INTERVIEW III

DATE: February 9, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: SHERMAN BIRDWELL, JR.

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Birdwell's residence, Lakeway, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start with the first thing you remember after that San Marcos meeting, after he hired you.

B: All right.

G: You say you went to work on Monday morning after that.

B: On the Monday morning after the Sunday [meeting]. He called me to meet him at the Old Post Office Cafe in San Marcos, six o'clock, Sunday morning. I walked in and saw Jesse Kellam, whom I knew fairly well, sitting there at the counter. I walked up and said, "Jesse, what are you doing here this early? Are you just getting in or getting out?" He said, "Oh, I'm just having a cup of coffee. Have one." I said, "Okay." So I got a cup of coffee.

We were sitting there drinking it, and about that time Lyndon walked in. At that time I didn't know that Jesse was there to meet Lyndon, and he didn't know that I was there to meet Lyndon. Lyndon came in. We both spoke to him and when he said, "Well, I'm sure glad to see both of you here," then we both realized that we had been contacted to be there.

Anyway, after we finished coffee Lyndon asked us to go take a ride with him. We got into this car of his and rode all around and particularly around old Roger's Park. Lyndon was so enthused and was telling us about young people, and how they needed assistance and some type of work-training, and also assistance to stay in school. They just couldn't buy pencils and paper, much less shoes. He just kept on uninterruptedly about this program for about two hours or more. I began to wonder, "Well, what the hell is he telling us all this about? I mean, so what? It's fine but after all, we've been up a long time." That's when he said, "I want you and Jesse to help me with this program." That's the first inclination that I knew that he wanted me to work for him.

Well, he sold Jesse and I on the program, and I went to work for him the following Monday on the sixth floor of the old Littlefield Building in Austin. Jesse at that time was working for the State Department of Education.

G: He had a pretty good job.

B: He had a good job; I've forgotten his exact title, but he had a good job. So he didn't come there immediately. Matter of fact, when he did come to work at the NYA office on the sixth floor, several weeks had passed by. When I first went to work there Bill Deason was already there and Marie Lindau, and they were the only two.

G: How about L. E. Jones, was he there?

B: No, not at that time. I don't remember him being there at that time, I'll put it that way. He may have been; I just don't remember him being there at that time. When Jesse did come several weeks later, he came

under a loan agreement with the State Department of Education so he could go back, because they didn't want to lose him. Jesse didn't want to lose that position, because he had a good position, and what was the NYA? It was something nobody had ever heard of.

G: Did Jesse agree on the spot to do that when you were riding around or did he take some persuasion?

B: No. No. Jesse, in the first place, was somewhat persuaded. But secondly, his acceptance was conditioned upon his getting a sabbatical leave from the State Department of Education. In other words, if he couldn't get it, he wasn't leaving. He didn't insist on that viewpoint, but I felt like that was what he was trying to say. Because, you see, Jesse was head of one of the secret social organizations in the college down there, and Lyndon was head of the other. One was called White Stars and one was called Black Stars. I was such an outcast I didn't belong to either. I didn't know much about them except that I knew about that background. So Jesse didn't feel the same obligation to Lyndon that I did, because I had a much longer, further background relationship.

G: We've heard the story that one of the first things that Lyndon Johnson did when he arrived in Austin as the newly-appointed NYA director was to visit Governor [James V.] Allred. Do you recall the details of that? Was there such a visit?

B: I do not know. I didn't go with him. I know that somewhere in the early days there was some connection between him and Governor Allred, because Allred ran on New Deal philosophy. Lyndon, having been

appointed [by Roosevelt], his appointment was certainly influenced by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and the New Deal people.

G: Let me ask you about that. I have never heard any evidence before that she had input into his appointment. Did he tell you that himself, that she played a role in it?

B: I cannot be certain that he told me personally that she did. But I know from the very early beginning it was my understanding, whether I got it from Lyndon or someone else that was in a position to know, that she had played a rather important role in getting his appointment. Sam Rayburn, I know, had a lot to do with it, and Sam Rayburn was very important.

G: Do you know what Rayburn might have done to expedite things?

B: I understand that Rayburn just spoke to the President about it. I know that Rayburn was influential in it.

G: Do you think Maury Maverick had a role in that?

B: He could have. He and Lyndon were very close. He could have. Maury was one of the Young Turks, they called them in those days, those that had banded themselves together and were known in Congress as the Young Turks. He hadn't been there long enough to really have built up a great influence except that he was pretty much of a liberal, and this is where Lyndon got his influence in terms of his philosophy about liberalism.

But I know that Mrs. Roosevelt must have had some [interest], because Texas is one of the few places that she came and paid a comprehensive visit to NYA projects. She went to a project where we

had built a dam down on Williamson Creek south of Austin. She went to my sewing room, and knowing that she was coming, [one of] the girls there--her name was Preble Tadlock. Preble Tadlock was one of the girl assistant supervisors, per se. In other words, they had regular full-time supervisors, but within the group we always had one or two, depending on the size of it, of the youth, we called them, who was one of the workers that kind of spoke for them, kind of a committee spokesman, a group spokesman. This girl, Preble Tadlock, I remember was such a person.

When we found out Mrs. Roosevelt was coming down there, we wanted her to be sure and see one of the work projects the boys had done, and about the biggest thing we had built at that time was this dam and park down on Williamson Creek. The other big thing that we were doing, and about the only thing we had to do, was a girls sewing room project whereby they worked right alongside the WPA women, except our girls only worked a few hours a month, comparatively speaking. The maximum they could make was twelve dollars a month in those days.

G: Was Mrs. Roosevelt impressed with these projects?

B: Very! Preble Tadlock herself was quite talented in sewing and she made something--I've forgotten what it was now--that she presented to Mrs. Roosevelt when Mrs. Roosevelt came down there. I know Mrs. Roosevelt just thought it was wonderful, not only the thought, but the fact it was exquisitely done, that these girls could do something like this. I've even forgotten what the object was. We had pictures taken of Preble Tadlock and Mrs. Roosevelt. Preble, she just thought

this was the greatest experience that she had ever had in her life, and it probably was at that time.

G: Sure. Anything else about Eleanor Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson during this period?

B: Well, I use this as one of the reasons that I think that maybe she had had something to do with Lyndon's appointment, because I don't think she would have given as much time to Texas as she did [otherwise]. She not only was in Austin, but she went to Houston and she went to Dallas to visit other projects. But she spent most of her time in Austin.

G: One of the first things LBJ did was to go down to San Antonio early in August and meet with Harry Drought, evidently to determine how the NYA would be coordinated with the WPA. Do you remember any of the details of this meeting?

B: Yes. I went with Lyndon. Lyndon went in and talked to Harry Drought, and I went in and talked to Harry Drought's first assistant, a very handsome fellow. His name was Smith.

G: Robert J. Smith?

B: Robert Smith was his name, that is correct. While Lyndon was talking to Harry Drought, Bob Smith and I were going into more details, particularly with reference to our travel allowance and expenses and the manner in which they had to be approved, in some outline. I think that's when [I met] the head of their--I don't remember whether he was head of the entire fiscal administration, or whether he had enough travel vouchers, which he probably did, being submitted that he just handled travel for all. Because all travel vouchers had to be approved first by the NYA

office in Austin, which was my responsibility, and secondly by the WPA travel department. When they were approved by them and then sent on, they were sent on to the WPA payroll division, because we got our checks from San Antonio.

G: When you went down for this meeting, did LBJ have a strategy here in dealing with Drought? Was he trying to achieve certain things here?

B: The directives were the usual, not the exception. By that I mean we had lots of directives to come to us from the national NYA headquarters: Aubrey Williams. One of them was we would get copies of his directive to the WPA telling them to cooperate with us in every way. We would get directives that were addressed directly to us, telling us that attached was directive number so-and-so, telling the WPA to cooperate with us in every way possible. We were all working toward the common goal, that WPA was to give, in most instances, just work programs to the adult head of the family. But since all of the young people that were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, on that family, were automatically eligible, then that's where we would get our referral group.

So with these general directives telling each to cooperate with the others and where we were to get help, then the question came down: how do you do it, what were the nuts and bolts of it? So that's why Lyndon went over there to see Harry Drought. That wasn't in early August because Lyndon's birthday was August 27. I went to work on a Monday which was just a few days before his birthday in August. I remember it very distinctly, so it was sometime after August. I remember we had gone

over there, and by that time we had had time to read and study some of these directives.

Speaking of directives, as our number of employees increased--Lyndon at that time was renting Bob Montgomery's house on San Gabriel Street--I would say at least two or three nights a week--it seemed like it was every night, because we were working hard--we would have a meeting out there and go over these directives. He would read a paragraph and he would ask, "What do you think that means?" We would just tear that paragraph upside down until we came to a consensus of opinion, usually Lyndon's opinion, 1) because it was his responsibility, 2) he had been in Washington four years and just knew more about such things, and 3) he was, after all, the boss. But he did ask for it. He'd read it and he'd always ask, "Well, somebody say what you think about that? What does that mean to you?" We'd go through those directives paragraph by paragraph. Along about eleven o'clock we'd all be so whipped down we couldn't see, because, gosh, we'd worked all day, probably had an hour to get home and get something to eat and maybe change your shirt and get over there. About eleven or eleven-thirty Lady Bird would come in with coffee and cake for all of us. We'd renew for a while.

G: If you disagreed with him on something like that, was he responsive to this? Would he entertain your version of it and consider it?

B: Yes. As I said a while ago, we'd tear that paragraph all to pieces, but we'd come to a consensus of opinion as to what it really meant. And if Lyndon felt like enough of us were in agreement on a certain directive,

or a certain meaning of that paragraph, he would accept it and we would write it down. We'd write it in the margin of our notebook or the paper or on a notebook, that paragraph such-and-such on page so-and-so of whatever memo that we were studying, or directive at that time, means so-and-so. Whether we were right or wrong, that's what we had decided on, because some of the directives that you'd get were not clear. I mean, we did not know what the writer had in mind; we had to determine what he had in mind. [If] we got to something that Lyndon felt very strongly about and it was in divergence with what a majority of us felt there, but he felt like we were so strong in our opinion that it was worthy of further study, he'd say, "Well, let's give that some more thought." He was very fair about these decisions on what directives from Washington meant.

G: Do you recall any particular case where you may have misinterpreted a directive and discovered later that it meant something else?

B: Not at this time.

G: Back to Harry Drought. The WPA office was in San Antonio and yet the Austin office of the NYA was the state office.

B: Right.

G: Was there ever any effort on the part of the WPA to locate that office in San Antonio?

B: Never that I know of. If it was, it was carried on at a higher level that I was not brought into. It was never discussed with any of the NYA staff, because I was there from the beginning and I think I would

have known. I don't think there was ever an effort to bring it into San Antonio, and why Austin was selected, I don't know.

All I know is that when Lyndon told me to report to work at Monday morning we only had a few offices, because we only had a few personnel. It was my responsibility to get us more room as we grew. That's what we did. We talked to the manager of the Littlefield Building and we'd get office space adjoining so that we could all be adjoining each other on the same floor, which was the old sixth floor of the Littlefield Building.

It might be interesting, to you, that in those days the Littlefield Building had its own electrical power, and it was direct current. So all the lights were on direct current; the elevator was direct current, and at ten-thirty at night they cut it off. Nearly without exception, ten-thirty was just getting time to really get loose ends tied up. So at ten-thirty, when they'd flick the switch two or three times, you knew it was fixing to come. The old Littlefield Building still had the old natural gas lights, jet lights, in each of the rooms. But they'd taken the mantles off of them, to cast illumination. All you had was the open jet. We'd open those jets and light them up, and that's the way many, many, many and many a night we'd finish our work, by those flickering gas jet lights. Then we'd walk down six flights of stairs to get out.

G: I gather in other states, or at least in some of the states, the NYA was simply an adjunct of the WPA. Here it seems to have been considerably more independent. Was this due to Lyndon Johnson?

B: I had no opportunity to visit other states or to know. Lyndon went to a few so-called regional meetings and a few meetings in Washington. I did not go to any regional meeting or to any Washington meeting. Mr. Kellam, who had come on and had stayed and finally had cast his lot, you might say, with the NYA and left his job with the State Department of Education, succeeded Lyndon as state director. He may have gone, because from the time he came over he was the number-one man.

Now when Jesse came over to NYA, he handled one of the two major phases of the NYA's responsibility. NYA had two major responsibilities: one was to give work and work-training experience to this group of people. The second one was what we called our school aid program, in which we got so much money by a formula that no one could understand, so that Mr. Kellam could decide exactly how much each school got. Whenever they'd come in and want more money, he would go through this formula. It was such a mumbo-jumbo that there was no way you could get around what he had set forth for them.

It was based primarily on the number of students they had, but it was subject to being juggled a little bit. [A quota of] so many students, at six dollars a student, was given to that school as a credit. So if we assigned them ten students, they had sixty dollars to play with, which might mean that they could take twenty students and give them enough work to earn three dollars, because that superintendent felt like he had twenty that needed money so badly, he'd rather give twenty of them three dollars than to give ten of them six dollars. So he'd

make out the payroll and send it to us, giving their name and so forth. Then there would be a summary of kind of what they did during that payroll period. It was every two weeks.

The NYA district director was responsible to go to those schools and check on them. In other words, if we got a payroll in that had twenty names on it, and we knew they had sixty dollars, and it came to sixty dollars, then that was fine. But it was our responsibility from time to time to do spot checks. We'd go to that school; we had that payroll with us, and we'd take it with us and go call those boys out and say, "Get them all together." "Did you all work this period here? Were you on the payroll?" "Yes, I was." "What did you do?" "I helped build a brick wall or a rock wall around the lower side of our baseball field."

So it was our responsibility to check with them.

G: Did you as finance officer do that?

B: No. Whoever was district director, whoever was responsible for that area [did it]. In other words, when we first started, our school program was our biggest program because that was the biggest thing we had going. We had some X dollars for school and we gave that to the school superintendent and told him how much money he had. In that school year they had them working and they had them on the payroll. That got the bulk of our money at that time. We didn't have the names off of the WPA rolls for work projects.

Since work projects had to be sponsored by a political division of some responsibility, either state, county, city, or what have you,

we had to work out projects with them in which the usual rule of thumb was that they furnished all the material and some of the supervision and all the transportation that was necessary. We had no buses; we owned no buses or cars at all. They provided whatever transportation was needed to get them from the town out to the job site if it was outside of town. It took time to work out these projects and get them approved. But it was entirely up to that district director to get them approved. Then after he approved them he sent them to the state office which most of the time perfunctorily approved [them], and bango, it was way to go.

So we'd get our youth referred to it, [and] the supervisors we would employ or the supervisors they'd employ. For instance, our first big statewide project in the early days was our statewide highway parks, parks along the highways. It was sponsored by the highway department; Gibb Gilchrist was the state highway engineer. He sent then to all of his district engineers, and they in turn to their local engineers, a memorandum saying that they'd sponsor the project. The outline was already made in which they would furnish the supervision, and except in very, very large projects, very, very large park areas where we had great numbers of young people working, they would furnish all the supervision. Now where we had large projects you'd say, "Why would we furnish them in those cases?" Usually because we needed someone checking the eligibility to be sure they were eligible, and two, to keep a time record and make out the payroll, because they were a little complicated. So that was the supervision we'd usually furnish.

They would say, like in Austin, "Okay, all you boys, we're going to go out here and build a highway park on Onion Creek," because I remember that's where one was close to Austin. "You meet at that little park area down there on 1st and Congress Avenue. A truck will pick you up there at seven-thirty." All that were eligible would be there and they would have maybe--depending on how many were on that project, but Austin was pretty good-sized--three or four trucks there, three or four drivers. They'd all pile in there, and they'd go out there and work. They built benches, concrete tables, barbecue pits, leveling. In the fall of the year they'd be planting trees and flowers and so forth, in the springtime, mowing and keeping the grass, trimming it, making it real nice.

G: When you first started up this NYA operation, you didn't have long before school started. You had to get the school aid project rolling pretty quickly, I guess, in order to help some of these youngsters stay in school. Was there a sense of urgency about [it]?

B: Oh, yes. There definitely was. That's why, as I say, the first big money and the first emphasis was on the school aid program, because that's something we'd get started right then. There was no eligibility requirement at that time for students on the school aid program. It was up to the superintendent to determine who needed it the most. He didn't have the same restrictions on the ones receiving aid as we did on the work program. On the work program--in the initial stages--they had to be a member of a WPA family, but these others were just those that the

superintendent determined were needy. If he determined that he had twenty that needed it more than just ten, he could split it up.

We also had this in college. Ernest Morgan is a fine example, from San Marcos, later United States attorney for the Southern District of Texas. [He] went to school and got his law degree at the University [of Texas] by working in the House of Representatives Library on a NYA project. After he got his law degree, it was kind of hard; you know, as they say, being a lawyer is [a good occupation] only when people have money. In those days they didn't have money so they weren't hiring many people, so as a matter of fact, he was looking for a job. He came to work for me as my finance officer in my district, which was old district ten, which, by a strange coincidence, coincided with the same counties that Mr. Johnson had. He went to work as my finance officer until the war broke out and he went into the service. Later he left and came and set up his own practice in San Marcos. [He] hadn't been there too long till he was appointed United States district attorney for the southern half of Texas.

G: Before we turned on the tape, I asked you about those three CCC camps that Mr. Johnson petitioned Washington to have opened for students to use to live in while they were attending the University and [Texas] A & M. Do you remember that?

B: No, I don't remember a CCC camp that permitted people to stay there and go to the University of Texas. A & M was outside of my jurisdiction at that time and so I'm not familiar with it. The only CCC camp that I am familiar with was the abandoned CCC camp at Bastrop where they had

the buildings where these boys lived. Over in the Bastrop-Buescher State Park, they call it, they had a very large building that had housed the CCC woodworking project, because they built all those cottages down there in Bastrop out of the natural red rock fieldstone. They also made all the furniture for them, real massive, heavy cedar furniture. Then when it was abandoned, the building was just there. Most of the equipment the CCC had to turn over to the army or somebody, had to turn it in. Some of it had been left but very little, just because I think they considered it not able to be salvaged. But the big barracks buildings were still there.

So that was in my district, and I established a resident project there where boys lived and worked. Ostensibly they were supposed to work a half a day and go in training a half a day. We had just bought a bunch of equipment and moved into that building when somehow the building caught on fire and burned up, burned all of our equipment. So we then got some sawmill equipment, sawed our own trees down under the direction of the Bastrop state superintendent himself, because certain trees you would want to saw and some you wouldn't. We sawed the trees, kiln-dried them, sawed up our lumber and built the building back right on the same foundation. By that time we got orders in for new woodworking equipment, went in there and started making furniture for all over my district.

Now that project, I remember so well, was under the supervision of a resident project manager, we called them, named Lovett Ledger,

who has a big furniture store now, who was later president of the Texas Furniture Dealers Association. I think he lived at Killeen, somewhere in that neighborhood.

There was one other big project and that was the Inks Dam Project. There used to be a CCC camp up there. When the LCRA sponsored the building of the administration building out of solid granite up at Buchanan Dam, we used the huge, large CCC camp there at Inks Dam as headquarters to build this building. Along with the building they had a very advanced training program: woodworking, rope-making, welding, steel fabrication, ornamental ironwork. All of these were in addition to learning how to build a building.

G: Did you also build a fish hatchery up there or work on one?

B: Yes, a huge fish hatchery at Inks Dam.

G: That was an NYA project?

B: That was an NYA project.

G: How about Buchanan Dam, did you do something there, too?

B: Well, the only thing we did at Buchanan Dam--see, they were right there together--was build this administration building. The other part of the project was building the fish hatchery and the training program.

G: Early on, an advisory board was established for the NYA. Senator [Alvin] Wirtz became the chairman of that. When Mr. Johnson submitted a list of suggested members to Washington, Senator Wirtz did not appear on that list here. I'm wondering if you know why his name was originally not on there and how he became a member. In fact, he became chairman of it. Do you recall any of that at all?

B: No. I just know that this was established and was used by Mr. Johnson. Why his name was left off of the list that went to Washington I do not know.

G: This is really a blue-ribbon list, isn't it?

B: Oh, yes. But I was not [involved in it]. In other words, this was a group that Lyndon met with principally, and at some times with Jesse Kellam. I do know that Luling was in my territory, and Miller Ainsworth was the only member of the advisory committee that was in my district. I know that every time I went to Luling, I always went by to see Mr. Ainsworth and checked in with him to get his ideas and suggestions. I let him know we were interested in doing a job and interested in his thoughts and suggestions, because I knew he was a member of this advisory committee. But as far as meeting with them as a group, I never did. Lyndon met with them to get input and I think, frankly, for connections.

G: Was it an active group? Did it meet as a group very often?

B: Not very often. I don't think they had a regular meeting date, like once a month or once a year. I think it was always subject to call, but that's a general impression because it was something that I wasn't too involved in.

G: Did you have the impression during this time that Senator Wirtz gave considerable advice and counsel to LBJ?

B: To a very great extent.

G: Of course, later he's regarded as a real mentor, but how about during this NYA phase?

B: Frankly, I don't think that Lyndon was too close to him. I think it was something that developed over the roughly two years that Lyndon was the NYA director. They became very close. He went to him with many of his problems on this program. So that when the opportunity [arose] to run for Congress to fill Congressman [James] Buchanan's unexpired term, I think it was only natural that he went to Wirtz for his advice and counsel. I do know this. I did not know, as close as I was to Lyndon, that he was going to run for Congress until one night I got a telephone call at home. It was Senator Wirtz calling me and telling me to come up to Number Four Happy Hollow Lane, where Lyndon was living at that time, that Lyndon wanted me to be up there right away. I went up there. Senator Wirtz and Jesse Kellam were in the kitchen, and I went in there. Senator Wirtz told me that Lyndon was going to run for Congress, and the first thing he needed was some money. I said, "Well, I've saved fifty dollars to buy an electric refrigerator rather than this old ice box I'm using, and I'll get it for you. That's all the money I've got in the world."

G: You had to start over saving for your refrigerator.

B: Start over saving for my refrigerator.

So I do know that they were calling people, you know.

G: Senator Wirtz had an office in the Littlefield Building also, didn't he?

B: Right, right. If my memory serves me correctly, I think it was on the seventh floor.

G: I wonder if it was just accidental that that NYA office was located in the same building, just one floor beneath Senator Wirtz' office?

B: I can't answer that. In the first place, there were not too many office buildings in Austin at that time, especially [if] we think about it in terms of downtown office buildings. The ones that were there were pretty well full. I guess the Littlefield Building was probably the oldest office building of any consequence and probably the cheapest. I know that the old Scarbrough Building, which is still there, was at that time full of doctors and dentists. The Capital National Bank Building, which used to be called the old Norwood Building, was full of professional people. Parking wasn't a problem in those days anywhere downtown. If you were going to Scarbrough's to trade and you couldn't park within a block of it, you would just turn around and go home and wait until tomorrow. So I imagine that since space had to be bid on, that that had a lot to do with it. I never did know. I know that when we were there, there were a few offices there that were already leased to the NYA. We just went from there.

G: Okay. Now one of the first things he did was go to Washington to attend an NYA directors' meeting in August, 1935.

B: Yes.

G: Do you remember that? Were you on board then?

B: Yes, yes. He went--I think it was the day after his birthday. I think he went up there on the twenty-eighth.

G: Well, I have August 20, but that may be wrong.

B: It could be. But I know that I went to work there just a little while before his birthday. I know it was right at that time.

G: Did he seek more money from Washington for the Texas NYA?

B: I do not know.

G: I gather in September he addressed an American Legion convention in Dallas. Do you remember that at all?

B: No.

(Interruption)

G: All right. [Tell me about] Mary McLeod Bethune.

B: Our big problem with this lady was trying to find her a place to stay.

G: Really?

B: Yes. The hotels would not accept her; dining rooms wouldn't serve her. You had to make arrangements beforehand to be sure that they would accept her to save yourself the embarrassment of going in and both of you being rejected, or you having to leave with her. Which actually happened in one or two places, because she visited several places in Texas. Our big problem was--well now, you can hardly blame her in terms of what she expected--her indignation at not being able just to go into any hotel or any eating place and sleep and eat. And she just didn't, and that was a huge problem. Mr. Kellam, I know, devoted most of his time trying to work this thing out where it would go smoothly. But she just raised hell, not only raised hell here, but in Washington. I mean, she was phoning Washington that she couldn't get a place to sleep, she couldn't get a place to eat, this was terrible.

G: She was on the national board of the NYA?

B: Right.

G: Did President Johnson take her around? Was this while he was director that she came down?

B: Yes.

G: Did he go around with her?

B: No. He gave that to Jesse and Bill Deason. Bill ought to be able to tell you more about that than I can.

G: Was he aware that she was having these difficulties?

B: Oh, yes.

G: What was his reaction to it?

B: "Oh, hell! What can you do about it? Just try to do the best you can."

G: You know, we have letters in the files from her, and there is an indication that she thought very highly of the job he was doing for blacks.

B: Yes.

G: Is this the case? Was this justified?

B: Yes, he did. There was no distinction between them. Your NYA boys and girls at that time were an entirely different breed of cat than you've got now. In the first place, Texas was still a rural society. A great majority of these that we worked came from small towns and worked in small towns, because we had small projects there built around the school system and so forth and the community. So they were not only from the small communities, but they also came from surrounding, close-by farm families. Since they first had to be eligible, they had

to be members of a WPA family, they came in with their daddy to work. So these people were used to hard work, and they were used to working on a farm. When you're chopping cotton, you're chopping alongside of a Negro. So it was no problem about them working side by side.

The only problem we ever had in those days was sometimes we'd have a community where we would have maybe a white minority, and the Latin Americans and the Negroes were in the majority, and they're the ones that didn't get along too well. We had trouble mainly with our Negroes and whites sometimes, because like I said a while ago--I don't know whether we were on tape or not at that time--we used to get some of our youth and make them kind of a leader of the group and could pay them a little bit more. They were timekeepers. Sometimes we found more literate blacks than we did whites. We'd make them that, whatever's best for making the payroll and keeping the time. We didn't have as much trouble with the Negroes and the whites, or the Mexicans and whites. Where we would run into trouble would be the Mexicans and the Negroes, particularly if a Negro would try to give orders to the Mexican boy. It wasn't a big problem, but we had more problems that way.

G: I didn't realize that the projects themselves were integrated, that you had blacks and whites on the same projects.

B: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

G: Is that right?

B: Yes. Now I'll tell you, the only place we did not have blacks and whites [together] was in our resident projects. They were either for

one or the other. In other words, you get down there along the Brazos River, we'd have some projects further on down. There was one or two that were not in my district. I never had one. But all my resident projects, if they were for boys, they were all white boys, or some Latin Americans. We didn't have any blacks. The blacks we had on separate projects. [In] the resident projects, you see, they'd come from all over my area to that project. They weren't just from Bastrop. I think I had about sixty boys there. Well, there weren't sixty boys there [in Bastrop] on NYA, so we brought them in from around there. Because, you see, they lived there, ate there. We would have hygiene classes, health classes for them. So they didn't go home except on occasional weekends when we closed down. If we had some blacks, which we did in Bastrop, we'd have a separate work project just for them, rather than a resident project. In other words, we had other work for them.

And our girls' program, we had lots of girls' projects. At one time I had six or seven resident projects just for girls. Taylor was a big one; Giddings was a big one; Brenham was a big one. At that time my district had been enlarged to take in Bryan and [we] had a big one in Bryan, had one in Georgetown, had one in San Marcos. These projects were all white. The Negro girls we put on sewing room projects or other projects. In other words, we didn't have integration except on our work projects.

G: Prairie View, I understand, had a very successful project. Is that right?

B: That's right. That was not in my district so I am not familiar with that. I just knew that it was a real good project down there.

G: Did you have anyone that served as a specialist on the black projects in the state?

B: I don't think so. That would be at the state level and I don't remember one ever being there.

G: Let me ask you some more general questions. What do you think motivated Lyndon Johnson during this experience?

B: Well, just particularly with reference to NYA? I think what motivated him was his innate drive to be the best at anything he did, the best at anything he undertook. I think from all that I heard at this time, and later after I went to Washington with him, that Texas was the outstanding state in its operation of the National Youth Administration of any state in the Union. It could not be for any reason except leadership. Another big thing that also made it great was that Mr. Johnson always had the knack of surrounding himself with people who were dedicated to Lyndon Johnson, more than what the program was. That's the reason that you never heard them whimpering or crying about working at night with a gas light, walking downstairs, working day and night.

I remember so well--and this is a personal remark, but only for the purpose of proving the point--I had been gone. This was in the early days of the NYA when my district stretched from below or east of Austin, all the way up to the Panhandle, to El Paso. That was my district, half of Texas. The southern half was Bill Deason's, who was stationed in San Antonio. His office was there and he lived there at that time. I had that part of the state and Bill had the rest of it. I had been gone about two weeks, and it was wintertime and I was on my way home. I wired him: "Snow storm in Amarillo. Dust storm

in Abilene. Downpour in Brownwood." I guess that's where I wired him [from], whichever one of the towns I was in. "Tell everybody I'll be home tonight." I meant tell my family, because I didn't have enough money to wire them. "Tell everybody I'll report to duty tonight."

It was a Saturday afternoon about three or four o'clock when Lyndon got this telegram. He either called or was having a staff meeting, and he got this telegram and began to laugh. He said, "Well, I guess we've had it," and he said it kind of seriously at that time, "I guess we've had it." And they all said, "Did somebody die? What happened?" He said, "No, this is a weather report from Sherman," and he read it to them. He said, "I think what we all need to do is put our hats and coats on and go home. It's time when a guy starts giving us the weather reports." (Laughter)

But, as I say, this was a dedication that all of us had, not only me but the rest of us.

G: What was it about him that enabled him to command that kind of loyalty from you all?

B: Same thing he had until he died. You put your finger on it, you'll know it. I can't tell you. It's just something that [I can't define]. He never insists on it in saying, "You're going to have to work late." Of course, one of the big things--but this is not it only, it must be a lot of things--is that in a great majority of times he was there working with you. Like when I was his secretary, and I'd get through working at eleven o'clock at night typing letters, he would still be waiting in there to sign them. And I knew that, so I didn't [mind].

He was there working with you, that's number one. Two, his intensity made you feel like this is the most important thing in the world, not just Lyndon Johnson, but the most important thing in the world, and you want to be a part of it. You want to be a part of building this, whatever it was. So you got involved, not with him, but involved in what he was trying to do. And too, he could imbue you with a desire to accomplish that which he was trying to accomplish because it was so worthwhile. I mean he [made] helping these young people an accomplishment to be done that would be so important to you that you just felt like, "I've got to do this for these young people. I mean, I'm the only chance they've got. Me!" And you just didn't mind working your tail off to get it done.

In the meantime you were making him the biggest state director in this nation. And he wanted to be. He also wanted to help these young people. Because like I told you, that first meeting, he never asked me to go to work for him; he just asked me to meet him down there and I did. After he talked for a couple of hours, almost without stopping, I was thinking, "What in the hell is he telling me all about this for? I'm ready to go home. I mean, this is fine and it's interesting, but why?" I almost was at the point of saying, "Well, what are you telling me this for?" That's when he said, "I want you and Jesse to help me make this dream come true for these young people."

G: During this NYA experience, what was his attitude toward poverty? Did you get any insight here?

B: Yes. Mainly because he would allude to his own poor background to the point of making a point, not for sympathy, but to tell you that he knew

what it meant and therefore he had a personal interest in making things better because so many of these kids weren't as well off as he was. And he was poor, because I personally remember that Christmas I was up there in 1924. A lot of people don't know it, but that was really the beginning of the Depression. Cotton was going down; people were beginning to be out of work because of overproduction. A lot of the meals, we had cornbread and beans and milk that we'd gone out and milked the cows, and that was it. So when he would talk about helping them, he would cite certain personal experiences, "My God, I know what it means when you'd have beans and cornbread and you didn't have any ham even to put in your beans. That would be when you'd have a luxury, when you'd have some ham in those beans. Some of these kids haven't even got beans, and we're going to make it possible for them to have some beans. We're going to make it possible for them to have some work experience so that they can make some money when they grow up further, because they're not ever going to be able to go to high school and finish, or college at all. So we've got to make it possible for them to have a trade that they can make a living at when we're all through." Because I think he knew that we'd all be through sooner or later with one cause or the other, that this wasn't a permanent thing, that these were emergency measures during Depression days. It made you feel [that way]. I hired many a welder as a supervisor to teach welding, but I didn't until after I had talked to him and felt like he had some feeling for the kids.

I saw a guy yesterday named Dutch Zeigler. Dutch Ziegler was a woodworking man that lived in Austin. I had a woodworking shop in Lexington, Texas. He was my supervisor over there. He did such an outstanding job and he was so interested in the young people, they just loved him. He developed one of these youths to such an extent that when I opened up a big woodworking shop in Austin--I got the city of Austin to sponsor [it]--I brought Ziegler into Austin to make him supervisor of it. He had trained one of his youths to such an extent; he was such a good worker, and he was a mature person, why, he took over as a full-time, adult supervisor. He was that good. He was so good that I was traveling with Jake Pickle one time, after he became congressman, and we went through Giddings. He said, "Let's stop down here and see old"--I can't even call his name right now. I said, "Well, what's he done?" "Haven't you seen his manufacturing place?" I said, "No." We stopped out there and he had a big woodworking program going on. At that time they were working on a hundred laboratory desks for the University of Texas. You know, it's built so it's got places for the test tubes and so forth on it. A hundred of them! So this is just one of many examples of what these young people went into.

The most remarkable experience I had [was] on my first Christmas leave, when I went in the navy. I went into Scarbrough's to buy a present, and I was there at the counter. This girl was extra nice to me. I was in uniform and I said, "I guess I can charge this. I've had an account here for as long as I can remember. I'm not just a passing-through navy man." She said, "Oh, I know you, Mr. Birdwell.

You may not remember me." I said, "I sure don't. Where did I know you?" She said, "I was at your resident project in Bryan. I never will forget a talk that you made to us about how important it was for an education, for those of you who can get it and take it. 'But you've got to be on yourself,' [you said], 'because I know most of you don't have the money to. But you can. There's always a way if you want to.'" She said, "I remembered that, how you made me feel like this was going to be an important thing in my life. I finished my high school work, and I got credit for it while I was down there. Now I am in my third year. I'll graduate in one more year at the University of Texas in accounting. I'm working part-time during Christmas at Scarbrough's to make enough money."

I never was as thrilled in my life that she made me feel like I had inspired her to do something. And I'd only done it because I was inspired to make every one of these kids something because Lyndon had inspired me to do it. He not only inspired me, but he inspired all these people around him. Ray Roberts, H. Ray Roberts, was one of our district directors. You just got enthused. He had that ability.

G: He had spent four years in Washington before. Did he talk about his Washington experience? Did he draw from it?

B: Very little, really. As a matter of fact, I can't remember any specific reference he had made to his four years in Washington.

G: He must have made some contacts up there that could help him if he needed to get information or perhaps get something expedited.

B: I would say so, but they would be contacts that were on a personal basis, and he wouldn't take us into his confidence if he was going to call Sam Rayburn or Morris Sheppard or Tom Connally.

G: Well, I'm thinking at a lower level.

B: He was, you know, very, very close to Bob Jackson, who was secretary to Tom Connally. Bob went on down and became editor of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. He and Bob were very, very close, personal friends up there. I'm sure that if he got into something he would call Bob, and Bob would use Senator Connally's office as a forum to call somebody to say, "Why can't we do so-and-so?" I'm sure this happened. But he didn't consult with me on those things.

G: Okay. Did you feel that he had an intense admiration for Franklin Roosevelt back then?

B: Yes. Yes, I really did.

G: How did the NYA influence Lyndon Johnson? What impact did that experience have on him?

B: Well, it's hard to put in words; it is for me. I think it very possibly built into his subconsciousness his ability to achieve. [It was] another steppingstone to something higher and better. He started out teaching school down there at this little town below San Antonio. What was it, Cotulla? Then from there [he went] to Houston. From there to Dick Kleberg's secretary. Since Mr. Dick was not as interested in being a congressman as he was in being a good guy and kind of taking it easy and enjoying himself and so forth, it wasn't long until Lyndon ran his office. He, in fact, was in effect the congressman. I talked to

Mr. Dick several times and he just told me, "Oh, what a joy and pleasure it is to know that everything is going right in the office." Because Lyndon was over there doing it. This was after I went to Washington and knew Mr. Dick as a congressman.

So he was still just a secretary; that was his title. So when he came from that position to a director of NYA with, you might say, some mini-power, at least, all over the state, with contacts all over the state, and a success, I think it was maybe just subconsciously implanted in his mind, "Well, I succeeded in everything so far; this is another step for big success." When this vacancy became available to run for Congress, hell, he didn't even know Mayor Tom Miller of Austin.

G: Are you sure that he didn't? We've heard this story. It's part of the lore, but is it a fact?

B: He had never known him to the extent where he'd gone in and talked to him like you and I are talking, on a personal basis.

G: He'd never met him?

B: He may have met him. But Lyndon Johnson didn't mean a thing to Mayor Tom, and Mayor Tom didn't mean much to him. Because his responsibility was to Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso and other places. Austin just happened to be the headquarters for the state office. So he didn't make much difference.

It was my responsibility to get along with Tom Miller, because I was one of the directors here. Austin was in my district from the very beginning. It wasn't Lyndon's responsibility. So, you know, he had

no particular reason to. Why? At this time he had no plans to run for office. I don't think he had any until Buchanan died suddenly. I think then it was suddenly thrust on him: "Hey, this is what I want to do. I want to be a congressman myself, and I can do it."

As I say, I don't know this. I can only surmise it possibly. You say, "What impact?" The impact maybe of achievement, success that, "I've had [success] in this, and I can be successful in another, too. Besides that, I got a good cadre of people all around me now." Because NYA had grown. We went from two districts to five districts and on up to where we had twenty-five districts. Most of the people in that picture are district directors, most of them. Jesse Kellam, of course, was not; he was state director. But we had twenty-five district directors, and they each had supervisors all over, and each one of these district directors were loyal to Lyndon. I don't believe there was a one of them that was in any way disloyal to him. You take one district director and you take twenty-five people, and Texas has, what--two-hundred and fifty-four counties in it? That's an average of ten counties to a district. Within those ten counties you had forty or fifty supervisors. You got a good base right there at grassroots for support. I imagine this entered his mind. I don't know.

G: Perhaps we should stop here. I've taken a good deal of your time today.

B: All right.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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