

INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 15, 1979  
INTERVIEWEE: MERRELL BLACKMAN  
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE  
PLACE: Mr. Blackman's residence, Bastrop, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start with how you came to San Marcos. You're from Hutto?

B: Hutto, Texas, yes, sir. I went to summer school to get my high school diploma. I received it and I went back home. My daddy put me in the cocklebur patch to clean it up. I decided then that I wanted to go to school instead of cleaning up cocklebur patches.

So I went back and Miss Pirtle at the Pirtle house said she'd take care of me, and Dr. [Cecil] Evans gave me a job. So I started [with] I guess you'd call it an athletic scholarship, twenty-five cents an hour, we had to work there for the school. When I left school then I just paid Miss Pirtle--my wife and myself helped make money to pay up my room and board for that two years. Then my folks moved to San Marcos in 1927 and I lived with them. We ran a boarding house that time. That's when some of the boys that you mentioned the names there, they stayed with us.

G: Is that right?

B: Yes. So we operated that boarding house for the next two years.

G: Do you recall the first time that you met Lyndon Johnson?

Blackman -- I -- 2

B: Well, I don't really, I just remember him being enrolled in school. I think about the first time I really became acquainted with him was in the Harris Blair [Literary Society]. We had a program where they were burying Miss [Mary] Brogdon in the Harris Blair debate as to whether we should bury her or not, get rid of her, some of her ways. I helped gather information for him and that's as much as I remember about that.

G: This must have been in 1927.

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall who won the debate?

B: I think Johnson did.

G: Really?

B: Yes. I think that's what it ended up. But it was quite a show; we had a big crowd there.

G: I gather at one point the Harris Blairs discussed the idea of challenging Miss Brogdon and Miss Hunewell to a debate.

B: Yes.

G: Did that ever take place?

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

G: How did one get to become a member of the Harris Blairs anyway?

B: Well, it was just a debate club. I don't remember--I think it's by invitation. I believe that's right.

G: Did it have a social side to it, also.

B: Yes. Yes. We had parties and entertainment. But most of it was debates. They just had them. I wasn't a very good debater but I

Blackman -- I -- 3

liked to get mixed up in it a little bit. I think it was because Miss Leaders [?] kind of helped sponsor it.

G: Really? Who was this now?

B: Miss Leaders. She was an English teacher there.

G: But it was for men only, is that right?

B: Yes.

G: Did it have a male faculty sponsor as well?

B: I don't remember that, who the sponsor was. It seems like it was Gates Thomas. He was an English teacher there.

G: Do you recall how LBJ got admitted, who sponsored him or what the process was?

B: No, I don't know, because it seemed like it didn't amount to very much until after he got involved in the thing and then it began to move forward.

G: I gather there was another literary club on campus for men, also.

B: I don't remember. It seemed like that was the most active.

G: What sort of a debater was Lyndon Johnson?

B: As far as I remember he was pretty fair. He would challenge people. He could bring up some pretty good points and could prove his points.

G: Was he witty or humorous?

B: Yes, kind of dry.

G: I gather the Harris Blairs would occasionally go to Wimberley and places like that, have overnight trips.

B: Yes. That's right.

G: Is there anything else about the group that you recall?

Blackman -- I -- 4

B: Well, not too much except that it seemed like every spring we'd go to Wimberley for overnight camp. One night we got caught for shooting craps out there, playing poker and one thing, girls and the boys.

G: At Wimberley?

B: Yes.

G: Was LBJ along, do you remember?

B: I don't believe he was. He always managed to stay out of that kind of thing or get out of it some way.

G: Let me ask you about the Student Welfare Council. This was, I guess, a group of elected students who sort of served as student government, didn't they?

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall how Lyndon Johnson worked with this group?

B: I don't recall. I think he was a member of it. I think he was elected by his class. We had to select members from the class to serve on the committee.

G: The committee, I guess, had the power to disperse the student funds, is that right, do you remember?

B: I don't remember, but I believe they did, because that's where we had quite a bit of argument sometimes about the division of it.

G: That's what I wanted you to explain to me, what some of the issues were with regard to how the funds should be allocated.

B: Well, really so much of that I didn't know too much about except that the athletic fund was to get a lot of the concession. There

Blackman -- I -- 5

came a discussion that they were getting too much and didn't need it, and the other organizations needed some. That's when they started discussing the dividing of the funds, the different organizations.

G: Did they divide it up, do you know?

B: I think we lost some. I don't know where it went to, but we lost some.

G: Did the Black Stars support the athletes, is that the way it worked?

B: Yes.

G: I gather the Council would also name the editor of the College Star and the Pedagog.

B: I'm not sure about that, but I think that's right. I think that's right.

G: Was there much politics in the selection of these?

B: It didn't seem to be, because it's kind of hard to get somebody to do it.

G: Oh, really? But it paid?

B: Yes.

G: I should have thought that it would be a reasonably good paying job as well as a prestige thing.

B: I don't remember too much about that. I know that the year they wanted me to take it, that's when the chemistry department gave me seventy-five dollars a month to take care of the chemistry labs.

G: So that was a better job.

B: So that's why I took that.

Blackman -- I -- 6

- G: You were saying before we turned on the tape, I think, that LBJ was named editor for the summer and you were named editor for the fall, but you declined.
- B: I had this other job, yes.
- G: Do you recall who supported him for editor?
- B: No, I don't. I sure don't. I think that one of the teachers there had something to do with it, the secretary that worked with the President.
- G: Tom Nichols?
- B: Tom Nichols. I think he supervised the Star some way or another. A lot of those things I'm kind of vague on.
- G: Well, it's been fifty years.
- B: Yes.
- G: I noticed that LBJ organized a Blanco-Gillespie County club almost as soon as he arrived on campus. Do you remember that?
- B: No.
- G: Well, before we turned on the tape I asked you about the 1928 Democratic Convention in Houston, where Al Smith was nominated. I'd like for you to recount what you told me earlier about how Johnson approached you with the idea of going.
- B: Well, one day we were talking out on campus about the convention and Lyndon said, "How about coming and going with me to the convention?" I said, "How?" He said, "Let's just hitchhike it. We don't have any money but we've got some friends we might be able to stay with." So I said, "Okay." So we got ready and caught rides

Blackman -- I -- 7

and went to Houston to attend the convention. We went to the sessions. Some way or another he was able to get some passes so we could get in. I don't know how he managed but he got them, I guess on a student basis. We attended two sessions. Then we came on back. We stayed with some of his friends, he called them. We were there two days. But I was afraid to cut any more classes so I went on back.

G: And hitchhiked back, is that right?

B: Yes. There wasn't any problem to hitchhike in those days. You could just get on most anywhere and get [a ride], because everybody thought you were legitimate. Even though we were just young politicians.

G: What was his reaction to the convention?

B: He just ate it up.

G: Really? What did he say about it, do you recall?

B: I don't remember what he said. He just said he wouldn't take anything for the trip down there. He learned a lot.

G: Did he ever talk about it with you in later years?

B: No.

G: Never did.

B: After I left school I never did see him very much anymore.

G: Do you recall what took place in the two sessions that you attended?

B: Well, the main one that we attended was the actual nominations. That's what he wanted to see, the actual nomination and how it went about.

Blackman -- I -- 8

G: Did you get any impression that he favored one candidate over the other?

B: Well, it seemed to me like that even going down there he leaned to Al Smith.

G: And was he there when Smith was nominated?

B: Yes, that's right. Yes.

G: I wonder if you got together at all with members of the Texas delegation there? His father had been in the legislature and probably knew a lot of them.

B: I don't remember. I know there was a couple of times he said, "I'll see you in a little while," and he'd go off someplace, and I'd stay. He'd say, "You just hang along around here and I'll be back." So I'd just wait for him.

G: And you both stayed together, is that right, at the friends of his?

B: Yes.

G: Well, there's a popular story that has it that he gained admission to the convention by showing issues of the College Star listing his name as editor-in-chief. He had taken copies of the newspaper down there with him, and that's how he got in. Does this sound familiar?

B: I don't remember that, no, I don't.

G: Where was the convention?

B: It's there at that old auditorium. What do they call it? In Houston. I don't remember exactly where it was.

G: Was there anybody else there that you knew?

B: No.



Blackman -- I -- 9

G: Boody Johnson wasn't there yet?

B: No.

G: Do you think that experience increased his interest in politics?

B: I believe so, yes, because he was really thrilled when he came back. He made a couple of speeches there at the school in classes.

G: Oh, did he?

B: Yes. To the history classes.

G: I don't suppose he received permission from the university to go before he left.

B: No.

G: Did he have to square it with--?

B: We did when we got back. We had to go through Evans, the president.

G: Were you called in?

B: We had to give excuses for not being at school, see. So we gave them. We had to go to his office to get them, because Lyndon worked for him at that time. So that wasn't too hard.

G: This was after you got back?

B: Yes.

G: What did Evans say, do you recall?

B: I don't remember. He just went ahead and signed the permits. Both of us were kind of his favorites so it didn't make so much. . . .

G: Well, now, before the convention Governor Dan Moody and Alvin Wirtz, Senator Wirtz, came and spoke at Riverside and there was a big crowd of students there. I wonder if you were there and if--

Blackman -- I -- 10

- B: I wasn't there. Now Lyndon might have been. He didn't miss many political rallies.
- G: Did LBJ do any writing for newspapers while he was down at the convention, do you recall?
- B: No, I don't know.
- G: That spring, in 1928, there was a drive among the students to improve Evans Field and also to improve Kyle Field, the track. You were active in that drive, according to my records, and so was Lyndon Johnson. Do you remember that?
- B: Vaguely, vaguely I remember it.
- G: Now, what happened. This was, I gather, going to be a student project and they were going to get pledges from students and maybe Dean [H. E.] Speck was an organizer of it. I'm not sure. But there was a big student assembly. Do you have any specific recollections here? Can you remember what happened?
- B: No. I just remember the activities to try to improve both fields, because they needed it.
- G: Now, you mentioned that Lyndon Johnson lived in that garage apartment of President Evans. Can you describe it and talk about what the living arrangements there [were] and who else was there and that sort of thing?
- B: No, except I know that for a while there were two or three athletes that stayed there, too. Boody Johnson and Ardis Hopper and Jack Lane. But after then I think Lyndon moved to the Gates house the next year when he came.

Blackman -- I -- 11

G: That was a boarding house?

B: Yes. One time somebody wanted to know how big the Gates house was, said they must have a lot of rooms because they had met lots of people who had roomed with Lyndon.

G: Well, there's some indication that he lived at Mrs. Hopper's house that last year with Elvin Read and Ardis Hopper and Fenner Roth.

B: I don't remember. The last year I don't know about.

G: Let me ask you about LBJ being brought up for membership in the Black Stars. Do you recall how he was brought up and what happened?

B: That I don't remember. I think Boody brought him up, I'm not sure. But I think the reason why he didn't get in was because he fought the division of the money back there when it first started.

G: You know, there was even the suggestion that he was courting the girlfriend of one of the members and he was blackballed for that reason. Have you ever heard that?

B: No.

G: Does that sound plausible?

B: Could be, because he could court. He was a good courter.

G: But you don't recall any particular Black Star that was angry with him for that reason?

B: No. I don't remember his name ever being brought up. I guess maybe I wasn't present at that time.

G: In general, how would someone's name be put forward for membership in that group?

B: Well, some member would just bring it up.

Blackman -- I -- 12

G: Was there discussion?

B: Yes.

G: Would people make speeches about him or how did that--

B: Yes, they'd make talks about him and discuss some of their activities and how they could help, one thing and another. They would just question and answer about it and then they'd have a secret ballot.

G: Was the Black Stars the official name?

B: As far as I know it was.

G: Why was it called that?

B: I don't know. I didn't get in it until I was a senior. That was in 1929 was when I was in it.

G: How many members would you say there were?

B: I don't know. There were a lot of them.

G: Really? Maybe thirty?

B: I imagine so.

G: Did you have regular meetings?

B: Yes.

G: What was the purpose of it?

B: Well, I really never did understand what it was. It was supposed to be athletes who supported the athletic program and would help to get new athletes in to the school.

G: I see. But couldn't the T Association do that?

B: Yes, they could have. They did later. I don't ever know what happened to it. I think in 1930, I guess, must have been about the last time.

Blackman -- I -- 13

- G: I gather that fraternities were not officially allowed on campus.
- B: No, they weren't.
- G: This was one way to have more or less a fraternity, a secret one.
- B: Yes.
- G: Would this describe what the organization was?
- B: I think so.
- G: Did you know about the White Stars?
- B: Not until I read Lyndon's book.
- G: You didn't know it at the time and yet you were a good friend of his.
- B: Yes.
- G: Did the Black Stars to a certain extent attempt to influence student politics, like who would be named the senior class president or make sure that their members got some of these offices?
- B: I don't think so. They might have, because I didn't get in until after I was elected the captain of the basketball team and president of the senior class.
- G: Did the Black Stars support you? Or you weren't in then?
- B: No. But most of those, after I got in, I saw that most of them were.
- G: Can you name any members of the Black Stars who were not athletes?
- B: No. No, I can't. Because I was in it just when I was a senior in 1929, in January up until school was out. Just six months is all the length of time I was in it. I went to about four meetings.
- G: Were there any faculty members who sort of sponsored the group?
- B: No.

Blackman -- I -- 14

G: Another point that I wanted to ask you to talk about in some detail was the circumstances under which Lyndon Johnson became best man at your wedding.

B: Well, I don't know. During the summer of 1928 I was with Lyndon quite a bit in the paper. I worked with him in the Star. I went to summer school that summer, and I was also selected as an outstanding senior summer student, I believe, during that end of 1928. I worked with him some on the paper, helped him get ads and one thing and another, and went to school. Then I played baseball, too, in New Braunfels during the summertime on Sundays and Saturdays. But then in the spring of 1929 I met my girl from Gonzales and then in the summer Lyndon signed up for that class, chemistry.

G: This was the class that you were teaching?

B: Yes, the class I was teaching. She didn't go to school that summer and so I borrowed his car to go see her about three times a week. Then we got pretty serious during that time and I asked him to go with me to talk to her daddy. That's when I found out he was a real politician.

G: How was that?

B: Well, he just sold her daddy on me.

G: What did he say, do you recall?

B: He just told him what a good guy I was. And he talked to her mother and all. They didn't want her to get married, but when we left there, why, she got in the car with us and came on home. Then he

Blackman -- I -- 15

called up the preacher, tried to get Dean Speck, and we couldn't get Dean Speck. We got the Presbyterian preacher, Lyndon did. On the road over there we had a flat in the car, so he just parked the car and we all walked over to the parsonage. He managed to get the whole thing done for us, so we got married right there. Then we went on back home and I stayed with my mother there on Bevin Street in San Marcos. He managed the whole deal.

G: Did anybody else stand up with you at the ceremony?

B: No, he was the only one.

G: There was not a girl?

B: No. So that was it. He just managed the whole thing for us. He did a good job.

G: Do you want to mention that student newspaper issue with your wedding announcement in it?

B: Oh, I didn't know that this other was coming out. When he came out with the newspaper he had big headlines about "Cage Captain Weds." He had contacted the powers that be that it would be all right, so it didn't seem to bother them anyway.

G: Did he present you with a copy?

B: Not until the issue came out the next day. But he gave it to me. But it was all right. Everybody seemed to accept it okay, even all my athletic friends.

G: Well now, you were saying that you would borrow his car to go down there and that you would furnish the gas. Is that right?

B: Yes.

Blackman -- I -- 16

- G: What kind of car was it?
- B: He had an old Model T Ford.
- G: Was it a T or an A?
- B: Model T, I guess it was. No, it was a Model A. Yes.
- G: It would be a pretty new car then, wouldn't it?
- B: Yes.
- G: Just a year old or so.
- B: Yes. He'd just bought it. You know, you'd heard him say a lot of times he wasn't able to get gasoline for it, but I always furnished the gasoline for his car. Because I had a little better job than he did.
- G: Well now, he dropped out for nine months and went down to Cotulla and taught. Did you ever see him when he was down there? Would he ever come back or would you ever go down there to San Antonio or anything?
- B: No, I never did. He'd come back once in a while to visit on week-ends, to school, and we'd see him then, at basketball games or something like that.
- G: How did he like teaching down there at Cotulla? Did he talk about it?
- B: Well, he seemed to be enthusiastic about it. He came back and was trying to make everybody be a teacher.
- G: Oh, really?
- B: Yes. He said, "You don't know what you're missing." Of course, I think the main thing he was talking about was the money. But he liked to teach.



Blackman -- I -- 17

G: He must have made a lot of money down there if he came back and bought a car, and I gather he was just able to afford things that he wasn't before he left. Was that the reason he went down there, do you recall? Why would he do that? Why would he drop out for a year and go down there.

B: I think he needed finances.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

G: But he had that job with President Evans.

B: Yes, I know.

G: And he lived rent free in that apartment.

B: I never have understood that. There are a lot of guys like that though. They had things going pretty good but they decide they want to teach.

G: Had he ever talked to you about it before he went?

B: No. See, we tried to get Lyndon to play baseball, go out for college baseball, but he wouldn't do it. He played with us some, a little semi-pro team when we would go out to Wimberley.

G: Oh, really?

B: Yes.

G: What was the name of the team?

B: Oh, we just played the San Marcos--I don't remember what kind of name we had.

G: Was he a good baseball player?

B: He could play.

Blackman -- I -- 18

G: What position did he play?

B: First base. We went out there one Sunday and we just had eight players and he was out there and we asked him if he wanted to play and he said, "Sure." So we put him on first and he got a hit. He said, "I can't play." but he played pretty good ball. So we tried to talk him into playing with us, going out for the Bobcat team but he wouldn't do it.

G: There's a story that he played on a team for maybe a week or so and then quit because the coach was having him pitch or something and it was hurting his arm or something to this effect. He didn't feel like he had time for it.

B: I guess that was the year after I left.

G: How about his writing as an editorial writer? Do you recall?

B: I don't recall too much but I think he did pretty good. He wrote some editorials, I remember. He tried to teach me how to.

G: Did he? What were his suggestions to you, do you remember?

B: Well, most of it was political. I wasn't much of a politician, but he liked to write those kinds of articles.

G: Can you describe his work for Dr. Evans, what he did for Dr. Evans?

B: It seemed to me like it was mostly just errand boy. Then he did write some letters for him, typed some. But most of the time he'd [Dr. Evans] need to get a message to somebody, why, he'd take it, give it back.

G: Now it would seem like with his interest in politics that he might have wanted to do some lobbying or, say, shown some interest in the

Blackman -- I -- 19

legislative appropriation that San Marcos got. Did he ever involve himself in this, do you know?

B: No. He could have the next year or two after he'd been out of school, teaching school a year. It seemed like he came into his own when he came back after he had taught. It seemed like he made himself known around according to the paper and things.

G: Did you ever meet his parents?

B: I spent the night with them a couple of times.

G: What were they like?

B: Real fine. Just good old country people.

G: Did his mother strike you as being well-educated?

B: Yes. See, his sister roomed with my wife once.

G: This was Rebekah?

B: Yes. That's how--Maisie [?] thought a lot of Lyndon, my wife. He liked Maisie and it was through Rebekah that Maisie knew Lyndon.

G: I see. She didn't know him through you, in other words?

B: No, not until after we started going together and using his car.

G: Well, I wanted to ask you to describe the offices of President Evans. They were in the administration building, is that right?

B: They were in the Old Main Building. He had a kind of a large hall entrance and Lyndon was in that. First was Tom Nichols, [he] had an area, and then Lyndon was in the back part of that. Then Evans had another entrance, a side entrance, to his office. There were two entrances. He'd go in one and come out the other.

G: Were there other people who worked in the office?

Blackman -- I -- 20

- B: No, other than Tom Nichols. Of course, Tom was close to him; he was pretty close to him. When I was there Tom was close in.
- G: You worked there for a while, is that right?
- B: Yes, I just cleaned the office. I was the janitor.
- G: What about stenographers? Were there any stenographers, typists?
- B: No, just Tom Nichols.
- G: Did LBJ have an office or a desk?
- B: Yes, he had a desk.
- G: In the same area where Tom Nichols was?
- B: Yes.
- G: I see. Now I gather in 1930 LBJ worked for Welly Hopkins' campaign there in San Marcos. Do you have any recollection of that?
- B: No, see, I was gone then. Lyndon tried to sell me his car that next year, that Ford. He wrote me a letter and said he'd take fifty dollars for it, but I didn't have it. We were busy paying off my debts going to school, so we didn't have the fifty dollars. Then 1930, you know, was when the bottom dropped out so nobody had much money. So I didn't buy it.
- G: Anything else on your experiences with him there?
- B: No.
- G: Where would you usually go for dates or social events?
- B: Well, a couple of times we went to picture shows in San Antonio, if it was something special. I went with him one time, he went with the Nabors [?] girl and then the Davis [girl].
- G: Carol Davis?

Blackman -- I -- 21

- B: Yes.
- G: Is it right that the rules didn't allow girl students to ride in cars with boy students there?
- B: Yes. It was pretty tough.
- G: How did you get around it?
- B: Well, see, Carol Davis lived in San Marcos.
- G: Oh, I see.
- B: So that doesn't make a lot of difference. We'd get somebody that lived there so then you could just go where you wanted to. But it's hard--oh, we slipped some gals out and went to dances some, to Euland. Some of them would get in trouble and some of them wouldn't. That's where we had all that argument about burying Brogdon, with all her crazy ideas.
- G: She really had some ironclad rules.
- B: Yes, that's right.
- G: Did LBJ get along well with her?
- B: Yes, we got along real good. She thought Lyndon was great.
- G: Did she?
- B: Yes. Because he could tease her and get along with her. I never did have any trouble with her because I tried to be nice with her.
- G: Who did you think LBJ's favorite teacher was?
- B: I don't know unless it was Prof. [H. M.] Greene.
- G: Did he talk about Greene?
- B: Yes.
- G: What did he say?

Blackman -- I -- 22

B: Well, he just kind of liked his presentation and his ideas about things. Some things I don't think he agreed with him on, but he caused him to do a little research by stirring up people in class about some of our favorite countrymen.

G: Anything in particular that you recall?

B: Well, one, he liked to belittle Washington, George Washington, and I think that upset Lyndon. That way he did quite a bit of research on some of that activities. That might be where he got in some of his political ideas.

G: Is there anything else that we've left out?

B: I don't know, I can't think of anything.

G: Well, I sure do thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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