INTERVIEW V

DATE: February 2, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: ELIZABETH CARPENTER

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Ms. Carpenter's home in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: Liz, let's start off talking about the reaction to the book on the Kennedy assassination particularly and the Kennedys in general, by William Manchester. There was some criticism in there of the Johnsons, and so far as I know the Johnsons never answered a one of them. But they must have been aware because everybody else was.

C: I think they were very careful not to give any reactions. Mrs. Johnson had given an interview, as you know. All of these interviews were difficult because for one thing, it was still fresh enough in everyone's memory that you did have cold chills.

F: It was about the first thing that had come out at that time, I know.

C: Yes. Second, you did know that you were dealing with someone who might not necessarily be a friend. And I think that he proved that he understood easterners a lot better than [he did] southwesterners. He seemed to make an effort to make everything that they did have style and everything that anyone from the Southwest did was a little too noisy for him. It would not be hard to find almost anything too noisy for him.

But about a year after he wrote the book, he sent me a letter in which he said that he had received many letters praising President Johnson's behavior; that he wanted President Johnson to know he was a

friend and that the book had created friends for Johnson.

F: Inadvertently or otherwise.

C: Almost a tragic sort of letter because by this time, he had had his knuckles rapped publicly by the Kennedys and he seemed to be reaching for somebody. But while I made certain people aware of the letter, there was still never a reaction. I'll ultimately give the letter to the Lyndon Johnson Library.

F: Was there any sort of tacit order that came down from on high that the staff were not to make any public reaction to the press on the book?

C: Not that I remember. Now, it's quite possible that there was such a thing. Sometimes those only filtered to the West Wing and never touched me.

F: The reason I ask--you know, it was news anywhere, and people just kept bringing up disclosures, particularly some of those that were critical of the President and some of the President's people. Yet, so far as I could tell, everyone just sort of went on about his work and ignored it.

C: That's right. I think that actually while the book had a great many things in it that I might argue with, still the total effect was one of horror. It was rather well written, and I think that--

F: It was a compelling book.

C: It <u>was</u> a compelling book, and I can't say that we suffered too much from it.

F: Let's shift off that and talk a little bit more about trips. We've covered the main trips, but there--

C: First--a minute. You know that Bill Manchester is not a well man, and I think that anyone who looked into his situation should know that he was haunted by this book, haunted by his role in it; and that a highly sensitive person like he--

F: Evidently he drove himself like mad.

C: Yes. It was almost an inhuman job he did--I mean, with himself. And I doubt if you would get a balanced book from an unbalanced situation.

F: Mrs. Johnson, on February 26, 1966, made a trip down to the University of Alabama. Do you recall that one?

C: Yes, very well.

F: Let's talk about it.

C: She had gone one summer for a brief time to the University of Alabama. She had very much wanted to salute the good things that were happening in the south, and the University of Alabama had a very able president, Frank Rose. She was invited to come down and speak on their Woman's Day in which they bring in outstanding alumni from all over the state and have outstanding women speakers. It was a speech she poured a lot of heart into. She felt very much at home on that campus and wanted to show by her presence that she hadn't turned her back on the south.

F: To place this context, George Wallace has been making noises against the administration for quite some time, and Lyndon Johnson is not welcome on the ballot in Alabama--or the Democrats are not, really. So that in a sense you're going into the teeth of the gale here.

C: But still if you're going to find any progressive group in Alabama, it's going to be at the University of Alabama. And certainly with Doug and Libby Cater, who were on the campus from Alabama, this was an added come-on. And Libby Cater helped.

F: Had Libby gone there too?

C: Libby was president of the student body.

F: I didn't realize that.

C: And a Phi Beta Kappa. Libby did the first draft of the speech, and the message was pretty much that, "Don't let years and the drudgeries of housework kill all your instincts--all your drive. Get up and have some go. Don't let that get you down." It was kind of a come-on to women to become involved.

F: Who was in the audience?

C: Prominent alumni and women leaders from all over Alabama--and students.

F: Both sexes, or just females?

C: I believe it was just an all-woman audience.

F: Did you have any politicians in tow, or were they keeping hands off? It seems to me the situation was set up for them to leave it alone if they wanted to.

C: I believe that no one was there. This was not nearly as tense a situation as the whistlestop through the South, of course, nor as the trip we made to Huntsville, Alabama. But Mrs. Johnson was very anxious to make Alabama a part of the United States and did so by a lot of letter writing to kinfolks, a small wave of phone calls, and then just simply refusing to turn her back on them. And she was one of the few people that could get in there.

F: How was she received?

C: Extremely well, with lots of people at the airport, and even more students out there. It was really kind of before the time of big demonstrations--ugly demonstrations.

F: She was, of course, in a sense an Alabamian, if you want to go far enough back.

C: Sixty-seven cousins showed up at one gathering.

F: Really?

C: Yes.

F: That ought to qualify her.

C: Yes.

F: Did she know them?

C: Absolutely. We invited them. She spent lots of summers--you don't have to go far back in her line, because after her father and mother died, she got on the train every summer with Aunt Effie and went back and spent lots of time in Alabama, and owns property in Alabama.

F: You will remember the flap that arose at one time over the fact that some of the tenants--

C: She hadn't painted her tenant's house. Actually, that could have caused a lot more agony than it did. I think again, by answering the press quickly and as honestly as possible, the truth of the matter was simply that you would like for no one to be living in those houses and tear them down. But because these people had been on the land and because they were in most cases indigents, some cases half-wits, she rented it to them at five dollars a month, and she hadn't done a whole lot of fixing up at five dollars a month. Well, the two Republican Congressmen who went down there made a lot of it.

F: Did they go, as far as you can ascertain, with that in mind--to see what they could find?

C: Yes. Because they were against the President's anti-poverty program, and they thought it could shame the President to show that poverty conditions existed on his wife's land. Of course, it'll take more generations than the next ten to properly bring these people out of their wilderness.

F: Did you ever hear the President comment on these revelations--charges?

C: Yes. He was annoyed. He was annoyed that they would exploit it, but he was annoyed that it happened. And he let Lady Bird hear a lot about it, more than she deserved.

F: Did she seem to be more hurt or annoyed by it?

C: Hurt for the people, hurt for Charlie Cutler--I think this was the name of the elderly Negro tenant--whose parents had worked for members of her family and who was highly embarrassed that people would come out and--

F: Who was Charlie Cutler, now?

C: The elderly Negro. Elderly guileless people most of them, living as so many people do down there. And in many ways you're better off to be in the country than in a ghetto of a city. But with just not enough resources within themselves to hold a job.

So she didn't want to tear the houses down. You know, it's a case of "no good deed goes unpunished." What are you going to do? But it'll take a long time before the people with as little resources as they had are able to measure up to the Republican.

F: Did the President tell her to get in there and fix them up, or did he pretty well let her run her own business on that, as far as you know?

C: I'm not sure. I suspect he would have told her to fix them up. That would probably have been the worst thing that we could have done.

F: You didn't do anything, did you? You left life like it was.

C: No.

F: Did Mrs. Johnson ever talk to Charlie Cutler about it?

C: She talked through a lawyer. Ashton Gonella will know this story better than I do. When I called her that I was getting press calls on it, I simply said, "What are the facts?" The facts are that she wished she had

the whole acreage in pine saplings, but that she could not turn these people off her land, and so she charged them five dollars a month--maybe that's to give them a sense of responsibility. Nobody wanted the five dollars a month. It just was perhaps to give them a little more dignity.

F: You'd had one rather well received tour of the White House by Jackie Kennedy, and no one ever tried to equate Mrs. Johnson's style with Mrs. Kennedy's style. They're two different types entirely.

C: The press did constantly, I think. I mean, comparisons are obnoxious. But occasionally they would. I think generally Mrs. Johnson came out very favorably. She did things.

F: Particularly as time went by.

C: Yes.

F: I read some of the comments on her in '64 as against '67 and '68, and you could see the growth in esteem in the intervening period.

C: Yes. Well, she was an activist, and I think that the thing that most people want in a first lady is to feel that she was interested in doing something for the life of her country, giving of self.

F: What I was leading up to was the fact that Jackie had done this TV tour of the White House, and then Mrs. Johnson did one of Washington for television. This was in '65, and it, I think, won a Peabody Award.

C: Yes, it did.

F: Now, how did that come about? You were bound to invite some comparisons.

C: Yes. The purpose wasn't that you were trying to give a tour. As a matter of fact, the "tour" element never occurred to us--that element of it. The purpose was to try to show what her beautification committee had done in

have to make around Washington to--

C: It went on for two months. She blocked out time to do it right. She went even at sunrise to Mount Vernon because the sun's better then. The cameramen all fell in love with her because she was the first person they'd ever been around who didn't just treat them as a piece of equipment. I know one time there was one of them holding up something--a microphone 'way up over her head--and she looked up at him and she said, "Can't you lay your burden down?" She was conscious of the fact that they were working. Incidentally, two of them later were killed in Viet Nam. But she kept a friendship with them and had a party for them when it was all over. They all felt they were working on a work of art, and it wasn't with any prima donna. They made a chair for her that said, like a director's chair, "First Lady." She got to know this city intimately before that. She does her homework. And I know one night at nine o'clock they were still filming at the Lincoln Memorial. She made several forays down there late at night to get the feeling of that building.

F: Did you have much trouble pushing back crowds?

C: No.

F: They must have gathered.

C: Well, most of the filming was done when the tourist hours weren't at their peak. A boat almost sank in the Potomac. They were out on a barge rented by ABC. The President wouldn't let them use the Sequoia, which I think was too short-sighted, but he was afraid somebody would criticize us for it. So ABC rented a barge, and it was not exactly weather-proof anyway. It got to the point where the barge sprung a leak. It got deeper and deeper into the Potomac, and finally the Secret Service insisted that

Washington, and thereby show it to the rest of the country; and say, "Look, we have, with a committee and with some energy and effort, planted a park. You can do it in Keokuk, Iowa." The idea was that if she would use the great powerful media of television in color and say, "This happens to have been my town for awhile, and this is what I tried to do in it. You can do it too," this example would spill out. And I think it did.

F: How do you go about negotiations on something like that?

C: They came to us. Now, I think that probably the idea was born with Mary Lasker, who was one of Mrs. Johnson's most enthusiastic disciples in the beautification field, and had talked to Leonard Goldenson about it. ABC came to us. They spent a tremendous amount of money. They would liked to have sold it commercially with ads. Looking back, I think we were probably too rigid, too self-righteous. We made them do it for public service. As a result, it cost them a great deal of money, because they used--and we demanded--the most artistic producer they had, John Secondari. Before Mrs. Johnson undertook it, she looked at his films on Leonardo da Vinci and two or three other exquisite documentaries, and he obviously was the man to make this story come to light. So she spent a long amount of time and Simone Poulain, who was Mrs. Johnson's assistant on television, spent a lot of her time on this show.

F: Was it scripted in the White House, or outside?

C: It was scripted primarily by Mrs. Johnson's meeting with Secondari. She liked him; they were soulmates; they talked things out. Then sometimes the answers were spontaneous. While she's a person who thinks her words out completely, it wasn't all just reading off a text. It was Mrs. Johnson and Secondari who did the script.

F: Of course, it had a continuous line, but about how many forays did she

they get off.

F: Did the barge sink?

C: No, but it could have.

F: On something like that, do they make any attempt to reimburse Mrs. Johnson through some gift to the White House, or something like that, for her time?

C: No, I wish they could have.

F: You could have with a sponsor.

C: Yes. But they didn't. Now, they made the film available certainly, but there was nothing in that respect that I remember. I hope I'm correct on that. The networks did buy shrubbery for Luci's wedding to cover up their scaffolding, and then gave it to the city of Washington to be planted.

F: You will recall that along in there some of the women newspapermen--if that's not a contradictory term--around Washington criticized Mrs. Johnson, particularly in the early stages of the beautification program, for spending. For instance I remember on one occasion that they criticized her for spending fifteen thousand dollars that Mrs. Lasker had given for some beautification projects, saying that that money could go so much better to feed the hungry and improve shelter and so on. Did this ever cause her to waiver in her idea of running a general beautification program?

C: No, because there were other programs, and her husband was set on them. The whole poverty program--you certainly can't fault the Johnson Administration for falling short on. She spent an awful lot of time walking through Appalachia and through ghettoes in Newark to boost these programs, as she did beautification. But she was sold very much that beautification

was her "thing." She felt at home doing it, natural doing it. You know, you always have prima donnas who can tell you how to change things. I don't think that was the major criticism. I never felt it. If she fought it in any way, it was to balance it by being honorary chairman of Head Start, and conspicuous in that field.

F: Did you ever have any newspaper women who became personna non grata as far as she was concerned? I'm sure you like some better than others.

C: Not as far as she was concerned. She was very fair. There were certainly some as far as I was concerned. But I think that the one outstanding example is Maxine Cheshire, who wrote that Chuck Robb was trying to delay his going to Viet Nam, which was not true--a lie! But it certainly didn't make me feel that she deserved, as a reporter, to be served.

F: What happens in the case of somebody like Maxine, who is not unknown to be wrong, and is right a fair share of the time, too? Do people who have to deal with it just take this on balance and go right on?

C: We would like for her not to have been assigned by the Post to cover. But when they assigned her, we couldn't do anything but accept her, put up with her, and hope we survived.

F: And did. Did you ever have any opportunity to observe Ambassador Adlai Stevenson's relationship with the First Family?

C: Yes.

F: Let's talk about it.

C: Well, I think that he was enchanted by Mrs. Johnson. He was one of the first people who wrote her a letter using such perfect words for her--"efficient and beguiling." It was picked up often in the press later, but during the President's heart attack, after he was recovering and at

the ranch, and Majority Leader, Stevenson went down there, and had written Mrs. Johnson this letter. It was, along with a lot of other letters, in a book--an album. It was picked up because it was so appropriate--"efficient and beguiling."

I think there was tremendous appreciation of Stevenson by Mrs. Johnson, and she went to New York several times where he escorted her to various things. Yet there was never the feeling about him, on a purely personal basis, that there would be many other men in public life. For instance, if women were dancing, and choosing their dancing partner, he wouldn't be the one she would choose. She was always kind of amused that so many newswomen swooned over Adlai Stevenson. She'd say, "I think he's brilliant; I think his word use is fantastic, but as a man, I can't see his appeal to them."

F: More to listen to than--

C: Yes.

F: Than to be with.

C: She likes he-men. She likes the John Connallys and Lyndon Johnsons. You didn't ask me what I like, but Adlai Stevenson could put his shoes under my bed any night.

F: I'm glad to have that statement immortalized. Let's talk about that just a minute. What did he have? I mean, he's a fifty-five-year old, balding man, with a gift of gab. That's the worst face on it.

C: He had the same quality that Leslie Howard had. He had that gentleman, smooth wit, was the big part--tremendous wit, very sophisticated wit--that is appealing to a great many women. And he was extremely courteous and conscious of whomever was around him.

F: Was he the type that when he was with you, he gave you more or less his undivided attention?

C: Yes, and somewhat as a flirt. You felt that here is a guy with a twinkle in his eye.

F: He may not get turned loose, but if he is turned loose--

C: The world is lined with women who would tell you the same thing, and women that you know--I mean, Willie Snow Etheridge, Betty Beale, Mary McGrory. For some reason it goes with women writers.

F: Who are, in a sense, a very cynical bunch.

C: Yes. But he had a certain quality. I remember another time when Stevenson came to the White House and was waiting to see the President. Somebody discovered it was his birthday--I think it was Horace Busby--and quickly a cake was produced from the kitchen. And Mrs. Johnson went over and they had some kind of a birthday celebration for this man who, after all, as far as family occasions were concerned, lived a very lonely and poverty-stricken life.

F: Almost a monastic life, yes. I would presume he was properly touched by that gesture.

C: Very. Then many times we went to his apartment when we were in New York when he was ambassador to the UN. In fact, a lot of the pages that are left out of Mrs. Johnson's diary--and will be in the Library--have references to Stevenson in them. Her description of his funeral, which is in her book--I think she sums up her feelings of here was a man who really captured the imagination.

In so many ways, Joe, he had everything that the Kennedys lacked--what they had, and more! He had class. He was a thoroughbred. He was

genuine, and he did it without the strong heel of the Irish Mafia. He didn't make as much of a sale as they did, but then, he was running against a general, and a very popular one. If you'll notice, in most of his speeches he always referred to Eisenhower as "the general." And isn't it strange that we didn't turn off at a "general" but I guess we were just sold on the idea of the least government the better after eighteen years of rationing and Korea and World War II.

F: We had a problem in there, as you will recall, of René Verdón (White House chef).

C: Yes.

F: Did that sort of thing pain Mrs. Johnson?

C: She hated for it to all be dragged out in the public. It's kind of like putting the cup towels on the line. But he didn't let it be any other way. His good friend was Craig Claiborne of the New York Times, a gourmet writer.

F: Was he dissatisfied, or was he just a publicity seeker? What was the situation?

C: He was a prima donna. He was a French chef, and most of them come with a hell of a lot of blood pressure. They can make good sauces, but the employer has to put up with them. I think that once also you've served one set of people--and in his case it was Mrs. Kennedy who brought them there--you're going to have a very hard time finding the same aura in the others. He had a hard time getting on with the help. It wasn't the President and Mrs. Johnson.

(telephone interruption)

The friend of René Verdón was not Craig Claiborne, but a chef at the Four Seasons, or the Pavillon--the Pavillon, I believe. And the Pavillon man tipped off Craig Claiborne that Rene was unhappy. So he called me.

One night I got a query from the New York Times, saying, "Craig Claiborne--the man here on the desk--our gourmet editor, who eats food around the world and doesn't like any of it, says that Rene Verdon has quit." I called and we acknowledged that he was leaving the White House. We never did him the disservice of saying that he was fired, although he had had his verbal blows with Bess and J. B. West. I'm not sure what happened.

F: Who's J. B. West--the butler?

C: He was the head usher of the White House working in that office for about thirty years.

F: Among other things, Rene criticized the menu that was served Harold Wilson.

C: Yes.

F: Who decides on the menus?

C: Bess and Mary Kaltman, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Johnson.

F: Does the chef come up with suggestions for something, or do you try--?

C: Generally he didn't, I don't think.

F: Did you try to tailor your menus to--

C: The tastes of the visitor.

F: You didn't try to make good old American goods since they were in America?

C: No, you tried--

F: Did you try to make it Arabian or French or whatever it was?

C: No. A tremendous job is done on research on what the visitor likes, in gifts and entertainment. And this way you'd try to tailor it to the head of state who was coming.

F: Along that line of tailoring, the President was known somewhat for his birthday gifts, including some to you. I think you may have even done a little bit of suggesting yourself? How did he handle this problem?

That was handled on your side of the world, wasn't it?

C: Gifts to heads of state?

F: Gifts to heads of state, birthday gifts to personnel--I mean, keep him informed, you know, that--

C: He's a great person for--he likes to play Santa Claus all year 'round. And he liked, when he gave a head of state a gift, it had to be something worthwhile, not just one more piece of Steuben glass. When we came in there, he told Bess Abell, "Spend imagination more than money" because you can get into astronomical figures if you just decide to serve them up one more thing for the palace. So Bess used a lot of imagination. We had to work over the State Department somewhat in that respect, because they were stuck in the same groove. It was easier that way. Well, the President of Ireland or the Mayor of Dublin, I can't remember which one, was born in this country. With great effort, they found his birth certificate in New York City, had it beautifully framed. This meant more to him than anything. It was sentiment. The president of the parliament in Japan--you are elected to that position only if you've held a cabinet post--happened to have been postmaster of Japan as his route. Bess found an antique post office box that made a desk piece he could use. He was very touched by that, and yet you spent maybe less than a hundred dollars. So the President loved this, and he loved to give people something.

He was a gadget man too. He liked to give Accutron watches. Then he had a whole storehouse of gifts up in his closet where if a member of Congress or anybody came down there, they were very likely to find themselves with six beautiful linen handkerchiefs he had bought in the Shannon

airport on some trip; or more likely a watch. He just really loves to give. He didn't want anyone to go away empty-handed.

F: When he gave things to his staff, did--

C: He often asked me to think of a good idea. And the "going to the well" thing came one time when I ended up in an elevator with him, and he said, "all these girls in my office have been working so hard, and I want to give them something that really means something, that they'll have all their lives, and they can give to their children and grandchildren--something with the presidential seal." This was a few days before Christmas. Well, his favorite expression is, "I like someone who'll go to the well with me," which is a Texas expression that's self-explained. So we found a jeweler who had a charm that was a well, and that could be put on the bottom of it the Presidential seal, to be worn as a charm or a necklace. We started out by a crash production line on about twenty-five, I think, for Christmas. Then every day the President's secretary would call my office again to get some more. It ended up that he went to the well with about two hundred and fifty people by February.

F: How did you and Maggie Cousins and Mrs. Johnson decide what to leave in, and what to take out of her almost exhausting memoirs?

C: Well, you wanted a true portrait of the life of a first Lady, so you wanted some fast days, days of tension, and then you wanted some quiet days.

F: Did you try to tailor it to a woman's audience?

C: No.

F: Because what you have here are three women who are working on it.

C: No, you didn't. You tried to really tailor it to what is the true picture

of a first Lady. It's some trips, some running the house, wife, mother, and hostess. So you had some of all. Mrs. Johnson would have liked to have had a lot more beautification, but here is where Maggie felt that there was not that much national interest in it. I think there's another conservation book left in those files because with pictures which are readily available there, it could readily be what they call a coffee table book--beautifully illustrated. And a lot of her "walks along the river." She wrote exhaustively about walks along the river, because, for one thing, she had the time then. She was relaxed. It's when the words come to your mind. It was a love of life, and what she liked to do most. But we did hit more days of tension, because she didn't want to be accused of leaving any of those out. You can't ignore a June 5th war, even though you may have two or three other midnight phone calls.

F: Now that it's all over, would you redo any of it?

C: I can't say that I would.

F: Allowing for the fact that you can always tinker forever.

C: No. I think you get the flavor of the First Lady, and I think the sales show that. She has been on the best seller list for eleven weeks now and the New York Times says the public is buying it. The letters pouring into her are fantastic. I think that it's a true picture of Lady Bird Johnson.

F: Has she gotten a lot of response?

C: Tremendous--just mail bags of response.

F: What's the general tenor?

C: Well, people felt the intimacy of the White House through her book.

F: Did people try to air parallel experiences, allowing for the there's no

parallel experience to being in the White House?

C: Not so much that, but for instance: she's such a good reporter and such an exact person that she would mention that Suzy Belle Jones gave her the corsage--I'm just using a silly example--from the Girl Scout Troop in Denver, Colorado, and that will be in the book. And she'll hear from Suzy Belle Jones, who's just an ordinary person and who is so thrilled to have had her name in that book. The only regrets we have are the many names that were left out, especially friends in the vicinity of the ranch--there were long guest lists left out, and yet that is history. That would have meant something to those people. But you did have to weigh in the reader there.

F: From your knowledge of the people around the ranch, did they understand their role in the making of a presidential family, or did they sort of resent the onslaught of strangers that were always coming in to interrupt the routine?

C: I think they were fascinated with the onslaught of strangers. They opened their doors to them. As a result, a lot of Secret Service men have ended up living in Fredericksburg and Austin, Texas, because they liked that part of the country. They liked the people there. They thought it was a good place to raise children.

F: Did it promote any romances?

C: I think that you could probably find some. I believe that there were some men in Communications who married girls down there. The Dale Malecheks--ranch foreman--I know their door was kind of always open to particularly Secret Service agents who at night might have gotten off duty and who were a long way from home, and they'd drive up the ranch landing strip and visit there. And, of course, the

LBJ Ranch, eighty miles from a fresh head of lettuce.

F: Did you see much growth and kind of veneer and what you might call urbanity among the vicinity people there during that era of the White House?

C: I think they learned to do things with a lot of class and dignity. And I was always proud of them. Fredericksburg, Texas--to see Bill Petmecky, who was the postmaster, and he looks like a burgomeister--stand up and receive Erhard and the President of the United States, and do it with a minimum of words, but with words that meant something. You know, I was proud of that part of Texas, to see that kind of performance. I don't think that Van Cliburn ever had a more appreciative audience than the one that he had in the Stonewall gymnasium when he played his piano there. I think that people found a genuineness in those people down in the Hill Country, lasting friendships that they won't forget.

F: You never were in the position of some people who have made good who sort of feel they have to be apologetic about their relatives back on the farm?

C: No, I haven't. The person that I resent is what I call the Texas hick. Generally, he has done well. Generally, he's in a better income class in Austin, and he's likely to say, "Oh, I knew Lyndon back in Johnson City," as though he expected him to stay there, just 'cause this guy hadn't gone any farther. That's the kind of remark I always resented. And I think that probably it takes awhile for a press that had grown accustomed to the Palm Beach life, sailboats, to find fishing on the Pedernales, fishing in the Johnson Lakes, quite as inspiring. I do think they--

F: It must have been a real glimpse at interior America to a lot of people.

C: Yes. And more than some of them wanted, because some of them are joy

and distance spoiled. They would rather have been in Palm Beach. But nobody said Johnson wasn't a man, and nobody said he wasn't a president. Now, what I always resented is they ran around keeping statistics on the number of LBJ acres, when they didn't run around Harriman's house or Kennedy's house counting the paintings. You know, the statistical story writer bores me, and I think it's the downfall of the press. They never see the story behind the numbers.

F: Were you involved in the coming of the Hirshhorn Collection to Washington?

C: No, I wasn't. Harry McPherson and others were. But I suspect this is a battle of arts that's going to be rehashed for a long time by a lot of people who don't know anything about art. For one thing, when you buy a big collection, you take some bad and some good. We would be infinitely more criticized if we had let this one go to England, which it was in the danger of doing. While Mr. Hirshhorn may have been flirting and wanting to be catered to on two sides of the ocean, how awful if we hadn't tried to keep it in this country. Actually, I believe you'll find in Mrs. Johnson's book that Dillon Ripley is the first one that brought Mr. Hirshhorn in, while having made statements to the press to the contrary. I don't know why people run for cover on it. Because sure, you're going to get some lousy paintings with a big collection, and you're going to get some great ones.

F: You're going to get some cheap novels probably in a great library, too. We've gotten a few. What about that letter that Mrs. Johnson wrote to Jackie Kennedy that was later auctioned?

C: That letter was from Mrs. Kennedy to Mrs. Johnson, and it was saying--this was written during the campaign--

F: In '60.

C: Yes. And said that she was so sorry she couldn't be at a Democratic meeting. It was in the files, and we had some part-time help at campaign headquarters. A girl named Lucy Cummings kept the letter and went to a real publicity hound in New York, Charles Hamilton, who loves to find a letter that he can get a headline out of and pack people in his auction place.

We heard about it. It was in the paper. We were horrified. We didn't want it implied that Mrs. Johnson was trying to sell a letter of Mrs. Kennedy's, or had gotten rid of it. Certainly that wouldn't be the case. So I sent the Secret Service up there and urged them to go in very quietly and ask who had tried to sell it and withdraw the letter from sale, because the true owner is the person it's written to, under our laws, Mrs. Johnson. Of course, the Secret Service never did anything quietly in its life. They sent two men, and they went in, and this was just what Charles Hamilton wanted.

F: Came in with all the subtlety of a fire engine.

C: Screamed and kicked, but he wanted to do it. So we lived with the bad story for twenty-four hours and we got the letter back.

F: Mrs. Johnson wasn't greatly upset. I mean it was just a temporary--

C: Well, we were embarrassed, yes.

F: What became of Lucy Cummings?

C: Lucy Cummings married the president of North American Newspaper Alliance, and walked into my room one day right after my book had come out to get an interview. I didn't recognize her new name, and she had the pleasure of saying to me, "You didn't think this would be me--the bad penny would turn up did you?" It was an uncomfortable hour.

F: Were you involved in the restoration of the boyhood home--which was not

without its headaches?

C: In a minor way only. Just in working with Mrs. Johnson on scripts that she would use, watching for things that would be of interest there, helping her set up parties for the hostesses, encouraging her to do it. The thing that started out on the boyhood home--the boyhood home was all set long before LBJ was going to be president to be a place that they would let the town use for community meetings--4-H clubs, home demonstration clubs. Then it became something a great deal more, and it was an easy thing, when we could not let people come to the ranch after he was president to say, "But you can see the boyhood home."

F: Did the Secret Service or the President set the rules on coming down Ranch Road 1?

C: I think the Secret Service, primarily, when he is there.

F: Within your observation--now, of course, the President is commander- in-chief of the whole business, but does he tend to listen to the professionals in this case, the Secret Service?

C: Not always. He will listen, but he also knows that they're empire builders. The same is true of the military. He'll listen, but he knows that brass hats are trying to--you know, this man is a master on people who play their constituencies, play to their constituencies. One reason he was so awfully good in going around the world with heads of states, he never thought of them as just a ceremonial person but somebody who was having to answer to a constituency.

F: It wasn't a ceremony for Lyndon Johnson, it was the local man's opportunity to show himself.

C: Yes. And he was great--always to scoop him up and try to carry him along,

and maybe let a little of democracy rub off on him.

F: Did Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy seem to have fairly good relationships?

C: Yes, I think so.

F: Were they first-name?

C: Yes. And I think that the Kennedys have a great deal of respect for Mrs. Johnson--for her brain. For one thing, they think she's smarter than they are, someone once told me--which must have been hard on them. But I think she had great compassion for Jackie. I think she had. Here's a woman who's ten or twelve years older than Mrs. Kennedy, and she had great admiration for what she did with the White House, so she didn't walk in and undo everything.

F: She didn't feel competitive with her in the sense of putting on her own show.

C: No, there's not a competitive bone in her body.

F: What about the President and the general field of business management? Does Mrs. Johnson run most of their affairs, make the business decisions, or does he?

C: They talk them over. He relies heavily on her judgment. But she is a woman, and she is a woman who turns to her husband on many things. Business was put on the shelf for the five years we were in the White House. It was just literally put on the shelf mentally and financially.

F: Is there anything to add to the Barbara Howar story that hasn't already made the public print?

C: I don't think so. She's somebody who wanted to use the White House. It won't be the first time it has been done, nor the last, through Luci. Barbara's an amusing, pretty girl. The party with Luci was called off because--

F: Did Luci like her and like shopping with her and so on?

C: Yes, she did. And Barbara makes herself likeable. But when Barbara was going to invite a long list of so-called beautiful people, including Life Magazine and everyone else to come--

F: That was at the Hotel Washington.

C: Yes--to a party for Luci. It wasn't going to be any party for Luci. It was a party promoting Barbara. It was at a time that the Viet Nam War was worsening. The President was overly nervous about parties in wartime.

F: It was called off very late in the game.

C: Just before the invitations went out.

F: It was before the invitations got out.

C: Yes.

F: Some of the impression was that everybody already knew who was coming--

C: She had been planting lots of stories about it, but it was called off before the invitations were put in the mail because I phoned her myself. It wasn't an easy job to do.

F: What was her reaction?

C: Wonder, curiosity, I imagine some hurt, and I felt sorry for her.

F: Has she remained a friend?

C: Arms length. We have a certain respect, but not any--

F: Not intimate.

C: Not intimate. I wouldn't be surprised to wake up and find her flailing me, and yet I think that there is a certain amount of respect.

F: In this matter of transition, did you get into that within your own domain.

C: Yes, we did.

F: Was it something of a success?

C: The transition was fantastic because you literally--and I wouldn't take anything for staying on until the last day because you go through all kinds of waves. At first, there's the high hope that you're going to be able to achieve something after the President's announcement. And then people don't come on the phone as fast as they did. "White House calling" loses something after retirement is announced. It's a lame duck White House calling. Then pretty soon you have very nice meetings with your successor if they have been named--in this case, Gerry Van der Heuvel and Lucy Winchester.

F: Where did the Nixons get those? Did you suggest them?

C: No. Herb Kline told me it was going to be very hard, did I have any suggestions, and I made about four newswomen suggestions. And I must say I didn't think of Gerry Van der Heuvel because the last time I had seen her she was going to work for Hubert Humphrey. They chose Lucy Winchester from the ranks of wealthy Republican women, and a good choice. They sent both women over, and Bess and I and some of my staff saw them, showed them around, fixed up our files with some effort, so that I left a copy of every one of Mrs. Johnson's speeches there, every press release that we had ever put out for a pattern and also something they could lean on, and a lot of pictures that were made of the house and not of people. I think it was appreciated.

There's a sad point though at which suddenly someone comes in and the pictures go off the wall, and all you have left is a dirty ring reminding you that your time is up. Boxes are moved in, and you realize, you know, this is for real. You're going to be outside the fence on January 20th at twelve o'clock.

F: You had a problem once--I believe it was Lynda's wedding that overlapped with the sports loving world and the tail end of a very exciting National Football League game. Do you recall that?

C: I wasn't even very conscious of that.

F: That didn't become one of your problems?

C: No.

F: Did you try on your side of the White House to capitalize on Yuki?

C: No.

F: He was strictly the President's dog?

C: He was the President's dog, and he was a very great one. Of course, when people came to ask questions on dogs, they came to my side of the House and we tried to answer them. I had to learn the gestation period even of guinea pigs, which is shockingly small. We had pets always, particularly when Luci was in the White House, from mice to--well, everything, it seemed to me. And we tried to answer them, because there is a curiosity about them, and it's one way to get in the Chicago Tribune favorably, almost the only way a Democrat can.

F: Neither girl gave you any real trouble.

C: No. Luci was infinitely more cooperative than Lynda. I don't like comparisons in that respect either, because both of them really, I think, showed that they had grown up in the public eye. They'd just moved from backstage onto the wings. They wanted to do their own thing. That's a very sensitive time of life. It must be awful to have eighty-five newswomen writing every time you go out with a boy, calling him "a beau." They nearly screamed at that because "beau" is such an outmoded word. You know, wanting to know every move. It doesn't make it easier if you're having any kind of romance with the boy for him to read about it. You generally would turn off good guys.

F: When do you get a chance to have a romance?

C: On the third floor. The solarium. You didn't have to have a Secret

Service agent.

F: But you can hardly do it when you're out on a date, can you? Once you leave the White House, you're public property.

C: No, you have agents under the law. So it's hard on the kids at any age, I think particularly the fifteen to twenty-three. Here these girls went through many of the milestones of young womanhood, graduating from high school into college in Luci's case, and in going through college and dating in Lynda's case.

F: Do Washington stores feel put down because someone like Mrs. Johnson goes to Nieman-Marcus or Bergdorf's? Does that create a little bit of a problem?

C: If they did, it never did bother me.

F: Did you go to Garfinckel's?

C: She would sometimes go to Garfinckel's, or she'd send a friend. She didn't go out shopping much, because generally it was too much of a show stopper. It was one thing you could give somebody else to do. Helen Williams was an excellent shopper--her maid. She'd send her out for gloves, for stockings. Scooter Miller did some shopping for her. It just was easier not to.

F: Did Robin Biddle?

C: Oh, yes. Robin Duke did something in more of the design--you know, clothes, helping her choose clothes. Bess did, too. And so did Nancy Dickerson, all of them. Mrs. Johnson is a great advice seeker. She's not an advice giver, but she'll say, "What would look well on television?" And you are on stage so much that your clothes go out of style all the time. She didn't want clothes to devour her.

F: She still looked on clothes, though, as an accessory rather than sort of the primary bit of evidence?

C: Yes. And she often quoted the Dorothy Parker piece--

"My dress is sparkling new
And pristine is my hat
My shoes are 1952
My life is all like that."

To show how little she did think of it. And yet, I think she always looked elegant, well dressed, becomingly dressed, without being the tool of Women's Wear Daily.

F: Did Women's Wear Daily sort of go after you with a stilletto?

C: Oh, yes. They go after anybody with a stilletto. They are mischief-making. You know, to them the greatest story--and the only story that the White House means to them--is what the females are wearing. And so they treat it like a summit conference every time they wore a different outfit. They loved to make acid remarks. They aren't out to write a constructive story. They're out to write copy that's read, and it is, and it has paid off for them.

F: Is the focus entirely on the First Family, or do they pay any attention to the staff?

C: They used to give me a lot of hell. They didn't ever try to make me a fashionable dresser.

F: I can remember the expression at one time on "Texas tacky"--not with you, but with some of the people that came up for, I think, Lynda's wedding.

C: They would do that with anybody who was in office. You know, they called Mrs. Kennedy--what is their name for her! "Her Royalty, Her Highness."

They called Mrs. Johnson "Her Efficiency." They have names that they coin.

F: Was Mrs. Johnson a jealous woman?

C: No.

F: Was she jealous where he was concerned, because, of course, he is president, and he's always on stage and people are always making on over him.

C: No. I think that she knew what she married and that his life was going to be involved with lots of people. If she ever was lonely to have a meal alone with him, she never showed that. I don't think that she has had very many meals alone with him. She just made peace with that as a way of life. But the time that she would try to discuss something, she would put her wishes second always to his. The times that she would talk to him, though, would be when they were alone before the staff had come in in the morning in the bedroom. If she had something to bring up about a trip, then she'd look for a good time.

F: Did she seem to mind going off on these somewhat protracted trips by herself without him?

C: She talked to him every day. Generally, he initiated the call. But she would talk to him every day. She never went on any really that he hadn't approved of--wanted her to do. I think that she never wanted to be away more than four days. We rarely booked trips for more than four days.

F: Were she and Pat Nixon fair friends?

C: They were respectful friends. I don't think that there was any great intimacy. They'd seen each other at the Senate Red Cross Ladies, but there's no great closeness, and yet there's a respect.

F: Who were Mrs. Johnson's friends in official Washington?

C: Mostly Senate wives. The people whose counsel she sought the most were Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas.

F: You mean the men.

C: Yes. And she sought men's counsel more than women's. On a public relations kind of thing, something that would affect the public, she would call me. I think Bess and I both probably were as close to her as anyone else because we were working with her. It was natural that we would be.

She had lots and lots of friends. She loved to go with Marny Clifford, Mrs. Clark Clifford, antiquing. She loved to go and find a day when she'd have an afternoon and play bridge with Senate friends like Rosemary Smathers, Betty Talmadge, people that she'd known in the Senate and truly understands.

The Senate was her great love. It marked both of them more than anyone has ever realized. It's the way he ran the presidency, like a majority leader in my opinion. It's the way of trying to bring about a meeting of minds on close votes, doing what is possible, striving for the impossible, settling for the possible. But deliver. Deliver!

And with Mrs. Johnson, that was a great love for her because she adored the Senate. She liked the matching of wits there. She understood so much of the same life of all the other Senate wives, particularly those from the South.

F: One final personal question; that is, you have a husband who is a syndicated newsman. Therefore he has as much right as every other newsman in the country to try to seek out sources. He has a prime source in you. How did you avoid giving him an unfair advantage?

C: I think it hurt him, because I think that he couldn't--

F: Did you lean over backwards sometimes to--?

C: Yes. And I also tried to not discuss anything I knew so he wouldn't be tempted, not that I didn't think--

F: So sometimes he didn't even get the normal break?

C: That's right. And I think he got mistreated during that time. Also there would be occasions where I really would ask him not to be overly critical on something, because it would be considered twice as critical if somebody who was so "in the official family" were.

F: This is a source close to the White House, isn't it?

C: Yes.

F: Did you have anyone out in the news field who kind of occupied the position-- Whether right or wrong, people look on William S. White as kind of the President's official spokesman. If White took a line in those days, they figured that probably met with the approval. Did you have anyone like that on the women's side? I didn't discern it myself.

C: No. I did the most business with the two wire service girls.

F: Helen Thomas and--

C: Yes. Because their beat was the White House and it was morning and night. So I felt very close to them, and I was in constant communication with them. I had the advantage of having known newswomen from the time I came to this town. That was the greatest advantage I went in with--was having their well wishes, and I think their affection. There were just so many I liked for different reasons and still do.

F: Did you actually lose any women friends?

C: I suppose Maxine Cheshire. Either we came to know each other too well. I can't ever respect that kind of reporting again. Yet there had been a point at which I liked her writing. But there are too many times that

she really took advantage of someone in an unfair way. There's a lot of me that's a newswoman and I don't like to see any of us step backwards. I think she stepped backwards for us.

F: In general, allowing for the fact that they are highly skilled women and highly experienced women and should be properly critical and not the "Gee Whiz" type of reporter that you can bat about the way you choose, are they vindictive?

C: No, but they are after a story. They're the most over-sentimental women in the world. They work hard. In general, they are more elastic in their writing, they're more interested in what the story--what's happening for the human race than the average male reporter. I think women have a certain continuity of life because of maybe the birth-giving processes. But they're moved with--

F: Sounds like you wrote that for McCall's.

C: They're moved at a poverty program. They also know that the story that's going to get in the paper is that picket out there. So, for whatever reasons, they have to cover it and do a little more than I think is necessary. That's the way of the press these days, Joe. We haven't learned how to live with television.

F: Mrs. Carpenter, we're about out of cheese; we are out of wine. I wonder if maybe we haven't about wrapped it up? Anything else to say?

C: Let's say the league benediction. It was a great five years. I think that time long after the troubles of Viet Nam are gone and forgotten, those schools are going to be standing, and it was a span of time that counted for this country. And Mrs. Johnson helped make it count by helping her man.

F: Good.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V]

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