INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 6, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: ALBERT W. BRISBIN

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Brisbin's residence, San Antonio, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Brisbin, let's start with your background. You are from Texas, I understand, Dayton.

J: I was born in Dayton, Texas, right. I grew up in Port Arthur. I taught school one year in a one-teacher school out in Menard County and then came to Austin and went to work for the Texas Relief Commission there in Austin for Mrs. Elizabeth Gardner, who was the head of the local office. Then I stayed with the Texas Relief Commission until December, 1935, when Zuleika Hicks [headed the commission]. Zuleika Hicks was Val Keating's successor in the state relief commission when Val went to WPA.

Lyndon has asked Mrs. Hicks if she knew of anyone working for the Texas Relief Commission at that time that she would recommend for his program. She gave him my name. I went to Austin in the latter part of December, 1935, was interviewed and hired and actually went on the payroll on January 4, I believe it was.

G: January, 1936?

B: January, 1936, right, I went on the rolls of the National Youth Administration, originally assigned to Amarillo.

G: Did LBJ interview you when you took the job?

B: Yes, yes.

G: Do you remember your first impressions of him?

B: So much has gone on since then that I guess things have changed a lot. As I recall it, we got along fine and really didn't have much of an interview. He just said they were doing their best to try to get young people into the jobs because they thought that the young people would have more rapport and sympathy with the youth that we were going to try to be helping. I guess I was on the high side of the youth program; I was twenty-six at that time. He just said something to the effect that "Well, we're doing all we can to get young people in this program but we think you're young enough to be able to help us." So they handed me an armful of regulations, told me to go out to Amarillo and get going.

G: Were you replacing someone who had been there?

B: No, this was the initial assignment for the NYA to that area. Now they had had some offices set up, I believe, before that, perhaps in Dallas and Houston, Austin and San Antonio. I'm sure you're aware that the NYA was really a supplemental program to WPA. We were really to try to provide useful employment and training to secondary breadwinners in the family. The breadwinner, no matter what his age, of course would have been eligible for WPA employment, which insured a higher income than we could offer them in our program.

G: Did he give you any instructions on dealing with the WPA?

B: Yes, that was a problem. I think we talked a little bit about it, that the WPA might have an inclination to just absorb you into their organization. "But we don't want to do it that way," [he said]. "We expect you to set up your own organization. Of course, we want you to get along with the WPA people. We don't need any feuds or anything like that. But we do want the NYA to stand up on its own feet as a program of its own." That's my recollection of the sort of instructions they gave us.

G: Did you drive up there and rent an office?

B: Yes. My wife was at her family's ranch in Menard, Texas. I went back to Menard and after Christmas we went up to Amarillo. I presented myself to the manager of the WPA. I guess they did have a tendency to feel in WPA that this was a sort of a subsidiary of their operation. You could certainly make an argument for that. But Lyndon, I think quite properly, felt that if we were really going to accomplish anything that we had to create our own program and work with WPA, but not actually let them tell us how to do it. I'm sure he had good relations with Mr. [Harry] Drought, who at that time was head of the WPA in Texas in San Antonio.

G: Do you want to describe the work of setting up the office?

B: I really can't remember that much about it. We had a very small office, I think maybe two or three people. I believe that initially the only real projects that we had to start with were those with the highway department, which of course Lyndon had already laid the groundwork for with the state highway department people. So I just

called on the highway department engineers or whoever was in charge of the areas out there, and talked with them about what we could do and tried to set up some work. We did some work. Of course, working in Amarillo in January, February and March isn't a lot of fun. So it was very difficult to really feel like you were accomplishing anything up there initially. But we were doing things that were looking toward the creation of roadside parks of one kind or another with the highway department up there.

G: How did you go about getting word to the youth that this program was opening up?

B: That was one of the first problems that we had, to try to identify our constituency. To do that we really had to rely on the WPA employment people to identify for us the secondary wage earners in their families. They didn't really feel they were getting reimbursed for that, so that got to be a little problem. But as time went on, the thing worked out and we began to identify the people who were eligible. As I said, I was only there for a few months.

I can't recall exactly, but I'm sure by May I had been transferred down to Waco. Most of the recollections of the NYA are really in the Waco area where I worked from then on until 1940 or 1941 I guess.

G: While you were in Amarillo, did LBJ ever come up and visit the office?

B: Yes, he came up one time and visited to see how things were going. My recollection is he got in there early one morning and was only there for half a day or so. I guess he was really trying to make

the rounds at the time. But that was probably in January or February. I guess really all they were expecting us to have done by that time was to have begun to develop our own list of eligible youth and to have set up some sort of an office.

We really didn't have any jurisdiction over the college program, because it was really largely decentralized from Austin directly to the institutions. They gave them quotas and allotments that they could draw on. I visited several of those colleges out there. But the program was going fine in that part, because it was really tailored to work directly with the school program, with the school and their regular administrative programs. So they were all delighted to have it where they could give these kids seven or eight or ten dollars a month, which was about all it amounted to at that time.

G: Did you have anyone working with you on the staff out there?

B: Yes. I think he's in this picture. (Looking at photograph of NYA group) I think that's him; Phil Wilson was his name, from Greenville, Texas. I had known Phil when I was working for the--well, by that time it was no longer the Texas Relief Agency; it was the Texas branch of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. It had been centralized in Washington under Harry Hopkins at that time. I had known Phil. I have forgotten exactly what he was doing, but he was working for the relief commission or the successor organization there in Greenville when I was assigned [there]. I was in Greenville for several months in 1935, 1934, somewhere along

in there. He came out to work with me. I guess I had a girl working in the office, and that was just about all of it, just the three of us, as I recall it.

G: When President Johnson came out there to visit the site, do you recall his interest in the thing, if he was more interested in one kind of project than another, if he had a particular interest in one or more of these?

J: I think it was so early that we really didn't have much going. I think he was really there to try to do a little diplomatic work with the WPA heads. I'm sure he must have visited the highway department people to charge them up a little bit about how important it was that they got into the thing. Because that was really just about all we had at that time.

G: Throughout the course of his directorship and extending over the time you were in Waco, did you get an indication that he really had a favorite project or type of project?

B: It's so hard to separate that sixteen or eighteen months that he was with NYA there while I was from the rest of it. He really was very strong on our public relations activities: getting the newspapers aware of what we were doing, getting everybody to understand that the youth program was a very important part of the government's activities. My recollection is that was his primary interest, at least in the earliest days, to be sure that there was recognition of the fact that we had a unique, important program. He was

carrying the word around on that I think more than anything else at that early stage.

Now projects did begin developing. He, I think, was always very much interested in the possibilities of the residence programs. [For] so many of the rural youth it just was impossible to develop any kind of a local project in rural areas where you could get any meaningful work experience. So we began early, and my recollection is Lyndon had a lot to do with it, to develop the project like Inks Dam project and others of that kind. We had a project with Prairie View [A & M] College for the black youngsters. You could get them off the farms and the sharecropper shacks and everything and take them over to Prairie View and just open their eyes to a whole new life. They got useful work experience and they learned a lot of things, too. I think we built dormitories for them over there, [that's] my recollection. Now as I say again, I'm not certain how much of that happened before Lyndon left, but at least we got started on it. [That] is my best recollection of working that way. Because it was so difficult, so frustrating, to try to find something that the rural farm youth could get involved in that was useful to them.

G: Prairie View, I gather, was reasonably successful.

B: I always thought it was a very successful program. We worked with some of the other Negro colleges in Texas, but I don't think we ever did anything quite as successful as we did with Prairie View. That worked very well indeed, I thought. I remember many times

loading my car up with black youngsters to take them down to Prairie View. That was the way we got them there; we took them ourselves.

G: They would stay there for a period of weeks or months?

B: Well, it seemed to me that the earliest concept of the training was you'd try to provide work for them for a week out of the month or some such thing. But when you go into a resident sort of thing you've got to have some other leeway. You can't run them up there one week and bring them home the next and so forth. So we, I think, did break some ground with the national office where we got authority to go on and put them in there for a reasonable period. They were carrying out work projects for the college, but also were getting an opportunity to learn to read and write and some of the other things that are such an important part of developing any working skills, which was what we were trying to [accomplish].

G: What sort of skills did they learn, in terms of laboring skills?

B: Laboring skills? They had some workshops there at Prairie View. You know, most of the black colleges in that day were really just sort of vocational schools, basically. They tried to train teachers and they tried to train for other sorts of vocations, but basically the black people at that time, their aspirations were not very high. They wanted to be able to do something that they could earn some money from. So my recollection--and W. O. Alexander would probably remember in more detail--was that we were using them on shop work. We were also probably doing some construction work around the place for the college. That's a sort of combination that we really worked

pretty well. In Waco, for instance, the city made available to us a building that they weren't using and we converted into a workshop, where we did a lot of woodworking and other things of that sort. That was a local project, you know, where the kids worked maybe ten days of the month. I can't remember exactly, but some such way.

G: What do you think was the most important factor in the difference between a good NYA project and a bad one, or a successful one and an unsuccessful one?

J: I think everyone felt pretty bad about leaf-raking kinds of projects. Those are the easiest ones to get. I see them doing it right now. They're going out picking up trash along the highways. But I don't think anybody got a lot of satisfaction out of that, or gained a lot out of it. Sure, it was nice to have the money, but it seemed to me that [the best projects were ones] where they really had a chance to acquire some new skills and to begin to understand the process of gainful employment, of securing gainful employment. And we tried to create situations where they really were rendering a valuable service. Most of them, the ones you always felt were successful, were the ones where their parents came and told you what a great job you were doing for their son or something like that. And that happened, quite a lot.

Of course, one of the problems that we always had, although it wasn't as big a handicap as I feared it might be for a while, the labor unions were a little bit leery of us training bricklayers. So you just had to work around that and tell them, "We want you to

come out here and supervise these boys and help them develop some skills." Well, the unions get a little bit uncertain about that. They were having a hell of a hard time, too, at that time. But it worked.

G: How did it work? Did Lyndon Johnson make it work? Did he talk to some of the labor leaders? What was his strategy?

B: I think that primarily we were trying to do it locally by working with the unions. It's the sort of thing that I think was probably a lot better to handle locally than it was to try to handle on a broad basis. I've talked to a lot of the union people and said, "Now, look, we would like to have one of your good people that needs the work come out there and help us with this project." And they'd rationalize their way around it. Their people needed work, too. It worked pretty good; we didn't have too much trouble with it.

Originally, initially, we did a lot of digging trenches for pipes and stuff like that. We had a project at the high school there in Waco, I remember, in the very early days. It was a beautification sort of a thing where they were going to do some landscaping and so forth around the high school. We moved a lot of dirt, but with wheelbarrows and shovels, which never did seem to me to be the best possible way to help young people develop their skills. So I think for that reason that all of us found the resident programs, where you could put them in situations where they were really learning something, [were very successful]. For

instance, at Inks one of the things they did was put in a foundry, and they were actually making bronze tablets and things. You see them in parks all over Texas still, because every time we built a park we put [up] one of these things that they'd make at Inks for us. They had some fine shop projects there and were doing some excellent work, first-class work.

G: Didn't they build a fish hatchery there, too?

B: I don't recall. They did some work for the Lower Colorado River Authority, but I don't recall precisely what they did. Maybe they did do some fish hatchery work. I wasn't that close to it. We'd get a quota of people that we could send down there, usually take them down there four or five at a time, maybe two cars full of them. I visited it, but I never did spend a lot of time there. I never had any responsibility for the operation. It was really pretty largely a state office operation. The state office directed it.

G: Did you have any crises or problems while you were at Amarillo?

B: I don't remember that we did. I have a feeling that we really didn't accomplish a devil of a lot during the brief time that I was there. But we were trying to, with all the handicaps [we had]. There might not be one or two days in the week when you could work out in the open on a project of that kind. No, I don't really think we had any major crisis, none that I can recall.

G: Did the district supervisors come back on the weekends, say, and meet with LBJ?

B: We had a number of meetings. There were meetings in Austin. I guess maybe at least every couple of months or three months we'd have a session up there. Of course, we were all trying to feel our way. How can we attack these kinds of problems and what can we accomplish? So we liked to get together and talk about what we were doing and try to learn from each other about the things that would work one place and might work somewhere else. Of course, Lyndon was a charismatic leader. He was always trying to fire us up.

G: Where did you meet on these occasions?

B: Initially, at least, we were over in the Littlefield Building, which I guess is still there. But later we were over in the Brown Building. That probably was after Lyndon had gone to Congress that we moved over to the Brown Building. I don't remember. But we met in the offices there at the Littlefield Building. It wasn't such a terribly big crowd, as you can see. Well, this is a pretty big bunch. You don't know what the date of this is?

G: No, I don't.

B: Everybody looks so young. (Looking at picture of NYA group)

G: Did you ever meet at his house in Austin?

B: Well, I think we played poker at his house one time, or something like that. But I don't remember [meeting there].

G: Now why did you go to Waco? Do you remember the circumstances there?

B: My best recollection is they were a little disappointed in what was happening in Waco, didn't feel that the fellow who was there was doing all that well. That's all I can recall about it.

G: So you went there after staying four or five months in Amarillo, is that right?

B: Right. Right. I was there until 1940, maybe 1941. We probably moved to Austin in 1941.

G: Of course, there you were a lot closer to the state headquarters.

B: Yes, that's right. Of course, Lyndon was in Washington by that time, although he used to get us all together when he was back in town, when we'd have a meeting or anything. We'd go over and meet with him, and he'd tell us what was wrong with the world and how he was solving it and so forth.

G: Did he maintain a continuing interest in the NYA?

B: Yes, he did. Yes, he certainly did. Jesse Kellam, of course, succeeded him as director and Jesse and Lyndon were really very close. I expect Lyndon had a lot of clout with Aubrey Williams and Harry Hopkins in Washington. I think he had something to do with the fact that we apparently did get a lot more leeway in developing some of our projects than the other states did, and had a reputation for being innovative.

G: What do you mean by leeway?

B: Well, it always has seemed to me that we were given a responsibility without any very clear guideline, or the ones we had were restrictive rather than helpful. The whole program was sort of a stepchild of the WPA. Sometimes they felt like we were using money that they could use better than we could. But I think by and large that seemed to straighten itself out over time. Because, as I said,

Lyndon really believed in the public relations program, which was really based on achievement, on actually doing an honest job and getting a lot done.

We began to find, fairly early, some of these guidelines that the national office set up as being very, very difficult and restrictive. To go back to some of the problems we had, [one was] getting the cooperation we needed out of the WPA, because they of course had the basic records. Now, we worked through the relief agencies. The FERA was still going. We got them to help us identify the youngsters. I think basically WPA never did have the kind of records that we needed for our purposes, so we had to try to persuade them to accumulate the sort of data we needed.

G: I see. You mean on families of youths that would qualify?

B: Yes. Their interest was the breadwinner, and that's just about as far as they went. A lot of times they wouldn't have any information about the rest. They would know there were six in a family, or four or five in a family, or something like that. Their records would show that. But my recollection and feeling about it was that we felt pretty handicapped to begin with. The things we wanted to do somehow or other we just couldn't quite manage because we didn't have the clout to do it. I think Lyndon really worked on that. That was his--he and Aubrey Williams and Harry Hopkins.

G: Aubrey Williams came down, I think, and visited some of the projects.

B: Yes. Yes, and I can't remember exactly when that was. I think maybe it was in 1936, if my memory serves. You should have asked

Fenner Roth about that trip. Aubrey came down, and he had an idea that one of the projects that we ought to set up would be to build a palm line, to plant palm trees all the way from Galveston to El Paso. That's right, he was going to take them to El Paso. Well, of course, palm trees don't grow very well in West Texas. So Fenner always thought that was about the best that he'd ever heard, Aubrey's proposal to plant trees.

We had some other people from [Washington]. Mrs. Bethune came down. Have you heard of her?

G: Mary McLeod Bethune?

B: Yes. She came to Texas. I think Lyndon had something to do with that.

G: What was she like?

B: Well, she was really a very wise old girl. She was, I think, one of Mrs. Roosevelt's protegees. I mean, Mrs. Roosevelt sort of took her up and it was smart to get to know her and have her look at your projects and so forth. We were glad to have her. We had some other people that came down from Washington.

G: Did you take Mrs. Bethune around Waco? Do you remember her reaction to the projects?

B: We had a project in Waco. We got Mrs. Roosevelt to come look at that one. We developed a girls club there, which was a sort of a fascinating little project. We took over a house that belonged to the city. The city had acquired it I think through a tax sale or such thing. We reconditioned it and cleaned it up and then set up a

girls project there, as a girls club. We used some of the girls to do the training. We had home economics classes there and a lot of things. It's still there, as a matter of fact. I got a letter a couple of years ago, inviting me to come down for an anniversary of that girls club. Mrs. Roosevelt was there and I believe Mrs. Bethune was there also, but at a different time. Mrs. Roosevelt was down here for something else; I've forgotten what. But she was always interested in seeing things of that kind, so she was delighted to come by the girls club and meet all the people. And boy, they really lined up to shake her hand there.

G: LBJ went to Waco in February, 1937, and addressed the faculty at Baylor and the students at the Baylor University chapel. Do you remember that?

B: Only the very vaguest recollection of it. I got to know Pat Neff pretty well, because the editor of the paper was Frank Baldwin. His wife was Helen Baldwin, who I was telling you did that series for the Associated Press. They got along well with Governor Neff. He came to their parties and all that sort of thing. So I got to know him pretty well. He was an interesting old boy, and as you said, he knew Lyndon's father I'm sure, as well as Lyndon's mother, too. But I don't recall the details of that at all.

G: You don't remember any stories relating Lyndon Johnson to Pat Neff, or LBJ's grandfather or his mother, any of the family?

B: No, I sure don't. I don't recall.

G: Just some general impressions. One has the image of Lyndon Johnson as being rather a driven man, even at this time, and pushing himself constantly.

B: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, he was. In fact, I tried to get Bill Deason to tell the story about that that happened back in those days when he thought that was inappropriate. Have you heard the story?

In the very early days, in the early spring of 1936, Lyndon was highly charged, as you say. He was really a dynamo. Bill, who had known him for most of his life, just blew up one time. I think he said something to the effect, "Well, Lyndon, if you don't calm down you're going to run yourself and all the rest of us crazy." And he got banished to El Paso. You hadn't heard that story?

G: Well, I knew he was out there.

B: Well, Fenner knows it, and I'm surprised nobody has told you if they haven't. Bill was really sort of an assistant to Lyndon at that time. I don't know what his title was, maybe it was administrative assistant and that very likely was Bill, because Bill came down every morning at seven o'clock and opened all the mail before Lyndon got there. Lyndon's rule was: you got a letter today; you answered it today. That's a hard thing to get away from, too, after you worked for Lyndon for a while, because he believed in it; he really did. He didn't have a confrontation with Bill at the time, but he told Jesse to send Bill out to El Paso on some sort of made-up assignment of some kind. Jesse sent him out there. Bill stayed a week or so and he called Jesse and said, well,

he'd cleaned that problem up. Could he come on home now? Jesse said, "No, I think you better stay a little longer." (Laughter)

Now the sequel to that is fairly interesting. Bill talked to Lyndon about it, reminded Lyndon of that when Bill was with the Interstate Commerce Commission there in Washington. Lyndon said, "Well, damn you, Bill, if you had said that to me privately, I would have took it all right. But you said it in front of all those other people and just infuriated me," or something to that effect. But I tried to egg Bill into talking about it at that little session we had with Bill White there in Austin. He [said], "Oh, no." He just won't get into that.

G: He didn't stay very long out there though, did he?

B: Oh, two weeks, three weeks, something like that. Lyndon would get mad and he would get over it pretty quick.

G: I think Ray Roberts used the expression that the NYA was really more of a crusade than an organization.

B: Well, I think that's right. That's a very apt statement of it. We were kept fully charged.

G: Did you work on the weekends?

B: Oh, hell, yes. We never quit working, really. Lyndon was a dynamo. He wanted you to spread the gospel right. I think most of us were really pretty enthusiastic about our mission, too. Of course, it was hard to work for Lyndon without getting enthusiastic or leaving. (Interruption)

G: We were talking about the dedication and long working hours of the NYA people.

B: Yes.

G: Did you get a feeling at the time for what motivated Lyndon Johnson in this job?

B: I guess we, all of us, felt he was running for president, had been for years. I don't really mean that seriously. What I mean is, he was obviously a very highly motivated, well organized, highly charged individual who was interested in politics and obviously had a great future in it.

G: Are you thinking of something in particular here?

B: No, I guess what I started to say is that we, all of us, who knew him, who worked with him, were really confident that he would go far in politics. Now, of course, I don't think anybody knows how you get elected president.

G: At any of these sessions, the poker games or the meetings or the bull sessions, did you ever talk about his future in politics? Did he ever verbalize it or what he might do?

B: Well, he and his brother both had a remarkable fund of stories about Washington. They would just keep you agog for hours on end about those sort of things. He knew everybody and knew everything. You know, at the time he came he had been, for several years at least, assistant to Congressman [Richard] Kleberg. So he knew his way around in Washington. My recollection is that he would call us naive sometimes because we'd say, "Well, we think this is what the

situation is." [He'd say], "No, that's not it at all." But he really was a very--well, I don't know quite what I'm trying to say. He was a very entertaining person to be around. You always enjoyed him. Now, he, as we've said, was certainly highly motivated and highly charged. Sometimes, it seemed to me, he asked a lot more of us than we really were capable of performing, but he made it work. And I guess we were a pretty naive bunch of boys, living here, growing up in Texas. We didn't quite see the world the way he saw it.

G: You wouldn't get disgruntled because he would push and push and push on you?

B: Well, I was trying to recall. It seemed to me that he would have some notion of something we ought to do. At least there were times when I just didn't feel that was a practical way to attack that problem. We had that sort of problem with him from time to time.

G: Can you think of something in particular?

B: Well, I was trying to recall one. I just can't bring it to mind. I remember the occasion. We were in a meeting in Austin and something came up about why didn't we do this or that. He would get so carried away with his own perception of the problem it was awfully hard to argue with him, to say, "Well, look, don't you think this is a problem that we might run into?" So I guess we were all pretty much in awe at that time. Very often, after we'd get through the meetings we would say, "Gee, I don't know how we're going to live through this," or something to that effect. Fenner and I were always pretty good friends. He was Lyndon's roommate

in college. He knew him real well. We would commiserate with each other about how we were going to deal with this assignment. We didn't really see how we could handle it as he'd suggested.

G: Would he play one of you against the other?

B: I guess he did. To me it always seemed to me that I was being compared with Ray [Roberts], and I bet Ray felt the same way, too. If you'd ask him I bet he'd tell you that he always felt like Lyndon or Jesse or Bill were always saying, "Well, look, Bris is doing this or that. Why aren't you doing something like that?" Yes, that was one of his characteristics, one of his traits, that I really had forgotten about, but he sure did.

G: What were some of his other techniques that he used?

B: You know, that's a long time ago. As we've already said, he was able to deal with people on a different level from the rest of us. He was sometimes talking to someone in Austin about something, or he was talking to--I don't really know. I mean, I really can't recall, but it seemed to me that he never did really have a very strong relationship with Drought, who was the head of WPA at that time, although Lyndon had friends everywhere. He'd know somebody that he could call and talk about it. I guess Bob Phinney--have you talked to him, by the way?

G: No.

B: It's P-H-I-N-N-E-Y. Bob Phinney. He was the district director for Internal Revenue there in Austin until he retired a few years ago. Don't tell him I told you to talk to him, because he's not

one of my admirers. I've put him in a position where he had to retire, and he'll never forgive me for that for the rest of his life. And I did it deliberately. He was the last political appointee in the Internal Revenue Service. You know, in the old days, the president appointed collectors of Internal Revenue, [as] they were called then. When they'd call a meeting in Washington of the collectors, well, the collectors all dropped by the White House to see Harry before they would go over to see the commissioner. Bob was one of those. He was actually the last of them, and Lyndon got him appointed collector of Internal Revenue there. He was converted to a district director on a reasonable basis. Bob was a very competent person. He sort of ran a family shop in Internal Revenue, that was one of the problems with him. The people weren't working for Internal Revenue; they were working for Bob Phinney, and I didn't think that was a very happy situation.

But Bob knew Lyndon very well indeed in those early days, and as a matter of fact was working for Drought in the employment area, which was a very valuable place to have a friend. That was one of the problems we were always having, to get data out of the WPA, to get them concerned about identifying and informing us about people that were eligible for our program. Bob Phinney, I guess, was associated with Val Keating. I'm not quite sure what their relationship was. But Bob, at least, was in the employment side of it, which was the side where we needed more help than any other

place. He was, of course, a very firm friend of Lyndon's, which brings to mind another little story about Lyndon and I.

The Internal Revenue, the Austin office, during the time that Lyndon was president, did an audit of Jesse Kellam's tax return. He was working for Lyndon at the time there. It's sort of a standing joke in NYA that Jesse Kellam bought all his suits at Stein's where you could get a suit for twenty-five dollars. They somehow found out that Lyndon one time while he was president, it may have been before he became president, at any rate told Jesse to come on over here to San Antonio and go to Lentz Linden, his tailors, and get a suit made. Jesse said, "Oh, I don't [want to]." "Oh, yes, you are, by God. You better do it." So he did it, got a four hundred dollar suit as a gift from Lyndon. But the Internal Revenue Service considered that income to him and he had to pay taxes on it.

Now I'm not certain that that was what triggered this, but while I was in Washington with Internal Revenue, Walter Jenkins called the acting commissioner one day and said the President wanted us to send Bob Phinney to South America. We had a tax information program going between us and the countries down there, and he didn't care where we sent him. Send him to Peru or anywhere we wanted to, but send him to South America. (Laughter)

G: Did he go?

B: No, I think Bob found out what was going on and went to Lyndon or went to Walter or somebody. Anyhow, he got Lyndon to reconsider it.

G: That's a good story.

B: Yes. But it was another one of those banishment things like Bill Deason going to El Paso.

G: Now, we were talking about LBJ and his political aspirations. Did you have a sense for his attitude towards Franklin Roosevelt?

B: Of course, he had more insight into the political things than most of us did, certainly more than I did at that time. I think generally the people that were working in the NYA and WPA, too, to a large extent felt that Roosevelt was just absolutely the finest human that ever lived, as far as they were concerned. I'm sure Lyndon was a great admirer of his. My feeling about it was that he just thought it was wonderful to have that sort of leadership in the White House. Lyndon actually, of course, knew Aubrey and Harry Hopkins who was spending about as much time in the White House as he was anywhere else. As I'm sure you are aware, when he ran for Congress in the spring of 1937 his record was that he was going to uphold the right hand of the President. Which was, I think, good politics in a lot of ways, because it brought him to the attention of President Roosevelt.

G: You talked about his attitude toward publicity, and I was going to ask--

B: Yes. I don't mean that to be critical either, but Lyndon believed that this program that we were working on was a real cause, and he wanted the people of Texas to realize what we were trying to do and how well we were doing it. We all agreed with that. We didn't have any trouble with it. By and large we had a first-class press during

all this time, and it was no small part due to Lyndon, because he was out selling it all the time. As [with] everything he ever did, I guess, he attacked it in the same way, you know, highly motivated, highly organized.

G: I read in the files that one of his major concerns was with the efficiency of the projects and the lack of corruption and making sure that they got the maximum amount of youth employment out of every dollar spent, rather than spending a lot on overhead. Did he emphasize this with you?

B: Well, it seems to me that that was [true]. We always had pretty small staffs. It was on the basis of his own feeling about things. That was the way to run it. He wanted highly motivated people and not a lot of time spent in the office. He wanted them out there working, seeing that the work was going on properly, that things were happening.

(Interruption)

G: I wanted to ask you about a couple of the projects. You've talked about a number of them already. But again, on the roadside parks, did you do this in the Waco area, too?

H: Yes, oh, yes.

G: I understand that there was a decision made not to have rest room facilities in the park because they didn't have the facilities to maintain them. Is that [it, the lack of personnel]?

B: I think that's probably correct. You know, a rest room requires water and sewage and all that sort of thing. So, yes, we really

just tried to make them nice places where people could stop for lunch or something like that.

G: The term beautification was used in conjunction with some of the highway projects, planting trees and shrubs along the highway. Do you remember that aspect?

B: No, I don't, really. We might have done some of that but I don't recall it as being any significant part of our work.

G: How about building school gymnasiums and vocational, agricultural buildings? Did you do any work of that nature?

B: Yes, we had a project in Athens that was involved with, it seems to me, an extension to the gymnasium. Then there was another one where we did build some sort of facilities for the Future Farmers' activities. But it seems to me that was down around Buffalo, Texas.

G: Was there a project to eliminate traffic hazards?

B: Doesn't ring any bells.

G: Putting up railings at precarious turns?

B: I don't remember anything like that at all.

G: How about research in Texas history? Did you do any of that?

B: Not that I can recall. Now, the WPA had some projects of that kind, and I guess we could have gotten into the edge of some of them, but I don't recall that we did at all.

G: What projects did you have connected with Baylor?

B: I don't believe we did anything with Baylor as a work project. You know, they had their own school aid program, but I don't recall anything [else]. But of course Baylor wasn't a public institution.

I mean, it's private. We were always hung up on the thing about we could only improve public facilities. Baylor wouldn't have qualified because it's a church organization. I mean, we worked for the public schools; we did a lot of things to the public schools. We built a library in Athens, as a matter of fact, I remember, and dedicated it to the veterans of the First World War.

G: Could Baylor's students receive NYA student aid if they were working on public projects though? Did they do any of this?

B: I don't think so. I think the rules were altogether different on the educational part of the program. As a matter of fact, I never did get involved in it. My feeling was that it was a sort of a gratuity that they got to help them through their college career, and it was not connected at all with the business of providing work experience and training. Now, that's not to say that they might not have done work in the school, in some part of the school system, or assistance to the teachers or professors or whatever.

G: You mentioned the project at Prairie View. Beyond this, did you have an impression of LBJ's attitude toward blacks in the NYA as a whole?

B: I don't remember it being anything but they certainly deserved our attention as much as any other youth. There certainly was no question about that, that the black youths were the people that probably would get more out of our work experience than anybody else would. It wasn't put that way, but our duty to the blacks was just as real as our duty to any other of the disadvantaged young people.

G: Do you think that Lyndon Johnson was ahead of his time in his thinking on race?

B: I expect so. Yes, I really think that was a sort of a basic fix of his all his life.

G: Was this something that was evident to you at the time?

B: Well, I don't really recall it as being a problem, as something that would come up where you would need an expression of view. But I know that he was delighted to have Mrs. Bethune come look at our projects. We did have a lot of black people working on our various projects. I guess we tended to segregate them though, now that I think about it. I don't remember that we had blacks and whites working together on the same project. But I'm not sure of that, I just don't recall. Of course, segregation was such a part of our lives in those days that I guess we may well have. As I said, I just can't recall. But my impression was that Lyndon had a very liberal view, as he did the rest of his life.

G: What about the supervisors? Did you have a difficult time getting good project supervisors?

B: I don't recall that we did. As I said, the only difficulty I remember about them is that in a lot of cases we were trying to get people that were in labor unions. Texas has never been a great labor union state, of course. But in the building trades, particularly, they were strong in Central Texas, in Waco, the larger towns. I don't know that they had any--I suppose everybody was non-union. As a matter of fact, a lot of that broke down during the Depression.

Then of course during the war, my God, they just hired anybody that could hit a nail with a hammer.

G: What was Mrs. Johnson's role during these years?

B: I don't remember her having any real role in the NYA, except socially.

G: Did you meet her and get to know her?

B: Yes, oh, yes. Yes, we met her early on. In fact, it seems to me I may have met her the first day I met Lyndon. You know, we worked hard and we worked long, and I think we all went to dinner together one night or something like that, and I met her then.

(Interruption)

But she didn't have any role that I'm aware of, except a social one.

G: Do you recall his decision to run for Congress after Congressman [James] Buchanan died?

B: I think he made that decision in about five minutes. Yes, of course we knew what he was doing. In fact, he called on--you've probably heard this one--Governor [James] Allred at that time and told him that he wanted to run. The Governor said, "Great. Tell me when you want me to call the special election and I'll call it to suit your convenience." He had so much going for him: he was better known; he was a very vibrant person, as you know. [He was] not a great speaker, but his own inimitable style carried a lot of conviction with it, I think, for most people. He wasn't an FDR or some of those people who's a spellbinder as a speaker, but his relationships were so strong with everybody he came in contact with. I guess I really remember more about when he was running for the

Senate than I do for the House seat. It's all a matter of the record. I think he had ten opponents if I'm not mistaken. All it required was a plurality I believe, and he apparently got that very easily. He was in the hospital for an appendicitis operation, of course, when he was elected.

G: Did you see him any time shortly after the election or the operation?

B: Well, we went to see him at the hospital. My wife and I went to see him. Lady Bird was there. A lot of people were there. That was the day after the results of the election. I think he had the operation a couple of days before the election. That's my recollection.

G: What did he say?

B: Well, I'm sure he was buoyant. I remember one of the things he said which I'll never forget was--and he was talking to all of us--that he got a check for I've forgotten how much, maybe a hundred dollars from Congressman Kleberg, and he was furious with him. He said, "Hell, he should have sent me ten times that much!"

G: Kleberg, I understand, didn't want him to run for some reason.

B: I don't know. I really don't know what the story was there. At any rate, he didn't help him much. That was what Lyndon was saying, of course, that he hadn't been very helpful to him, and he was disappointed in him or something to that effect.

G: Now Sam Houston [Johnson] was working in Kleberg's office at the time.

B: Yes, that's right. He succeeded Lyndon.

G: Did he help him?

B: I'm sure Sam Houston did anything [he could]. Probably Lyndon felt it was better for Sam to stay where he was than try to do anything else. You see, it was really just a sort of a little local election in a lot of ways. It included seven or eight or ten counties, I've forgotten how many. It was a wonderful opportunity for Lyndon. It was one that was built for his type of approach to that kind of problems, because he buttonholed everybody. He got a letter--you've probably heard this story about him--and he may have had that letter in that hospital that day. No, it was later than that. He got a letter from an oil man in Houston whose name I wouldn't have any idea of, but who was well-to-do. He wrote Lyndon to the effect that he was very disappointed that he had been elected, that he certainly didn't agree with his politics or the approaches he was taking. It was really a pretty bitter letter. You've heard this story, haven't you?

G: No.

B: Haven't you? Lyndon wrote him back and said he'd like to come down and talk to him. That became one of his greatest supporters. Right. That happened, no doubt about that. He went down and talked to him and told him how he felt about the things. Well, he said one time to us as a group that "They can accuse me of being too liberal, or a communist or something. But I come down here and eat crackers with these boys in these country stores. They know it can't be so, because they've seen me." He was really a very remarkable person.

G: Did you observe his association with Senator [Alvin] Wirtz?

B: I didn't really have much of an opportunity to. They, of course, were very close friends. Wirtz was in Washington, I believe, at that time, wasn't he?

G: No, he was in Austin I think at the NYA [period].

B: Yes.

G: I wonder if he would rely on Wirtz for advice?

B: I suspect he did. Now I don't know that much about it. I know they were very close and he had the highest regard for him, but I don't really [know]. Jesse--well, of course Jesse is not available, but I was going to say, Bill would be a better source of information on that if you want to pursue it. Bill would know because he was just living with Lyndon at that time.

G: Let's see, in August, 1936, there was a banquet for Richard Brown, assistant NYA director in Washington, when he came down to Austin. Do you remember that? Governor Allred was there.

B: A banquet in Austin?

G: Yes.

B: No, I don't. I don't recall it.

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

B: No, I don't really think so. I've remembered a lot of things I hadn't thought of in a good many years during this, and I don't believe I have anything to add.

(Interruption)

G: Let me get you to start this from the beginning again. This was in 1941, do you think, or was it 1948?

B: It was 1941, I'm sure. That was his first race for the Senate against Coke--

G: W. Lee O'Daniel.

B: W. Lee O'Daniel, right. He beat Coke Stevenson later. I saw Lyndon and I can't be sure where, probably in Austin. I was still in Waco with the NYA at that time. We did get to see him when he'd come back. When we were there we'd always go over and visit with him and let him give us the latest word about how we were doing and so forth. I saw him I guess in Austin after he announced that he was going to run for [the Senate]. Now that was a special election, too, wasn't it? Right. [Tom?] Connally died? No.

G: Morris Sheppard.

B: Morris Sheppard died, right. I guess he was speaking in Hillsboro and I went up there. No, no. I'd seen Buck [Hood] before then and talked about some problems Lyndon was having, and Lyndon said something about me writing a speech for him. I never did do it. I didn't know anything about writing a political speech and I just didn't think I had anything to contribute.

But Buck was telling me about the problem he was having at these courthouse meetings. They'd come on the courthouse and stand up there and make a speech, particularly at night. Buck was telling me about the problem, and I said, "Maybe we can figure out some way to help him with that." I was going over to Marshall for

something or other at the time. I guess Ray [Roberts] had already gone somewhere; I don't know where, can't remember. But at any rate, he wasn't at Marshall at that time. I was going over to Marshall for some other reason. I went to one of their shops there, and we designed and built him a little podium that he could use, and put a light on it and everything, got it all ready. I rushed back with it, and they tried it out in Hillsboro on his next speech there, and I was there. He was very happy with it.

Then he was going to be in Dallas and I went up to Dallas. They were in the Adolphus Hotel, I'm sure. I was up in his office there in Dallas, and that's when he told me. He said, "You know, you could get in trouble. You better watch it a little bit." I said, "Okay," or something to that effect. But I had arranged to introduce him to Sam Acheson [?], who at that time--I don't know what Sam does now, but he was a big shot in the Dallas Morning News, sort of a columnist I think for the Dallas Morning News, and a bright guy. I had met him and I was telling him what a great guy Lyndon was. He said he'd like to meet him. So I said, "Okay, I'll set something up for you." So we arranged for him to meet him, and Sam was a good friend of his from then on. Lyndon had that remarkable characteristic of being able to win the respect, admiration of people. But I guess I really did sort of try to tone down a little bit after that.

But I was, as a matter of fact, at his campaign headquarters there in the Austin hotel when the returns were coming in. At first

he thought he was elected, and he was talking to me and C. P. [Little] about one of us going up to Washington with him, in the hotel there. Then the bad news started coming in.

G: Do you think he was getting counted out?

B: Yes. He always felt that they were still casting a lot of votes over in East Texas after the polls closed.

G: Did he think that Jim Ferguson was behind some of the switching from [Martin] Dies to O'Daniel?

B: It seems to me that was one of his suppositions, but I can't be sure of that. The old-time Texas politicians were counting him out of it; he was convinced of that.

G: Why did he think they were doing it?

B: Well, the Texas Democrats, they've never been very democratic. Most of the Texas politicians, the state politicians, which Lyndon never had really been, they're just as conservative as hell. They think anybody that talked the way he did about FDR was probably a red, you know, secretly, and so forth. He had that kind of a problem. As he said, he overcame it anytime he could get to meet people and sit down and talk with them about it. But that was the thought of a lot of these old-time politicians here. I can't recall who were the leading politicians, but it was one of those very conservative groups, had to be. That was the only way they. . . . The oil people were financing most of the campaigns in Texas. They had their own axe to grind, and they expected politicians to be obedient.

Well, I guess all of us really thought we were living it up, that close to power, to somebody who was going to be a senator. We firmly believed he was going to be elected.

G: Do you think there was a strategy mistake of trying to get the returns in so early from his strong precincts?

B: I really think that Lyndon underestimated the power of his opponents. He just thought he was going to sweep it all in front of him, all of us did, really. As a matter of fact, as I said, the early returns sounded so good that we were all talking about how our lives were going to be changed. So they were pretty stirring days. That's, I think, maybe the only time I ever met Herbert Henderson. His brother I had known before. You mentioned his name. What was the other Henderson's [name]?

G: Charles.

B: Charles. Charles was in Austin, and I guess probably on the NYA payroll for at least part of the time prior to that. But he was working for Lyndon's office there. He was part of the election staff. I remember I went up to see him. I was up there at the headquarters and saw him, and he was working on responding to some letters that Lyndon had gotten. But I don't remember anything very significant about that.

It made us all feel like we were really living in the real world to get into something like that. I guess by that time I was getting a little nervous, too, about the--well, now you said the 1948 election. I was working for the VA then.

G: In San Antonio?

B: In San Antonio, right.

G: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

B: I can't think of anything. I've thought of a lot more than I thought I would.

G: I sure do thank you.

B: You're sure welcome.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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