austin at that time, who was Tom Miller. He had an uphill battle in terms of meeting what you'd call the political leaders of that day. He had met some of them, but he had been secretary to Mr. Dick Kleberg and by this time, the Tenth Congressional District had been changed. Many of the people that were leaders in the ten counties that comprised the Tenth Congressional District had been changed. Many of the people that were leaders in the ten counties that comprised the Tenth Congressional District at that time were people that he'd just not met. Your leaders in Lee County, Caldwell County down at Lockhart, over in Burleson County--

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these were people that those who worked in the Works Projects program and in the School Aid program knew. But he did not know them, because he was not down at the operating level, he was at the administrative level. So he had an uphill fight. That's the reason that I say that I think his success was due to many, many things. One of the big things was his personal magnetism and his personal interviews and his personal approach to people.

F: He went down the line with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, which was getting to be a little risky at that time, especially with the Court-packing plan.

B: Yes, this was a very controversial plan that President Roosevelt had, to so-called "pack" a Supreme Court.

F: In your feeling, did he come to this decision sort of intuitively, instinctively, or did he figure this was the best way to get elected?

B: Dr. Frantz, I think there were two things involved in it. I think one, he felt that President Roosevelt had a series of good programs going, but they were being negated to a very large extent by the decision of the Supreme Court; therefore, to get the Supreme Court that would help him do these progressive programs, they did need additional members. So I think he was genuinely and sincerely interested in the approach to get more representation by Roosevelt on the Supreme Court. His decision as to whether it was politically sound or not, I do not know, but none of the other candidates came

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out in complete support of Roosevelt. They supported his program because Roosevelt was popular at that time and was doing lots of things for an economy that was in need of assistance. They supported some of his program, but on the Court-packing issue, they really shied away from it because it was very controversial. This thing goes very deep as to what our Supreme Court ought to be. But when Mr. Johnson came out for it 100 percent, just said, "I'm down the line all the way," he stood out, then, above all the rest on this particular issue. It developed that it had more appeal than the other candidates felt like it did have.

F: Were you with him at the time the election results were coming in?

B: No. The election was on a Saturday, April 10, if my memory serves me right. I was with him on a Thursday night in the County Courthouse here in Austin when he had a rally. I was in the room and people would go by as they left, and he wanted to shake hands with everyone. I went up there as they were going by, because of the tendency for people to stop and want to talk about something. Well, in that way you can't meet everybody, so I was kind of helping shove people along, being polite at the same time, you know, introducing people--

F: Putting pressure on the elbow, though.

B: Yes, put a little pressure on the elbows. He was sweating; of course, he always sweat rather profusely. We did not have air conditioning in those days, and it was a little warm up there, a little crowded, but he

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was sweating more than usual, perspiration standing all over his face, and he was looking very pale. He said, "Sherman, stand here beside me. I don't feel so well. Just stand here." After the crowd got away and left, Lyndon left with whoever was with him at that time, I don't know--who had driven him or someone. Anyway, that night about midnight was when they did an emergency appendectomy on him, and I didn't know about it until the next day. I had left and gone home. I didn't know he had been operated on. But the next day was Friday, and he was supposed to have his final rally in Lockhart on a Friday night before the election. He was not able to go; I went down to the meeting. He had some real good friends down in Lockhart. Dr. Coopwood, I remember, was one of his stalwart supporters, as well as the Ainsworths from over at Luling.

F: Is that Miller?

B: Yes. H. Miller Ainsworth. This was where his rally was supposed to end up his campaign--in Lockhart. I have forgotten now who took his place and made the speech for him, but it was highly successful. Of course, the cry went out on Friday that this is the only way he can get elected, to go to the hospital and get sympathy votes, but it wasn't-- I think he would have won anyway. But I think this did have a tremendous amount to do with it. I think it did, because everybody would say, "Now he's not here. We've got to do double. We've got to see that people get out and vote for him." I think it did spur those people

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that were sincerely and greatly interested in his campaign to redouble their efforts.

F: There wasn't any feeling among those who knew him that this was just something that had been trumped up?

B: No. We all knew that Lyndon Johnson wanted to fight to the very end, whatever it was. He wouldn't take this route to appeal to the sympathy of the voters. In those days, I think people had more sympathy than they do now. It was a closer relationship with people; you felt closer to people. That's the reason those, for instance, that knew and loved President Roosevelt, even though they may never have met him and probably never had met him, felt very close to him. He was someone that was close to them; they felt a close relationship with him. Those that hated him hated him with the same passion, even though they didn't know him.

F: He was a personal enemy.

B: That's right. Mr. Johnson is a whole lot the same, cut out of the same cloth. Those people that love him love him deeply and have abiding faith and confidence in him, but those that dislike him dislike him intensely. There's not a whole lot of halfway ground with Lyndon Johnson.

F: Did you have any ideas that this victory was going to change your life?

B: No, I certainly didn't. I was greatly surprised. After Mr. Johnson had been in the hospital several days, Lady Bird called me out at Buda one Sunday night. I guess he'd been operated on on a Thursday

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night, and it was Sunday night the week following [that] she called me and asked me to come up there. I went up to the hospital. In those days, when you had an appendectomy, you stayed in the hospital at least two weeks, and when you had an emergency like this--and he had a red-hot appendix--they were very fearful of infection.

F: Peritonitis.

B: Yes, peritonitis. So he was still in the hospital. When I went up there, I went into the room, and we visited a few minutes, and he asked me to go to Washington as his secretary." I said, "Lyndon, I don't know anything about being a secretary." He said, "Well, I've been one for four years. I'll tell you what to do." And he really did, too.

F: How soon did you go? You had to kind of wrap up where you were.

B: Well that's a rather funny story, too. After he got out of the hospital and I had agreed to become his secretary, I had to resign from the National Youth Administration, which I did. I was still living in Buda. He left the hospital and went up to Johnson City, and I went up there. We had lots of calls and telegrams about his health and congratulatory telegrams with reference to his election. I was kind of bewildered by it all, but I was trying to be as helpful as possible.

About this time, President Roosevelt had planned and was on

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his way to the Texas coast on a fishing trip. Jimmy Allred was governor at that time, and Mr. Johnson and Governor Allred were very close friends. So Mr. Johnson got Governor Allred to arrange a meeting for him with Roosevelt following Mr. Johnson's election as congressman. He delayed going to Washington until after this trip by the President in which he did get to meet him and was presented to him, and they had an opportunity to visit. Mr. Johnson rode on the train with him, I think part of the way to Washington. I don't think he went all the way; I think he went up to East Texas, where Lady Bird was from--Karnack, Texas. I think he got off this train somewhere up there, I don't remember.

F: The train goes through Marshall.

B: Yes. I think he got off at Marshall. So he delayed going to Washington. At that time, my wife was teaching school in Buda. Mr. Johnson went into Washington and was sworn in. Soon after he was sworn in, within ten days or two weeks, Carroll Keach, who had been his assistant secretary when Mr. Johnson was secretary to Mr. Kleberg, was employed by Mr. Johnson as assistant secretary to him. I was his secretary, Carroll Keach was assistant secretary. Carroll Keach and I drove up to Washington.

F: Carroll was back in Texas at that time.

B: Yes. Carroll was back in Texas. Carroll could take shorthand; I could not take shorthand. I could type some, but Carroll was able

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to take shorthand and type. So Carroll and I drove up to Washington. I remember we drove in on, seemed like it was, a Saturday afternoon, and went to the office at the Old House Office Building.

F: Was this your first time in Washington?

B: This was my first time in Washington.

F: You were probably wondering, "What have I let myself in for?"

B: Yes. Particularly when we went to the door and opened it, and inside the door were twelve sacks of mail that had not been opened.

Mr. Johnson was up there by himself, he had not been able to get to it, and that's what we started in on, twelve sacks of mail. Ninety percent of it was applications for jobs, "I need a job," because people did need work in those days, and where do you find jobs for this many people? That was my initiation to Washington. We started in working that afternoon, worked all day Sunday, and we worked seven days a week. Mr. Johnson was there all the time, too, trying to get this mail answered. If we didn't have an answer to the letter, at least we acknowledged receipt of it and we'd say, "We'll try to find out what we can do." Mr. Johnson had a cardinal principle of:

"Answer every letter when it comes in, that day. If you are not through, you work till every letter is answered."

F: Did you make a real effort to get jobs for these people, or did you pretty well just have to say, "We'll do what we can. We'd like to help, but . . ."?

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B: We made a real effort. We would tell them where to go to try to find work. In those days, there just wasn't a lot of work available, and we didn't have the answers to them.

F: Did he answer some correspondence himself, or did he have time?

B: Yes, he dictated quite a few letters to Carroll, but the volume of mail was so great that he had to leave it to Carroll and me to answer, subject to his approval. He signed every letter; no one rubber-stamped his name on a letter. He looked at and read every letter. If we wrote something that didn't sound right, why, it was rewritten. Or if we said the wrong thing, he said, "Get the right information; you don't have it in this letter. You answer the letter and acknowledge it, but you get the right answer. This is not it." Mr. Johnson had been a secretary, as I said, for four years, and he knew places to go. Carroll also had had experience, and this was a tremendous help to me as a new secretary--where to go to get the right answers. As I say, we went up in April. Lady Bird did not go up at that time; she and Mrs. Birdwell went up in the last part of May. In the meantime, we had moved out to an apartment that Bob Montgomery had.

F: I see. Back with him again.

B: Back with him again, and took his apartment. Lyndon and Carroll and Sam Houston, who had taken Mr. Johnson's place as secretary to Mr. Dick Kleberg, and myself all batched out at I believe it was called Sheraton Arms, if I remember, in Washington. Then when

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Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Birdwell came up, Sam Houston and Carroll moved out. So we all lived there together for several weeks, kind of communal living, I guess you'd say, until Mrs. Birdwell and I found an apartment.

F: Did you type your own letters?

B: Yes.

F: You really were a secretary at the time, not a--

B: Yes. Soon after I got there and soon after I got caught up, Lyndon said, "You've got to speed up your typing, and you've got to get shorthand down." So after working ten or twelve hours in the office I went to typing and shorthand class. I was pretty fagged out, and I never did get my shorthand down too well.

F: How long before you got a girl in there to help you? Was it pretty quick, or did you have to go along on a--. You were shorthanded, you'll admit that.

B: Well, Gene Latimer, who was another person that had worked for Mr. Johnson when he was secretary to Mr. Kleberg, had a job in Washington with, I believe, the Federal Housing Authority. After he got off work at 5:00, he would come over and help us with letters and get mail out, and on the weekends, because we worked every weekend, so that gave us an extra help every Saturday and Sunday.

F: He just did that out of--

B: --his love for Mr. Johnson.

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F: --admiration for the Congressman.

B: That's right. Another young person that Mr. Johnson had taught debate in Houston was named Jones who is now, I believe, in Corpus. I ought to be able to call his name, but I can't right now [Luther E. Jones]. But Jones was up there working somewhere. I think he was working in the Capitol either in the mailroom or one of the elevators or something like that, and they have a certain number of hours off--these are patronage jobs. He would come in and help. He had beautiful shorthand and was a very good typist, so we had some extra help that way from Gene and Jones.

F: You gradually caught up and stayed up.

B: Yes. Well, never did get caught up. We were always a little behind in work that needed to be done. But I know that even though the House Office Building is just across the street from the Capitol, I was there for over a month before I ever saw the Capitol from the inside, and I wouldn't have then except Mayor Tom Miller had an emergency call for Lyndon and said he had to talk to him, and we couldn't find him on the floor. He was around the cloakroom or somewhere in the corridor. I went over there to find him, and that was the first time I was ever in the Capitol of the United States and I'd been up there over a month, less than a block away from it!

F: You hadn't seen Washington at that time.

B: No sir. I had not seen Washington. But we all pitched in and helped.

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My wife, for instance, kept the clipping book, read all the papers.

We took the papers from all the counties in the district. Everything that pertained to Johnson or everything that pertained to some important issue, she kept a clipping scrapbook of all of this. We just all worked; it was just family.

F: How long did you stay with him?

B: I stayed until '39. I came back to Austin and went back to work for the National Youth Administration in '39.

F: Now he had an incomplete term that he was finishing out, Congressman Buchanan's. There never was any doubt he was going to run for a regular term.

B: No. And during the time, one of the things that caused us not only to be busy: he asked for letters. When he wrote a person, we always asked them to reply or "get your friends to write." He asked people to write. I found a warehouse there. It had a bunch of old agriculture yearbooks that were not out of date, because the information was still the same about the farm procedures, the cattle procedures, and so forth. I got hundreds of those books, literally hundreds and hundreds of those books, and we sent them to key farmers because we had a constant address file that we kept up to date of leaders in the community that were farmers--by groups. We'd send them one of these books under separate cover with an individual letter, saying, "We are sending you under separate cover

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a yearbook which you might find interesting." And on every one of them why, of course, we had stamped, "From your Congressman, Lyndon B. Johnson." We sent these yearbooks out. Also, the Government Printing Office had a list of publications that were available, and we'd send these lists to key people and ask them to check things that they'd want. Must have been a lot of babies born in those years, because one of the popular ones that so many people asked for was, "Infant Care," I remember it was one of the very popular ones. Whenever we'd get a request for them, why, we'd order them from the Government Printing Office and then we'd write the letter saying, "they're being sent to you." In addition to that, we got the lists from every high school of all the high school graduates and wrote them a personal letter. When you write somebody like in Austin High School, which was the only high school we had at that time in Austin, there were just several hundred. But when you try to make every one of those an individual letter so they won't get to comparing them and say, "Well, this is an identical letter," and try to change them up a little bit. . . .

F: You did not have a form that you sent.

B: No! They were individually typed and every one of them was individually written so that whatever they said in terms of "congratulations on your graduation and what can I do to help" and so forth, it was different. You really had to scratch your head so that the letters

Birdwell--II--36

wouldn't all be stereotyped. This also created a big thing, because what Mr. Johnson was endeavoring to do at that time was to do everything he could not to have opposition. One opposition is expensive, and two, you always have a chance of losing. So when he got by without any opposition, why, it was a tribute to all the work that we'd done in developing people that felt they had a close personal relationship, a close personal rapport with **their** congressman. He identified with them.

F: Why'd you leave?

B: Well, there were several reasons. One of them was that I never had been able to take shorthand, and this is a drawback to a secretary because, traveling with him, being here in Austin and Carroll being in Washington, it was--he needed someone that could take shorthand, number one. Number two, I had gone from 165 pounds to 130 pounds, and I was about ready to crack up after close to three years. A young man came on the scene about that time who could take shorthand and who was very personable. Mr. Sam Fore, a very, very close friend of Mr. Johnson's, is from Floresville. He later on became the father-in-law of Carroll Keach; Carroll married his daughter, Marion. They were very, very close, Mr. Fore and Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Fore recommended this young man who was just graduating from law school named John Connally, so Mr. Johnson hired Mr. Connally as his secretary. Mr. Connally was interviewed first by me, and I

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recommended him most highly to Mr. Johnson. We had agreed that I ought to come back to work for the National Youth Administration and he ought to have a secretary who could take shorthand. Mr. Connally took my place as secretary; that's how I came to leave and come back to Texas.

F: Congressman Johnson built a reputation for being a young man who could get things done, with the result that people from other congressional districts sometimes utilized his services. Did that start at the beginning, or did this build up later as he came to be recognized? I know he was very careful about not infringing on another congressman's area, but I do know that people in other parts of the state did utilize him.

B: Mr. Johnson was very, very careful during the nearly three years I was with him if people wrote from other districts, because he had many friends over the state, particularly those he had made when he was secretary to Mr. Kleberg. He would write them and say, "If you've not written Congressman So-and So, who is your Representative from your district, you should do so because of the congressional courtesy that exists among all congressmen. But I will be glad to help Congressman So-and-So with anything he asks me to do." Congressman Johnson was very careful that he did not tread on the toes of other congressmen because, after all, he was a very junior congressman and a very young congressman, and other congressmen

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respected this of him. They would call on him for help, and he would join them, particularly if it related to a project. If the mayor of some town was a very close friend of Mr. Johnson's, and the town was not in Mr. Johnson's district, and if that congressman came to Lyndon and said, "We've got a project down here that we need assistance on and I'd like you to join with me," why, he would help him any way he could. But he was very careful to observe the courtesy due other congressmen.

F: He got along well from the outset with the remainder of the Texas congressional delegation?

B: Yes. Very well, very popular with them, very popular with them.

F: Was he close to Mr. Sam [Rayburn]? Did he draw close in these first three years, or did this develop over the [years]?

B: It had developed over the years. Mr. Johnson had great respect for Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn was a bachelor, as you know, and Mr. Johnson would go by his office and visit with him, listen to him attentively, and take his advice. Those of us that know Mr. Johnson know that he's most personable, likeable, and Mr. Sam Rayburn just took a great liking to him.

F: You didn't have any particular connection with him, then, after you came home in '39 until after the war, did you?

B: No, I stayed very close with him, because I was identified with him, and many, many people would come to me saying, "I want to talk

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to Lyndon about this," or, "How would I go about this thing?" I would tell them, in view of my experience, what I think they ought to do. So I kept a very close relationship with Mr. Johnson up until the time that Mr. Johnson resigned from his congressional seat and went into the service, which was immediately after Pearl Harbor. I did not go into the Navy until the early part of '43, but we kept up a very close relationship.

End of Tape 1 of 2.

Begin Tape 2 of 2.

F: This is Tape #2 on Sherman Birdwell.

You were talking about being back in Austin and the coming of World War II, and your going in the Navy and his going in the Navy.

B: Yes. After Mr. Johnson was recalled back to his congressional seat as, well, as all congressmen and senators were asked to come back and serve where they had been elected to serve. Along about this time, the latter part of the war--I don't know exactly what year--Mr. Johnson and his wife . . . his wife was the one that actually bought the KTBC radio station. I remember that I had just gotten back from the service in late December of '45. In the first week or so of January, 1946, I did not have a job. The National Youth Administration had closed down. Many of us were returned veterans

Birdwell--II--40

and were all seeking work, and I came back with two things in mind. One, I did not want to work for the government and [two] I wanted to get into some kind of private business. But in those days, office space was unavailable, typewriters couldn't be bought, office furniture couldn't be secured; it was very difficult. I ran into Mr. Johnson and Mr. Connally on the street one day in Austin, and they told me that they were organizing a new radio station and wanted me in on it. Ten of us who had been very close to Mr. Johnson; all of us were veterans. Mr. Connally had been in the Navy, Mr. Deason, Mr. Johnson, myself. . . .

F: Ed Syers ?

B: Ed Syers, Jake Pickle, Bob Phinney were some of them. Jesse Kellam. [They] incorporated and organized KVET--that's where we get the name is from veterans: V-E-T, Kay-Vet. I had bought a small interest in KVET.

F: A news and sports station.

B: Yes. I had bought this interest. Seems like I ran into Lyndon and Jesse and maybe Mr. Connally prior to this time. I've forgotten now whether I actually bought the stock and we were getting incorporated in '45. But in the first week in January of '46, I ran into Mr. Johnson, and he asked me to go to work for him at KTBC, and he said, "Maybe you want to go with KVET, but they're not on the air, and I need you over there at the station. We're going to really get cranked up and

Birdwell--II--41

get going, and I want you to go over there and go to work."

So I went to work for him in January of 1946 as assistant office manager and as special sales representative.

F: Assistant to whom?

B: Mr. Kellam.

F: The Congressman did not feel that KVET was unduly competitive but that Austin had grown enough that it could stand another station, and as long as there was going to be one, might as well be in the hands of friends, I would think.

B: This is exactly his attitude, because he felt like he'd rather have friends in competition with him than somebody he didn't know.

F: So there never was any question of any war between KTBC and KVET.

B: That's right, because Mr. Kellam, who was one of the incorporators, and Jake Pickle, myself, and Ed Syers all worked for KTBC.

F: Was the Congressman useful in helping you get your license?

B: I was not in on the application. Mr. Connally, who was the principal stockholder, did this, and I just don't know. I'm sure he was. The congressman that represented you--we were all from his district--would be helpful to anybody, and I'm sure he was doubly helpful to us, being closely associated with us. But he felt like radio stations were going to expand--the number. As you said a while ago, he had the feeling that, well, Austin is going to have another one, Austin's growing, it's booming, and if there's going to be another radio station, I'd rather

Birdwell--II--42

have friends operating it that I can talk with. I'm sure he was very helpful in establishing this.

F: Were things going pretty well for KTBC in these days, or had it begun to pick up?

B: Yes. It began to pick up from the time Mr. Johnson took it over. He had great leadership ability, and great persuasive powers, and he would get the sales people all charged up. The use of radio was expanding. People began to accept it more, it became more accepted as a news media than it had been previously. It was not a new thing. It was not a toy any more. So the sales on announcements from which you derived your income was far greater. About this time, he made a contract with one of the major chains--I think it was CBS--to become an affiliate station. Of course, this had tremendous advantage in that you had a lot of advertisement from national sources that you would not have locally. So you had not only your national income, but you also had your local sales income.

It began to pick up, and KTBC began to expand, and then they began to make plans for putting on their television station.

F: Was the fact that he was the local congressman, the local politician and therefore bound to have people both pro and con, did that make much difference in sales for the station, or was that pretty much of a hardheaded business decision?

B: To a very large extent, it's always a hardheaded business decision

Birdwell--II--43

whenever you're trying to make a sale to a person, because he wants to know where his dollar's going and what he's going to get in value received.

F: I might hate Lyndon Johnson but if I thought that this would pay off, I'd advertise on his station.

B: Yes, yes. But you see, more people loved Lyndon Johnson than hated him, or he would not have been Congressman all these years, and he would not have been without competition for so many of the times he ran. So the fact that he was well liked, I'm sure, did help in terms of sales presentation, because they knew that he owned the station. I think it was helpful. But as I said, when a hardheaded businessman looked at it and looked at his dollars, he decided, "Well, am I going to get coverage?" You had to present to them, in other words, Nielsen Reports and other reports of how many people listened to your stations compared to other stations. You had to present these to them to sell them, and your price had to be competitive. So I think that his being Congressman did help, but I don't think the success is due, to any real great extent, to the fact that he was Congressman. I think that it was just helpful.

F: Did he take a fairly active hand in the station?

B: Yes, he was always very interested in it. In other words, he wanted to go over the financial statements with me: what did this mean and why are we spending this much for so-and-so. He was very

Birdwell--II--44

interested in it.

F: Did you get the feeling that he or Lady Bird were the ones that kind of made the final decisions where the station was concerned?

B: I think it was kind of a joint affair. I think maybe on a day-to-day--

F: She was active?

B: She was always very active in it. She was always very active in the radio station, had great interest in it, and knew a lot about it.

Lady Bird's got good judgment; she's very sound. She's a sound businesswoman. She of course has been very helpful to Lyndon during the years that they were married in every area, politics--she went to rallies, she had teas, she went to the teas that were given, she appeared on the stage with him. I remember when he was in the Senate race. She was coming from, I think it was, Lockhart; she'd been to a meeting over there. She was coming into San Antonio and was late getting there. When she was late, why, Lyndon was rather impatient; he was impatient with himself, and he was impatient with other people. He rather sharply said, "Why are you so late?" She said, "I'll tell you after while, not right now." She had turned over in the car on the way to San Antonio, and she wouldn't tell him before the rally because she knew he'd be concerned. But after the rally was over and everything, she said, "I need to go to a hotel, my leg's hurting me real badly." "Why?" "Well, we had a little accident--" "WHAT accident!" "Well, we turned over in a car." Of course, Lyndon nearly blew his

Birdwell--II--45

top. But I mean, this is the type of person that Lady Bird was. And she was helpful to him in the radio station in terms of any major decisions that were made, because she was the one that put the money into the station.

During all the years that I knew Mr. Johnson, he was always more interested in politics than anything else. He would rather sit down with a group and talk politics, talk about people and their interest in things, so he knew them intimately. I remember on one occasion, some of us were talking about, seemed like it was, Marilyn Monroe. I've forgotten; it was a very popular star. Somebody said something about her, and he said, "Who's Marilyn Monroe?" I would doubt that he went to an average of one picture show a year. His interest was in politics, talking it. He lived and breathed politics. Most of us have hobbies outside our regular work. His regular work was politics and his hobby was politics; his life was politics. When you're this interested in it, you're going to know a lot about it.

F: When he was a young congressman, did he tend to do the same thing he did in his more senior days and that is have the staff over for hamburgers and supper and whatnot; these were his friends, the people he worked with all day and all week? Or was he trying to get acquainted in Washington at that time?

B: No. His staff was very small as I said, just Carroll Keach and myself, and Carroll was not married at that time. We had lunch together many

Birdwell--II--46

times and occasionally we were out at the house and things like that, but these were more family affairs. I mean, we'd talk about the old times and old days, and so forth.

He began immediately to invite those persons that were in a position to be helpful, the leaders of the Senate and the leaders of the House, and those that were close to President Roosevelt; Tommy Corcoran, for instance, who was a close confidant of the President. He developed these friendships, and he made it a point to do so. He did it because he wanted to know what was going on, and he knew that they'd be helpful to him. So in his earlier days and, I think, in his latter days, [his guests] as all of us know when he was Vice President and President having people out to the ranch here, were the leaders: Dick Russell, Adlai Stevenson, people like this that scrapbooks will show were the people that visited him at the ranch. In his earlier days, he pursued the same course. Sometimes I'm sure he didn't get the top people he wanted, but he got those that were close to the top people. This is helpful, because a lot of times the guy that's next to the fellow that you want can be very influential in being of help to you if you're close to him.

He was also very close to the reporters. Many of the times that I would go to his house for dinner, he would have one or two reporters; Tex Easley was one I remember in the old days, and Bill White. These were people very, very close. These things were always

Birdwell--II--47

helpful, too. Mr. Johnson, I think, was always interested in them for their opinions as well as the help that they could give him.

F: How long did you stay with KTBC?

B: One year.

F: While you were in your sales position, which I realize was just part of your duties, was there anyone you could not go to who was, in a sense, off limits to approach?

B: No. There were some people that we didn't sell.

F: Yes, you'd expect that.

B: But there was no one that I was ever told, "Don't go see these people; they're against me," or "They don't like me." A lot of times people that didn't like Mr. Johnson would like me personally, because I had lived here all my life and I had not been identified in politics as far as personally concerned. They knew that when I was working for Mr. Johnson, I was working for a salary. I believed in him and I was loyal to him. People like this will accept loyalty in someone; they'd think less of you if you didn't have it. So I never had any problems that way. A lot of times I would run into people that would give him hell, something like that, but I would attempt to turn it to one side, because that wasn't my problem.

F: You weren't there to discuss politics.

B: That's right.

F: Were you in a position to participate at all in the senatorial campaign of '41?

Birdwell--II--48

B: Yes.

F: What did you do?

B: Mostly in the way of advice and meeting with him at night.

F: You're out on Dillman [Street] by that time, aren't you?

B: Yes, 1901 Dillman. You see, I was still working for the National Youth Administration in '41, so I was still limited to a very large extent in being out in front; I couldn't be identified with it as such. But I was helpful in the fact that I knew so many people, that I could say, "This is the person to see on this particular section of the country," and things like that. I could give advice if it was asked of me. I didn't feel like I was able to get out or should get out in the forefront and did not because I didn't want to have anything that would embarrass Mr. Johnson.

Later on, in the campaign of '48, I was a free agent then, and I really put to use all the knowledge that I had, the expertise that I had accumulated, and the friends that I had made over many many years, to buttonhole them and really get down to working.

F: To go back to '41 a moment. At the end of the first night's count, why, it looked to everyone except Pappy O'Daniel that you were in. Of course it frittered away from you.

B: Yes. Even the second day, you remember. He got a larger vote the second day.

F: Were you out at the house while those returns were coming in?

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B: We spent most of the time down at the hotel.

F: Down at the hotel. On the phone or tabulating--?

B: Yes, at the headquarters, getting reports, tabulating reports and keeping up with them because it was a close race.

F: Did you have the feeling that you were going to, in a sense, blow it at the end, or did this come as a complete surprise?

B: No. No, this came as a complete surprise to all of us that were close to him. Quite a few of us urged him for a recount on this. It was just too close. In particular after the Texas Election Bureau had, to all intents and purposes, declared him winner. Then when these other areas began to come in and the number of votes began to swing, we became greatly concerned, but the first few days were nothing but jubilation. We're in; there're just not enough votes out to--

F: Must have been an awful fall after your first little happy spell.

B: Yes, and I think it was a greater fall to those who worked for him than it was for Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson has always had the ability to accept adversity and abide by it. That's what makes him a bigger man than me.

F: He never really, as far as you could tell, seriously considered a challenge?

B: I don't think so. If he did, he never discussed it with me. Now, he may have to others that were maybe closer to him in terms of

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campaign managers and so forth, but he never did discuss it with me. I know that when the final count came in, he said, this is it. Just how he arrived at that conclusion and decision, I can't say, except that I feel that he felt at that time that, "Well, this is the way the cards are dealt, and this is the way I'll play 'em. There'll be another day, another vote."

F: In '46 he had a fairly brutal campaign against Hardy Hollers. Did you get involved in that?

B: Yes, sir. I was deeply involved in the campaign with Hardy Hollers.

F: So many of the charges that were leveled against him for years thereafter surfaced in this campaign for the first time.

B: Yes.

F: Now then, did you have some role in trying to refute them or meet them?

B: Yes, I did. I was in the uncomfortable position of being a friend of Hardy Hollers and his wife. She had come from the little town of Kyle, which is just seven miles from where I was born and raised, and I felt close to the family. I knew Hardy Hollers in the fact that I just lived in Austin and I'm around Austin all my life. It was a very brutal campaign. These charges were leveled, and it was very vicious. Of course Mr. Johnson with those that were running his campaign in terms of public releases was something that I had nothing to do with; I wasn't on any of them. My role through all of

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his campaigns was very largely on a person-to-person basis. I knew so many people. I would just walk the streets and go into towns all around and talk to people I knew. They'd say, "Well let's go over and talk to so-and-so. He's sure upset with Lyndon." And we'd go over and talk to him, and they'd bring charges that I knew were absolutely untrue. One of the big things was ownership of so much property that I knew he didn't have. There wasn't a new apartment built in Austin in those days that--

F: Still isn't, sometimes!

B: That's right!--that he doesn't own it. And I'd say, "Well I keep his books. I kept his books when I was in Washington. Why don't you go to the tax record and see for yourself. I mean, you hear these charges, but they're not true! The only way to be sure in your own mind is to go to the tax records and incorporation, because anyone incorporating has got to go through the Secretary of State." Or maybe I'd gone to them and I'd say, "Here." On some of the major items-- I've forgotten what they are now--I went to the Secretary of State and got the incorporators. "Here are the incorporators. Do you see Lyndon Johnson's name on here? There isn't anything to it. He knew these people, of course. He's been their congressman for years."

But mostly it was on a person-to-person basis. And they had just heard it, you know. So much of it was rumors. But it was a very brutal campaign, and it's unfortunate that it happened, because

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I think any of these real dirty, mudslinging campaigns injure people. I think they've continued for a long time, and as long as they continue in the same vein, to a very large extent you are going to have people that lose confidence in whoever's elected because they've heard these things about them. If you hear enough of these things, there's always the tendency in human nature to believe the worst of a person rather than the best.

F: The charge is really more important than the guilt or innocence.

B: This is correct.

F: Did he ever reconcile with Hollers, or have they stayed apart through the years, as far as you know?

B: I do not know. I do know this, that through all of Mr. Johnson's campaigns, he has always made it an effort, for those that were against him and showed great animosity, to go out of his way to try to develop friendship for them. I know that he's been very highly successful in this, because I've known people that have had an intense dislike for him and intense feelings about his political standings, [who] have switched around and become some of his closest friends.

F: I know that about half of his opposition that very first campaign later worked for him.

B: Yes. This is right. But he made it a point to--I only know of one time that he got a letter from a person when he was Congressman that just really burned him out. He was so angry he said, "I want

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to answer this guy." He dictated the letter to Carroll Keach, and it was really something. He really blistered him. We took the mail in for him to sign, and we got the mail out. I didn't notice whether it was in there or not, because we had stacks and stacks of mail. After he signed it, we had to fold it and seal it and get it to the mail room. So about two days later, I was in his office with some mail, and he reached in his drawer and pulled out this letter he'd dictated and said, "Sherman, I didn't mail this letter. I wish you'd take it in there and draft me a reply, because I don't even want to write it myself. I might get hot all over [again]. You draft a letter in reply to it." Which I did, and which he accepted, I think with some minor changes. The one letter that he just blew his top on he had sense enough to put in his drawer until he had a chance to reread it a day or two later, and he did and said, "You write the letter, respond to it."

F: Was it '46 or was it as a result of the contest in '48 that Mildred Moody got this sort of abiding enmity?

B: I think it was probably some of both. I think it was a carryover. She became very, very incensed and has maintained this attitude.

F: Did Dan [Moody] feel that strongly?

B: I don't think so. . . .

F: You know, wives sometimes are less professional about these things than men.

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B: . . . I don't think so. I think he felt very strongly on it, but I think she took it as a personal affront, the whole thing, and she's felt this way. But I know that Mr. Johnson has endeavored to--when he knew that she was so bitter, so very, very bitter, he just knew better than to try to make a direct contact and do anything, because it would do nothing but lead to further involvement, and so forth.

F: That's one of those "no-win" situations.

B: Yes, that's right. One of those things you can't win on.

F: What were you doing in '48 when the--

B: I was manager of the Cook Funeral Home.

F: Now this in some ways is a more crucial decision than to run in '41, because he's going to have to give up his congressional seat. Did he talk to you at all about that?

B: Yes, he did.

F: In other words, he's putting all his marbles in one bag.

B: One bag. He had two things in mind at that time. He felt that he could take his radio and TV stations and become successful financially. Two, this had kept him away from his family, and I believe both daughters were born by this time. One was born, I believe, in '44, and I believe the other one was born about, what, '47 or something like that? And of course, during all these years it had kept him away from being the family man, and he loved his family very much, and he wanted to be with them. He felt like he would be successful.

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He did want to go to the Senate. He felt like, "It's time that if I go to the Senate, I go now. If I don't, then I'm out of politics, and I'll be a businessman and enjoy my home, enjoy my family, be with them more, and I can make more money." So I think he felt like, "It's now or never," and "I'll go on to the Senate, or if not, then I'll go on to the business world."

F: Do you think if he'd lost, he probably would have given up politics?

B: I don't think he'd ever have gone into politics again, but I don't know, because this had been meat and bread to him. He loved it. He might have and he might have run for governor, or he might have tried something else. I think he felt like, "Either way I'll win."

F: What did you do in '48? More of the same?

B: More of the same. More of the personal contacts all in and around Central Texas.

F: Well now, you have a problem here in that you've had a very popular governor that he's running against. Stevenson had left . . . [under] peculiar circumstances, I'll admit, but he had still run an almost model administration in some ways.

B: He was popular by virtue of the fact that he had been Lieutenant Governor and Governor. He had not made a lot of people mad. He was accepted as a good, conservative governor and the State of Texas has been pretty much a conservative state. Mr. Johnson knew it was an uphill battle.

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F: How did he arrive at your strategy in this, just talking it over and over?

B: Well, I wasn't in on too much of the strategy meetings. I'd always been more of a leg man, a contact man, rather than the strategy meeting type.

F: Did you get in on the financing?

B: No sir. No sir, on none of his campaigns was I ever in with the financing of them, and to this day, it's still a mystery to me.

F: I mean, in a sense, you seemed logical for that.

B: Well, I just never was called on for it, and I just never did it. I mean, either people could do it better or knew more about it, or whatever the reasons were. I just never was called in on the financing. I'm not acquainted with that.

F: Did you have the feeling in the beginning that you did have an uphill fight?

B: Yes, very definitely, and of course, the primary returns showed it. I forgot how many votes that Governor Stevenson beat him by, but--

F: You just barely made it into the runoff.

B: Yes.

F: Did you consider at that time throwing in the sponge? You had a big deficit to overcome.

B: No sir, just felt like, "We've got to do more. We've just got to do more."

F: What did you do? Just more of the same?

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B: Yes.

F: Did you work outside the district?

B: Yes, but mostly within the district. One, it was because of the travel. I was living here at that time, and it made it easier to get in here every few days. After all, you've got greater influence with people that you know or that can recommend you. You go to a town even though it may be a fringe area. As I said, I worked outside the district. Most of the areas outside were on the fringe. It was because I would know someone in Bob Poage's district, we'll say, up in the Waco general area, or some of the towns and counties surrounding the old Tenth Congressional District, where I had more acquaintances. But I would know of somebody I could go to and talk with them about who I should see there that were the leaders.

F: Did you try to get somebody designated in each county and below that, in each precinct, and so forth?

B: Yes, we did. We very much tried to have a county chairman, and then we'd try to break that down into precincts. Sometimes you couldn't do it, because you'd be in certain precincts where they were practically all against you. You'd just pick up what few votes you could, but there was no use in spending a lot of time and a good deal of money in something that you knew was pretty much of a lost cause. For whatever reason, you'd get the pulse of it, you'd try to feel the people. So we weren't able to get them in all the areas.

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F: On the other hand, you had the experience. You knew now that one vote here and there was important.

B: Yes. But at the same time, you had to concentrate where the most votes were and devote your energies there.

F: As it came down toward the runoff time, did you begin to feel some confidence that you could take it?

B: Polls of that day indicated that Johnson was gaining but, you know, polls lack a whole lot of being too accurate, too.

F: They were off in '48 on Truman.

B: That's right. But you kind of get the sense of the people that here was a young man that had the ability. Mr. Johnson was forty years old; Governor Stevenson, I think, was about sixty-odd years old. People knew--and this was one of the things, of course, of the campaign strategy--that you had to stay in either Congress [the House] or in the Senate long enough to acquire some seniority to be effective, and by the time that Mr. Stevenson would acquire this, why, he would be quite up there [in years]. Here was a young man that had been successful in Congress and was young enough to be there for a while and to represent them and to gain seniority on committees that would be helpful. Knowledgeable people knew this, and I think that's another thing that was helpful. His whirlwind campaign, I mean his going into every hamlet, his use of the helicopter and planes. . . .

F: Did you ever go in the helicopter with him for any of the campaigns?

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B: A few times. A few times.

F: The helicopters are bad enough now, but in that day, they were awfully noisy, rough things. You really couldn't get any work done between stops, could you?

B: No. You were very crowded in. I mean, you couldn't talk very much. As you say, they were very noisy. But they were mostly made for transportation, I mean to get from one place to another, to get in there and to get to the smaller towns.

F: And they invariably drew a crowd.

B: Yes. They were still novelties, and people would come just because there was a helicopter. Once you'd get them there, with Mr. Johnson's personality, why, he made the most of it.

F: When the election night came, where were you?

B: At the Driskill Hotel with him.

F: It developed pretty quickly this was going to be a squeaker.

B: Yes.

F: Did you really have any feelings you weren't going to make it as the evening wore on? What was Lyndon like? Was he pacing or was he pretty calm about the whole thing?

B: No, he was very, very interested. I mean, he was intensely interested in it. He kept very, very close to the returns as they came in and also as they were phoned in, because he had people from the different sections phoning in the returns as their box was released there.

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F: As a general rule, you tried to have someone who would keep you up on every box.

B: Yes. We would ask people, when the box returns were released, to phone us immediately, and we were always ahead of the Election Bureau with them.

F: Did your figures pretty well agree with the Texas Election Bureau's?

B: Yes, they tracked very well. It was not a large area of difference between them.

F: Was the actual count 87?

B: That's the way they finally came out with it, so I'd have to accept it. I would say it's probably accurate.

F: Was there a general jubilation when the final result was in, or did you feel that it was so close, you were really going to have to fight for it?

B: Most of us remembered '41, and it was too close to allow for much jubilation. It was just too close. I think everybody just still kept their fingers crossed; it was just too close.

F: Yes. Were you active at all in the contest?

B: No. You mean the Democratic Committee contest?

F: The attempt to get the Committee to certify on the legal maneuvering and so forth that went on.

B: No. No. No. I was not.

F: You were just like me, just interested in watching.

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B: I was just interested, of course, but I was not a member of the Committee. I believe they met in Dallas?

F: Yes.

B: I wasn't even up there.

F: It was a one-vote affair there, too.

B: Yes, I think it was, what 28-29, something like that? I've forgotten, but some of these figures I remember, sometimes I can't.

F: Did you have any further official connection with now-Senator Johnson?

B: No official. As I said, prior to this time I had gone to work for the Cook Funeral Home and that was one of the reasons I left Mr. Johnson after being with him a year. A very close friend of his, a Mr. Tom Davis, was the president of the Austin National Bank here in Austin and a very close friend of my family's. He had asked me to go up to the Cook Funeral Home as business manager and also [he was] president of a rather large insurance company that we operated at that time, and wanted me to come in as a partner. I felt that I needed to. I had a six-year old child. I owned nothing. My father had lost everything during the Depression and then following the Depression.

F: It was time to put Sherman Birdwell together.

B: I had this opportunity for purchase of interest in the funeral home. I told Mr. Davis I didn't have any money, and he said, "You can pay it out of profits as we make profits." It was a chance of ownership,

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and as I told you, when I got back after the war, one of the things I wanted to do was to get into private business again. My background had been, to a very large extent, in it. It looked like an opportunity to get into private business, where I had a chance of owning something. I talked this over with Mr. Johnson, and needless to say, he didn't want me to leave. We parted friends, but he didn't want me to leave. Mr. Johnson has this rather individual feeling about people that he's real close to, and although time has kept us apart, I have always felt about as close to Mr. Johnson as a brother--I never had one--and I think he feels the same way toward me. I haven't imposed on friendship, I haven't asked any favors for me or my family. The favors I've asked of him have been people who have come to me, and I've asked them in terms of how it would help them and would help Mr. Johnson. I think he has respected this. Mr. Johnson has a feeling for those who are real close to him, kind of like the old patrón that had the big ranch, "You stay with me and instead of Social Security, you can depend on medication and care, food and shelter the rest of your life." He has this feeling among people that work for him and are very, very close to him, and he means it. He means it. And I'm sure as long as he had anything, I would share in it. But you don't want to have this feeling of dependency, and that's the reason I wanted to get in something that I felt that I owned a part of and as it grew, I could grow with it. That's when I left Mr. Johnson,

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at that time. Throughout the years following that, we've been very, very close friends. When he was President, my wife and I were invited to several of the State dinners and I've attended several of them--the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Prime Minister of England. We had special seating and an invitation to the Inauguration. We've been very, very close.

F: You went up to that affair he had in the latter days of his Administration for just his old Texas friends, didn't you? What was that like? that must have been quite an evening.

B: Yes. That was great. That was really great. Most of the time was spent in reminiscing of the days that we were together in the National Youth Administration, because so much of it was at that time, and it went back further than that with Mr. Johnson and some others there -- to when they were in college together.

You see, when Mr. Sam Johnson, his father, was so sick here in the hospital, Carroll Keach and I took turns about sitting up with him. Mr. Sam Johnson, when he looked like he was really bad, said, "If I'm going to die, I want to go home to die," and we took him to Johnson City. You sit up with a man's father, whom he really loved and had great respect for, and you live in the home, or you share the expenses of living together, you're real close to him. Mr. Johnson and I have always felt very close. As a matter of fact, in March of this year on my birthday, he was in the hospital in

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San Antonio. My wife said, "What do you want to do? It's your birthday." I said, "What I'd like to do is--I know he's got hundreds of telegrams. I know that he's got flowers he can't even get in the hospital. I'd just like to go over to the hospital--not to see him, I'd like to see him--but just to tell Lady Bird or one of his aides that I came by the hospital to let him know that I was thinking about him, and I was thinking about him on my birthday." So I went over there, and we went to the hospital and I told them who I was. I just told them my name and that I was a friend of Mr. Johnson's, that I didn't want to impose on him, because he was not to have visitors and I knew that he wasn't, but if Mrs. Johnson was there, I would just like to tell her that I was there, just came by to say hello to him. So she connected me with some aide and I told the aide my name was Sherman Birdwell--I didn't mention that I'd been his secretary or anything, other than to say I was a close friend of his--and if Mrs. Johnson was there or some of his aides, that if I could just say hello and leave my card with them and wish them good health, why I would like to do that. He said, "Well just wait a minute. There are some women in his room right now. Just wait a few minutes." So we waited about ten minutes, and Mrs. Johnson, with a couple of women, came down on the first floor going out via the elevator. She was very glad to see my wife and me, because I feel as close to her as I do with Mr. Johnson. She said, "Lyndon will see you in just a minute." I said, "Oh, Lady Bird, I don't want to impose on him." She

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said, "No, he wants to see you. They sent word in that you were down there and said that you wanted to see me or him, and he said, "I want to see Sherman." So in just a few minutes, one of his aides came down and got Mrs. Birdwell and me, and we went up to the room. It was along about two o'clock in the afternoon. We went in, I said hello, my wife sat down in the chair over there, and I sat down on the edge of the bed. We stayed there about five or ten minutes, and I said, "Mr. President, we better run." "No. Sit down, now, sit down!" Well, to make a long story short, after I'd gotten up about a half-dozen times, he said, "You're going to wear that end of my bed off, now just sit down there, dammit." We stayed there from 2:00 till 4:30. We never talked politics. We never talked about the economy of the country. We just talked about old times, NYA days, people at Buda, my mother, his mother, the things that made us close together.

F: You were pretty close to his mother, weren't you?

B: Very close.

F: How did that come about?

B: Principally because I think she liked me, number one. Number two, I was always willing, not only willing but she knew I genuinely desired to want to be helpful to her. She needed someone to talk [to] a lot of the time, particularly about finances; not what to do about investments, but particularly with reference to income tax, the maintenance of her little apartment that she had out there on . . . I believe

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it's on Hartford Road. She just felt real close to me. As a matter of fact--I think you'd be interested in seeing it--here is a picture of my mother that Mrs. Johnson had. The year before she died, she gave me this for Christmas. It was from an old tintype, a print of some kind, and she had it colored and put in that case and gave it to me.

F: When you were with Cook's, you were instrumental once in getting her to go to the hospital when no one else could get her to go?

B: Yes. I was there at the Cook Funeral Home. At that time, we had ambulance service, and they wanted to go to Scott and White up in Temple. I think it was Josefa that called me and said, "Sherman, I want you to come out to the house. We've been trying for hours to get Mother to go to the hospital. We can't do it, and if anybody can do it, you can. Come out and talk to her." So I went out and talked to her for a while and finally convinced her that she ought to go, and she said, "Well, if you'll go with me, I'll go." I said, "Well I sure will." I went and called an ambulance and they came out there, and I drove her to Scott and White Hospital with the family; we all went up together. She's always had great confidence in me, and I've always loved her. She's such a sweet, gentle person, such a fine person; she was easy to love. So I felt very close to her.

F: The President pretty well listened to her, didn't he?

B: Yes. I say that because she had a gentle persuasion with him, and he

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listened to her. But I don't believe that she ever really tried to mold his life in terms of specific recommendations of what to do. She was more interested in imparting to him the need for education--he was always industrious, so she didn't have to talk to him about working hard and doing this--the need for working with people, the need for accepting advice from people that were knowledgeable and more mature, had more experience, the broader, what would you say--?

F: Sort of the outer polish, in a sense.

B: Yes, because she was a polished person.

F: She wasn't so much politically minded.

B: That's right. That's right.

F: Anything else that you think we ought to get into?

B: No. I think that about covers it all. It's been a pleasure to give this background of my relationship and friendship with whom I think history will record as one of our greatest Presidents.

F: Thank you, and I truly appreciate it.

(End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II)

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By W. SHERMAN BIRDWELL, JR.

to the

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