

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: February 15, 1979
INTERVIEWEE: W. SHERMAN BIRDWELL, JR.
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Mr. Birdwell's residence, Lakeway, Texas

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- G: What about publicity? What was President Johnson's attitude toward publicizing these projects, the successes that were achieved [by the National Youth Administration]?
- B: He was enthusiastically in favor of it. I am sure that all the other district directors and project directors were told to cultivate, make friends with the newspaper people in their communities. I know I was told to contact the editors of all the papers for my district, which I did; knew them all by name, always went by for coffee. I also had my area supervisors [do this]. I had four area supervisors: Jake Pickle was one; Harvie Yoe was one; Ben Crider was one; and I believe Harvey Payne was the other one at that time. They were told, as they worked their particular area within my ten-county district, to cultivate them, and they did.

So Lyndon was very gung ho on good publicity about our program, and about its successes. We needed it for several reasons. We needed it, one, to develop a good ground base for support for it so that the county commissioners, the city officials, and other local government agencies wouldn't mind sponsoring and supporting our program. Because we had to have their sponsorship, and we had to make it possible for them to

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furnish material in nearly all instances for these projects. They needed the support of their people to feel like this was a good thing. So we worked at it.

G: Did he himself have close contacts with the press, with publishers or reporters?

B: Well, knowing his attitude toward the necessity of having good public relations I feel sure he did, but I cannot recall any specific instance except in Austin where I know he cultivated Raymond Brooks, [and] Charlie Green later on. When I say later on [I mean] after the initial beginning of this program. In San Antonio I know he did, because I know at one time I drove he and the postmaster that was, I think, best man at their wedding in San Antonio--

G: Dan Quill.

B: Dan Quill. I was over in San Antonio with Lyndon one time and I drove he and Dan Quill to the newspaper office. Dan wanted him to see somebody particular. I was told to find a place to park or circle around or something and pick them back up. I remember that instance. So I would say definitely yes. But he did so much of that on his own that I just am not in a position to say to what extent.

I know one fellow named Ben Jackson who was a district director in San Angelo whose father owned the newspaper at Coleman. I know that Lyndon made a special point to see that he got out with Ben whenever he was out there to see his daddy over at Coleman. Houston Harte I know cultivated Lyndon very much.

G: During the NYA period?

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B: Yes. Yes, and continued to do so. Houston Harte used to be one of President Johnson's real strong supporters. Right, Right, and I think the initiation of this was that.

I also know he supported the newspaperman in Luling, because I remember one occasion when the owner of that newspaper--I cannot call his name at this time--I would just go see him about something. I went in there and he was real unhappy with Lyndon about something. He wanted to get his boy a job somewhere. This may have been after NYA days. It may have been right after Lyndon went to Congress. I know I got in touch with Lyndon about it and he was concerned. Hal Bridges was his name, in Luling. Lyndon was concerned about it, but he had known him before. He would get someone like General [Miller] Ainsworth, for instance, to take him around to see Bridges when he was with the NYA, because Ainsworth was on his advisory committee, if I remember correctly.

So, yes, I would say yes. Lyndon did make it a special point to cultivate and know newspaper people.

G: I believe on one occasion George Stimpson, a reporter from Washington he had known earlier, came down and toured around some of these projects. I think they even went out to Uvalde and saw John Nance Garner. Do you remember that at all?

B: No.

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- G: There is some indication that his policy on publicity was somewhat conservative in that he believed in restricting the publicity to things that had been done and were being done rather than giving advance publicity on projects that were being planned that might fall through.
- B: Well, what he did in that direction I cannot say. I don't remember him ever making a point of this with district directors, admonitions: "Don't talk about what you're going to do, talk about what you are doing or what you're going to do tomorrow." He may have, because I know that we never did. I never did, as a long-time employee with the National Youth Administration and as one who had made lots of contacts with these local government subdivisions to get their support to sponsor projects. If we had a project in the mill, we never made an announcement about it until it was approved by the local authority and also by the national and state office. Because they had the money and they had to allocate it to different things, and they made the final decision as to which projects were approved and which weren't. So I never made any announcement about anything that had been submitted and [was] waiting for approval for funds or something like that until we actually had it nailed down to the floor. It may have been that this was just kind of inherited, or it may have been told to us by Lyndon. I just don't remember. But we didn't do it and I don't remember him doing it. But I can't answer that for over the state.
- G: There was a program designed to enable youths to secure college credit even though they couldn't afford to go off to school. It was called the freshmen college center program, I think. They could take the first year

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of college courses from the first year of college at home or at centers in their home town and get credit. Do you recall that at all? I know they had trouble getting approval from Washington on that.

B: I don't remember enough of the detail. I have a hazy background that at my project that I had in San Marcos, which was after Lyndon had left the NYA, where I got approval from Dr. Flowers for this resident project for both boys and girls, seemed like a few of mine that had college entrance status got some freshmen college credits. It seemed like it was some of the girls, but I'm not sure. I'm a little dim on that. It seemed like it was at least discussed. But that's the only place that I had any such experience, and it was so limited and so long ago I'm just not really clear on it. It may have been strong in some other places.

G: Did President [Cecil] Evans of San Marcos have much input on the NYA, suggesting educational programs or things like this?

B: If he did it was through Lyndon before he left, because he and Lyndon were very close personal friends and there was a very close relationship between them. So I feel sure that he did. He also may have made quite a bit of input through Jesse Kellam who followed Lyndon as state director and who was a graduate of San Marcos and also a good friend of Dr. Evans. So if he did, he did it through them.

G: Did you see any evidence that he was giving advice or making suggestions here?

B: If he did I did not recognize it.

G: Okay. Anything on the roadside parks?

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B: Well, several things. One, our roadside parks in Texas were the first statewide project that we had. In fact, as I look back over it, I'm trying to recall any other statewide project that we did have other than this.

G: Whose idea was it?

B: Lyndon got the idea somewhere, I don't know where. But he and I went to Gibb Gilchrist, I believe, who was the state highway engineer at that time, and sold him on it. Lyndon sold him on it; I sat there and listened.

G: I gather that Gilchrist was the sort of guy that would naturally be resistant to a new proposal such as this.

B: I would kind of gather that impression, just looking at him and talking to him. I mean, he kind of impressed you that way. But I could be 100 per cent wrong.

G: Well, you were there, weren't you?

B: Yes, I was there, but I just remember that Lyndon sold him on it.

G: Did he agree right away or was it a matter of days before [he agreed]?

B: It was a matter of days. He agreed in principle. He wanted to see some more tangible evidence of how it would work out, such as a written proposal. Because we carried nothing in writing down there, just a general outline of what could be done, how it could be done, and what would be expected from the state highway department and what they could expect from the National Youth Administration. He wanted to see something more tangible in the way of a written proposal. He also wanted to talk to some of his other people. But as I remember it, I don't think there were but three of us in Mr. Gilchrist's office at that time. If there were

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others there, and highway department officials, I don't remember them being there. It seemed like there were just three of us in there.

Lyndon was very persuasive. I remember he talked about Mr. Gilchrist seeing so many needy boys at [Texas] A & M--I think that was where he was a graduate from. The NYA, you know, helped college students. Lyndon presented this picture on the basis of "Here, we help in college and you probably, Mr. Gilchrist, have had some experience and knowledge about helping some of these poor farm boys go to A & M. Now what we want to do is give the same type of boy who is not in college or not able to meet the entrance examinations, requirements, a chance to learn through work experience. Your supervisors are good men and they can train them to do rock work, cement work, form-making for cement forms. We can build a series of highway parks over Texas that will be something that no other state's doing. [It's] different." If I remember I don't think he was too hard to sell. I mean, I don't think you had to do any arm-twisting, but he did approach it with caution.

G: When you were first planning this idea of roadside parks, was there a question of whether or not to have rest-room facilities?

B: None that I know of. I built many a roadside park. I don't remember any question of rest-room facilities. They just climbed over the fence.

G: Well, they didn't have them.

B: They didn't have them, right, not even portable.

G: You don't remember, though, whether this was a conscious decision not to have them as a result maybe of the difficulties of maintenance.

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B: We built roadside projects at that time, and I think almost without exception--because it just stands out in my memory--we built stiles over the fence, if there was a fence there, for people that used the parks to climb over the fence. That's what we built them for. It was kind of publicly accepted. We didn't have the environmental agencies and other people that were so interested in keeping the environment pure. Of course, we didn't have that many people either. But anyway, no, I don't remember that subject ever being brought up.

G: There is some indication in the files that there was a film producer or some guy who was traveling around the state and made some movies of NYA projects in Texas. Do you recall that, if this was for documentary films?

B: Yes. There was a film production, shall we say, or a film project. I just don't remember enough about it. I don't remember them ever taking pictures in my district. They may have, particularly for instance maybe up at Inks Lake resident project, which was in my district. But it was such a huge project, it was administered very largely out of the state office as an individual project standing on its own feet. My job was to kind of [be] caretaker of it. They'd have some minor problems or something like that, they'd get in touch with me. I'd go up and see what had to be worked out. But the program, the major part of the planning, it was almost a state office project, it was so big.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

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G: Early on there was a question of having blacks on the NYA advisory committee. President Johnson took the position that it would be far better to have a separate committee because all of the white members would resign if the committee were integrated. In Washington the national office finally went along with this. Do you recall that issue?

B: No.

G: Do you remember Juanita Sadler coming to Texas to look at Negro NYA activities?

B: No.

G: How about Beatrice Denmark, do you remember her at all?

B: I remember the name. I don't remember the occasion. Some of these things could easily have happened--and I'm not trying to excuse my memory--during the three years that I went to Washington with Lyndon. That was in 1937 through 1939.

G: The ones that I'm asking you about now are from the files when he was--

B: When he was state director?

G: Yes.

B: No, I don't remember.

G: One impression that I get going through the material is that he was constantly seeking more money from Washington and trying to get them to expedite approval of new projects, programs. Was this the case?

B: The first part was, in terms of trying to get more money. He was constantly trying to get more money. The problem we had at that time, and I guess most federal agencies and agencies that depend on the federal government for money are constantly in a situation of not knowing how

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much money they're going to have on a level basis, on a continuing basis. God, we would get a wire from Washington, "Put five hundred youth on immediately. Money available." We would get them on there, and about the time we'd get them on there and the program going, "Cut seven hundred and fifty off." Bang. Now. Tomorrow.

I remember we had an NYA meeting--this was after Mr. Johnson had left--and we had, I think, twenty-five districts at that time. Ray Roberts, H. Ray Roberts, now a congressman, was a district director. I never will forget. Mr. Kellam had just gotten this wire to add five hundred, we'll say--I've forgotten, it was a pretty good-sized figure--"Add five hundred immediately." He brought the telegram in to the meeting and he said, "All right, here is our situation. Once again we're faced with a directive from Washington to put five hundred on immediately. How many can you twenty-five directors put on that you know of?" I never will forget. Ray, who was always very impetuous, raised up his hand and said, "I've got one hundred right here in my vest pocket!" (Laughter)

Well, anyway, this was one of the problems that we had. Without wanting to be personal, when I went to the Texas Employment Commission all of our administrative funds came from the Department of Labor. The money to pay unemployment benefits was state money kept in a separate little bookkeeping procedure. But dollars for the operation--paper, pencils, clips, my salary, travel and so forth--was administrative funds and we'd get so much money from Washington. At the end of the year they ended up with so much money that had to be spent. We'd get a telegram saying, bang, "So much money is available. Use it." So we'd always

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buy reams and reams of paper or desks or typewriters, things we knew we'd need in the future, but had no need for at that time. By the same token, about the middle of the year, which would be the end of the administration of the program, we'd get a telegram, "Two million five hundred thousand dollars must be cut from your operating budget no later than the first of the following month." Bang. What do you do in a case like that? You can cancel some orders that you might be able to, and you'd let some people go, but that just kept you in constant turmoil. This happened all the time. This is the same thing that happened a whole lot with the NYA back in those days. So I guess it's just one of the weak points in the administration of programs in the states that are financed by federal funds. There's always somebody up there jerking the lever either up or down. You've got more money than you need or you've got less money than you need, one of the two.

So we had that, and that's what Lyndon was always trying to get enough money for, because he would hidey-ho some of that money away on projects that we had no idea of doing. I mean they were possible. We already had sponsors for them; there was nothing crooked about it. But we had sponsors that accepted on the basis that, "If we get some money in the future, we'll go into this." They had signed the application and we'd hold it for approval pending funds, which we had all the time. Because I never knew when I signed a project program with say the city of Taylor that I'd get it approved in the state office. One, because of the type of program it was; two, mainly it was because of uncertainty about the money. So we always had enough projects stashed

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away with money allocated to them that if we got a cut, we just cut those projects out. Because they never were in existence. Although we showed that they were funded, they weren't. We just took the funds away from them because they weren't in operation. But that's one of the reasons Lyndon was always asking for more money. Two, he asked for it because he just kept on saying, "Texas is big and we need more money. Texas is a poor state." It was, at that time, a poor state. We didn't feel the Depression as badly as some of the other states because of weather and cheaper food. It cost less to live in Texas. So we weren't as hard up as Bayonne, New Jersey, but we had lots of people that were sure down to cornbread and milk.

G: Who would he make these pitches to?

B: I guess to Aubrey Williams or to Dave Williams.

G: Did he usually do it in person? Did he go up there and do it, or did he do it over the phone or in letters?

B: Well, since I was not in the state office too much, . . . I know that at first he went to Washington a few times. You just didn't pick up and go to Washington in those days like we do now, go out and get on a plane and you're in Washington in three hours. Then it was a long train ride and people just didn't care too much about going, none of them. But Lyndon did go to Washington and he did write some letters. Usually the letter was written as a follow-up to his telephone call, confirming it. But he used a lot of telephone calling up there because he had a lot of persuasive power and he knew how to talk to them. He had good rapport with them because he was doing a good job. He was singled out many times

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by the Washington national office about the jobs that were being done in Texas because I'd see some national releases on it.

G: When officials from Aubrey Williams' office would come to Texas, did he make appeals to them then for more money or approval of projects?

B: I can't answer that because I don't know, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

G: I gather there was also a WPA coordinating board up there that had to approve projects initially. Do you recall that?

B: No. The only kind of approval which had to be met--we were supposed to meet it at the district level; the state office, of course, [approved it] in their review of all projects, which they did because they had to review it and approve it and fund it--was that it would not displace any regular employee. In other words, if a school had two custodians and we wanted that school to sponsor a program of some work that would be closely aligned, closely connected with custodial work, we had to assure ourselves and assure the state office that neither of the custodians would be replaced by these young people working. That's the only thing that I know where we were kept in pretty close rein, was that we would not supersede any existing privately-paid person. I don't know about this coordinating board between WPA and NYA. If it ever existed I don't remember it.

G: Did you ever encounter situations where NYA people had replaced permanent, privately-funded or institution-funded jobs, in spite of this procedure?

B: Not specifically, but I would say in all honesty we probably kept some extra people from being hired during seasons of the year. For instance, I had a project in Austin out at Barton Springs, where we did lots of clean-up work following heavy overflows, where trash was all over,

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where rock walls were washed down, where trees were broken and needed trimming. We were called in because we had a program going on out there. That sunken garden out there we built; the National Youth Administration built it. Well, a huge downflood would cause considerable damage to that. Now, since we had built it and built a lot of those rock retaining walls out there, when they became damaged from floods we had a project already approved for building them and caring for them. We'd go in there and clean up the damage from these floods. Now had NYA not existed, I'm sure the city would have done it. So to that extent I think we probably supplanted some people that they would have hired otherwise. But as far as going in there and taking a custodian off his job, no. But I'm sure that [in] instances like I related that this happened, and in similar types of things we probably kept them from hiring somebody they would have, at least as far as money would have gone, because money was tight everywhere.

(Interruption)

- G: Some general things about him, particularly his health. I have the impression that even then he pushed himself too hard, that he was constantly being urged to slow down.
- B: That is true. Lady Bird tried her best to get him to slow down. But he had a very restless, driving energy that he just wasn't capable of slowing down. I'm sure others that were close to him and knew him well [tried], probably his mother. But except for someone like Lady Bird or his mother, I don't know of others that did. They may have, I just don't know. Because they'd have been on such a personal basis, like sitting in the

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office and talking and him getting up excited. I mean, lots of times, so many, many times, he'd get all wound up on something that he was very, very intensely interested in. He couldn't sit still. He had to get up and walk around, pace around, wave his hands up and down, come over and get in your face. I'm sure that maybe someone like Senator [Alvin] Wirtz that was close to him and knew how hard he worked, the long hours he put in, would admonish him to slow down.

But of course, we were young then. We could take a lot of working all night and the next day, too. As a matter of fact, it was typical of him and typical of so many of us, because we all felt this same individual responsibility for being of service to the youth of the nation. We'd work all day. For instance, as I said, my part of Texas was half of it, from El Paso clear on in to East Texas. It was nothing to work in El Paso till early morning with the boys out there, until four or five o'clock, and either drive into Big Spring the next day to meet with the mayor, or to San Angelo where we had a small office at that time, or even Austin. In other words, it was not uncommon for all of us to work all day and drive all night to start a project the next day.

There were just so many of us, and just so much territory to cover, and so many people to see and so much to do that that was the way you had to do. And Lyndon was no exception, no exception. We just drove ourselves to the limit of our physical endurance and most of us were in pretty good physical shape. But those that advised him to slow down or tried to get him to slow down, outside of Lady Bird and probably his

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mother, I don't have any knowledge [of], because it would be such a personal thing that I just wasn't brought into it.

G: What about his health? Was his health a problem then?

B: No. The only two things that I remember about his health problem at that time was he tended to have a good many colds, more than I would say the average. The other thing was that he had an itch between his forefinger and his next, the long finger. I believe it was on his right hand. I don't think he ever got rid of it; I think he still had it when he was president. I know he had it at that time, and he went to dermatologist after dermatologist. He applied stuff. But he shook so many hands it kept it irritated. He had that as long as I knew him. I think he had it when he first came to the NYA, that breaking-out. Sometimes it would get worse, crusty over, kind of a scab and he'd have to wear a bandage over it to keep shaking hands with people, or wrap it up when it really didn't need it, put some kind of salve on it like the doctor told him to and keep it lightly bandaged, as they say. But he had to keep it heavily bandaged so that people would see it and [say], "What's the matter?" He'd [say], "Oh, I just hurt my hand." I think that thing persisted all the way through his presidency or near it. He may have finally got it cured, I don't know. I lost track of him after the latter part of the years. So I'm not sure. But I can remember it through many, many years, and he had it at that time. It itched like everything, but it wasn't a big problem.

Those are the only two things that I recall about him in the way of a health problem. He got over his appendectomy, you know, that he had, I

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think, on a Thursday night before the election on Saturday in April of 1937. But that caused no permanent problem. I don't remember any particular illnesses he suffered.

I'll say this, and maybe it shouldn't be in the record, but other people can tell you, that Lyndon wasn't often sick, for instance with his cold. But when he had a cold, he had the worst cold that anybody in this world had ever had. When he was sick with anything, he was sicker than anybody ever had been sick in his life with a similar illness. In other words, he took his illnesses seriously; he really did.

G: You heard about his illnesses.

B: Yes. He'd just have to tell you how awful this particular illness was, just nothing like it. When he hurt, he really hurt. I would say that he probably had a very low tolerance to pain. I don't know that but, I mean, most people when they're always just so sick from whatever it is, they couldn't have all been that critical, they usually have a rather low tolerance for pain. But as I say, when he was feeling good he felt better than anybody in the world, enthusiastic, vigorous. But when he was sick he was next to death's door.

G: Do you think he enjoyed being NYA director?

B: Yes, I would say so.

G: Was it basically a happy time for him?

B: Yes. Yes. He had lots of old friends around him that he knew were loyal to him, he knew would go through brimstone and fire for him. That can't do anything but make you happy in your work. If you surround yourself [with] people that are loyal, you know you can depend on their loyalty,

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you know that they're going to say, "Whatever you want done, we can do it and will do it," it can't help but make a happy experience during that term of your life. All of his early employees on which the foundation of the National Youth Administration was built were old friends of his, been in college with and known before college days, and during college days, and after college days. Carroll Keach, who was his secretary up there, worked for the National Youth Administration. In fact, that's where he met Marion Fore, Sam Fore's daughter, and they went together and got married. Lyndon was their best man at the wedding down there at Floresville. So these are the type of people that Lyndon surrounded himself with, and I can't help but feel like it was a very happy time in his life.

G: Did you see much of his parents during this period?

B: I did personally for two reasons: one reason was because of our background of being so close to them, my grandparents and parents being close to them. Mr. Sam, his father, was born and raised in Buda, Texas where I was born and raised. Mr. Sam was born and lived there until he was ten years old before they moved to Johnson City. We had a community of background, so I saw a lot of them. When my folks would think about vacations in those days, those early, early days, their vacation many times consisted on hitching up a team of mules and a wagon and getting a buggy for the ladies to drive in or a light spring wagon, as we'd call it, that could get along quicker than mules with a wagon, and go up to the Pedernales River and camp along it or somewhere near Tom Johnson's ranch. He lived outside of Johnson City, and was Lyndon's uncle. They'd

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play Forty-Two, you know, in the afternoon, and dominoes. So I knew the family so well.

G: But in the NYA period, did you see them?

B: Yes. That's the reason I'm saying--I'm leading up to this--this continued on.

G: You've told the story about his father advising him that you would be a good man to hire because of your family background.

B: I didn't know I had told you that. I told somebody that.

G: Can you recall any other occasions when his father gave him advice while he was NYA director?

B: No, not specifically. I'm trying to think about when Mr. Sam died.

G: October, 1937, I believe it was.

B: Was it October, 1937? Mr. Sam was in the Seton Hospital and a Dr. Zeno Martin was his doctor. I believe it was Zeno Martin who was his doctor, an old friend of the family. Carroll Keach and I took turns sitting up with Mr. Sam. I had sat up with Mr. Sam that afternoon and I guess early that night, and I've forgotten now whether Carroll had gone over there or whether he had gotten so bad they had a special nurse, but I know that Carroll and I had been sitting up with Mr. Sam. He died and I forget whether the hospital called me trying to locate Lyndon, or whether Lyndon called me and told me that he had died. But we'd just been over there, Carroll and I, continuously for a great number of days, sitting up with Mr. Sam. So I was very close to them.

G: I gather that he didn't want to be in the hospital.

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B: That's true. That's true. He was immediately taken to the home in Johnson City. By immediately [I mean] as soon as he could be moved from the hospital.

G: But he died in the hospital, is that right, or did he die at home.

B: I believe he died in the hospital. I'm a little hazy on that. That was so long ago. But I know we sat up with him. It may be that the reason we weren't there--Mr. Sam didn't want to go to the hospital, he didn't want to stay in the hospital--in the back of my mind it seems to me that I can remember him making a plea, "I want to go home to die." Whether he made it home or not, I don't remember. It kind of vaguely seems like he may have.

There was an old nurse from up at Johnson City that was very close to the family. Gosh. She had two boys. One of them, as far as I know, is still successful in the photography business here in Austin, Ames [?] something. It seemed like that Lyndon may have made arrangements for her to take care of Mr. Sam when he got at home before he died. You know I don't remember for sure. Do you?

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV]

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