

INTERVIEW I

DATE: January 7, 1982
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BROOKS CASPARIS
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Mr. Casparis' residence, San Antonio, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let me ask you first about your family, Mr. Casparis. The name is a well-known Johnson City name. I don't know how many branches of the family there were in Johnson City, so perhaps you can enlighten me on that.

C: Well, I could talk to you for a month on the Casparises. We came over from Switzerland. My father's grandfather and his brother had a hotel in Washington, D.C. in the early 1800s which at that time was the meeting place for the diplomatic corps. It was known for its Swiss cuisine and wine cellar.

When my father's grandfather died, his children, which was my father's father, they were minors, and Judge [William] Hitz of I believe it was the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia was appointed guardian of the estate. It was about along the time that Helen Keller as a young girl began to attract national notoriety, and Judge Hitz squandered the Casparis fortune from the sale of the hotel educating Helen Keller, and he went to prison for it.

My father's father and his brother came to Texas and bought ranches on the basis of the inheritance from the Casparis Hotel in Washington, D.C. Incidentally, at the then time, the property that

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the Casparis Hotel was on is now part of the Capitol grounds of the United States Capitol in Washington. It's now part of the Capitol grounds; it's on Avenue A. I have a picture of the hotel I could show you if you wanted it. But when they came to Texas and bought ranches on the basis of their inheritance, my daddy's father lost his ranch. Daddy's father's brother was able to keep his.

Daddy was one of fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls. He wound up being sheriff of Johnson City, Blanco County, for fourteen or sixteen years.

G: Now, didn't the Casparises also own a cafe there?

C: That was Daddy's brother Austin. Yes, that was right, Austin and Fanny. And that's where Lyndon would go and eat his Mexican steak, his bowl of chili, yes.

G: How many brothers and sisters did you have in your immediate family?

C: In my family, I have one brother deceased and I have three sisters.

G: Could you give me their names here?

C: My brother is Charles, nicknamed Ted; my oldest sister is Madeline, the next one is Marie, and then the next one is Rebecca.

G: Now, you were a year behind Lyndon Johnson in [school]?

C: That's right. Lyndon graduated in May of 1924 and I graduated in May of 1925.

G: I see. Do you recall the first time you met Lyndon Johnson, or your first association?

C: Really, I can't. It was just through the school. Now, I don't

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remember when he came to Johnson City. I think for a while he went to a school up at the old ranch up there around Stonewall.

Lyndon's mother at the then time, as I understand it, was the only lady in Blanco County with a college degree. She, I'm sure, tutored Lyndon, and that's why, although I'm a little older than Lyndon, he got a year ahead of me in school.

G: What was Mrs. Johnson like? Did you know her very well?

C: Rebekah Baines Johnson was a princess, she was a wonderful lady. All that Lyndon could ever have hoped to be, why, he owes to his mother. She was a wonderful person, yes.

G: What was she like?

C: Very gentle, of course. Well, do you mean physically, what was her--?

G: Both.

C: Well, she was tall and kind of slender. She kind of had impaired hearing, but she was just as gentle, as nice as you'd ever expect any lady to ever be. She was every inch a lady.

G: We're told that she conducted elocution classes.

C: That's right, elocution. I took elocution from her; that's what got me started in debating, yes.

G: Can you describe how those classes would be conducted?

C: Classes as such, if she ever had classes I don't know about it. I would go up to her house and she would tutor me. But in the then days public speaking was also called declaiming, declamation, and she would tutor the students who in the interscholastic league would participate in those declamation contests.

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G: Did she teach them or tutor them individually or as a group?

C: Individually, to my knowledge.

G: So you were not there with other students?

C: No. No. And as far as I know, it was all at her home. I don't ever remember her coming to the school. Now, she might have on one or two occasions, but I don't remember it if she did.

G: How did you happen to go to her house for these lessons in the first place?

C: Because I knew that she was tutoring the others on declaiming.

G: I see. So it was something to supplement your school work?

C: As such, no. It was just debating, and I knew I needed help, and I'm sure she knew I needed help badly and she offered to help me.

G: Was there any kind of debate program in the schools?

C: Debate programs, as such, no, only when it came time for interscholastic league. As far as I remember, I believe about the first debates were in 1921 or 1922. Then I got interested and I debated--I'm sure that I did not debate in 1923, but I debated in 1924 and in 1925.

G: Did you take trips as part of this interscholastic league?

C: The county meet would be held one year in Blanco and one year in Johnson City, alternate, see.

Then Lyndon and I, the year we debated in 1924, we won at county and went to district at San Marcos and won our first debate, and then we lost our second debate. But those were the only trips we made.

G: Were you partners?

C: Oh, yes, we were.

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G: Together, I see. Well, I want to ask you about this in some detail.

First of all, can you recall the topic that you debated on?

C: Yes. The first debate we had was Resolved: That the United States of America should join the League of Nations. Then another debate we had was Resolved: That the Monroe Doctrine should no longer be maintained by the United States of America. Those were our debates.

Then, of course, I debated in others, I'm sure these were after Lyndon [graduated]. Yes, these were after Lyndon was out.

G: How did you happen to become debate partners?

C: I can't answer that, I don't know. To a degree I guess more or less I was argumentive, I liked to discuss, and of course Lyndon liked to argue and discuss things.

G: What sort of a debater was he?

C: I don't know how to answer you. He was good, all right. His style was different from mine as I see it, but--

G: How would you compare the two?

C: By mannerisms.

G: But his mannerisms were different than yours?

C: Than mine, yes.

G: I see.

C: And, of course, possibly he had been tutored more by being there with his mother, why, I figured that maybe he was a better speaker or a more convincing speaker than I was.

G: Did you normally do better in the affirmative or the negative?

C: It didn't make any difference to me.

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G: Really?

C: No. I had my choices, what my personal belief would be, but as far as the debating ability, why, I saw no difference in it.

G: Well, did the two of you get together and map out an affirmative case when you--?

C: Well, see, we got material from the Extension Library of the University of Texas. They would give us outlines, and then they would give us material. We would study the outlines and then read the material, and then we would write our debates from that.

G: I see. Well, was LBJ pretty diligent in studying this material?

C: I can't answer that, I don't know. As my memory serves me, there wasn't too much that we did at school. We did most of it--I did most of it in my spare time at home. Now, we occasionally would get relief or periods off from class or study period at school, and we would go into another room and work on it. But as such, no, nearly all of mine was done at home.

G: Was there any teacher who was particularly helpful?

C: No, no. As my memory serves me, no teacher would help me. He would give us this material and we would return it to him.

G: What do you think led students to pursue debating?

C: Well, I have no answer for that, I don't know. In my case, as I say, I like arguments and I like discussion. I didn't like to argue for the sake of an argument, I would walk away from that. But if it was something I believed in, I would go at it fang and claw.

G: But isn't debate arguing for the sake of arguing?

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- C: In the final analysis, I guess you're right, yes.
- G: Was Johnson a good debater?
- C: I think so, I think so.
- G: Now, you said you debated Blanco first, and I guess Blanco was an old rival?
- C: Oh, yes.
- G: Blanco and Johnson City.
- C: That's right.
- G: Can you recall that debate?
- C: Yes. It was the League of Nations.
- G: Did you take the affirmative or the negative?
- C: I believe we had the negative side.
- G: And what sort of team did you face? Was it a good team?
- C: Really I don't remember. I really don't, no.
- G: And then you went to San Marcos.
- C: Yes, which was the district meet. And of course had we won at San Marcos we would have gone I guess to Austin to the state meet.
- G: Do you recall any of the details of that debate?
- C: Yes, we debated against M-O-R-R-I-L-L High School. I don't know where it was. Then I know another time we debated against the school from Kyle, Texas, and there was a guy, Sledge [?], on it. I think he turned out to be a district judge or something. But that debate I think was on the Monroe Doctrine. My notes on that are not as detailed as they should have been, I realize now.
- G: Was LBJ disappointed at not winning, or do you recall?

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- C: I have no way of knowing.
- G: Anything else about this trip to San Marcos that's noteworthy?
- C: No, only that we had to hitch rides down. What I mean, of course, in those days and time we didn't have cars, and we got rides with some of the schoolteachers or some of the other contestants that were going down.
- G: Did LBJ express an interest in going to college there?
- C: As I remember, I don't remember having heard him say anything like that.
- G: Were there any other students from Johnson City who were in these debate programs?
- C: Yes, Otto Crider. I think Otto is in California now. That's about the only one that I [recall]. Lyndon and Otto Crider and I are about the only ones I remember.
- G: Was there any program in Austin? Did you ever go to Austin?
- C: No, no.
- G: Now, you were talking earlier about LBJ's mother. Did you ever have an impression of their relationship? Were they close, or was she much of an influence on him, do you suspect?
- C: I think she had more of an influence on him than his father did. Yes, I think so.
- G: Can you elaborate on that?
- C: No, I can't. It's not that I don't want to say anything, I just can't elaborate on anything.
- G: Did she tutor him in debate?

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C: In reason, I'm sure she did.

G: Okay. Well, let me ask you about Sam Ealy Johnson, his father. Do you remember him?

C: Very well.

G: What was he like?

C: Do you want to blank out your tape? (Laughter)

G: Well, I don't see any problem here.
(Interruption)

C: I know at this time Lyndon's father was in the [Texas State] Legislature, and it was a big thing to have some kind of a function at the school and have Mr. Sam Johnson to make an address. Several times I've seen Sam come to the school just lit up like a country church and have to climb up the steps on his all fours. The auditorium was on the second floor, and he would come up on his hands and knees or on his all fours getting up. Several times he's been at our house for breakfast and sobered up.

G: Was he a good speaker?

C: As I remember, yes.

G: Was he well-liked in Johnson City, or disliked, do you recall?

C: At that time, see--I'm now talking about 1922-23. At that time I was fourteen or fifteen years old, and of course in those days and times children were taught to be seen and not heard. Anything personal like that, why, my mother and father didn't discuss it much within earshot of us. So I just don't know how to answer you because I don't know; I'm not evading.

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G: You know, there's some indication that LBJ tried to stop his father from drinking. Have you ever heard this?

C: I have never heard of that, I have never heard of that.

G: Do you know anything about their relationship?

C: Well, I gathered the impression that Lyndon and his daddy were not as close as Lyndon and his mother.

Now, I also have this gut feeling that as such Lyndon didn't care much for the Casparises. I have that [feeling]. Of course, [there's] nothing in particular that I can base it on other than belief, but it's probably because back before Prohibition my father and his brother ran a saloon, and of course Lyndon's father patronized it and ran up a bill and never paid the bill, [inaudible]. Whether that stuck in Lyndon's craw or whether the fact that his daddy drank so much stuck in his craw, I can't tell you. But he had any number of times to do things for the Casparises that he didn't, and when he started to run for--

G: Can you recall any of these things in particular?

C: Yes, I can, but I prefer not to.

When he was considering running for president, my father was one of the ones that he called from Washington and wanted to know what his chances were in Blanco County. Daddy told him to go ahead, that he'd carry Blanco County.

G: What year was that, do you know?

C: When did he run for president?

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G: Well, 1960 and 1964, and he was a favorite son I guess in 1956, so it could have been any of those.

C: Yes, yes.

Now I remember one thing in school. It was in 1924. We had just had chemistry as a course in Johnson City, and I believe that was the first year. E. M. Bowman was the instructor. This particular day, why, we were studying raw phosphorus, and we were instructed to use forceps and handle it under water. Otherwise, exposed to the air it would ignite. So Lyndon just reaches in this container of water with his fingers and picks up this phosphorus and holds it out in the air, and it ignites. To the best of my knowledge, the last time I saw Lyndon he still had the burn marks on his index finger and thumb.

G: Is that right?

C: He just believed that it wouldn't do it, or he dared it to do it or something. I don't know what his motivation was.

G: Well, did it create a fire at all, or did it just burn his hand?

C: No, as such, no. Just burned his hand, no. As such, no.

G: Do you recall his reaction to it?

C: Yes, hollered like hell!

G: Was he a good student or an indifferent student?

C: I really don't remember his grades. He passed every year, but as I remember he did not appear to apply himself much in school. Now, whether he studied at home or not, I can't answer that.

G: Who did he run around with? Do you recall who his friends were?

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C: Well, Tom Crider and Otto Crider and Fritz Koeniger. That's all I can remember right now.

G: Did he normally associate with boys older than he, or boys the same age?

C: About the same age.

The reason so many of these questions I can't answer, Lyndon, they lived right in town, two or three blocks from town, and of course we lived out and we weren't allowed to go to town but once a week and that was on Saturday afternoon.

G: But you did go to school, didn't you? You'd see him there.

C: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

G: Can you describe the school and what sort of courses you would take?

C: It was a two-story rock building, stone building, three rooms downstairs and two rooms and an auditorium on the second floor.

G: Did you have a variety of courses?

C: Oh, just the regular thing, reading, writing, arithmetic, civics, physiology, geography, mathematics, of course including arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and trig.

G: Someone has suggested that they would use a nearby church to practice declamation, speaking from a pulpit. Do you have any [recollection of this]?

C: I've never heard of that, no. That could be after my time, because I graduated in May of 1925 and left in August of 1925 and came to San Antonio, and I've been here ever since.

G: Was LBJ active in athletics at all?

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C: No, no. I never saw him on a basketball court, and I don't remember-- he could have been but right now I can't remember even seeing him play baseball. Of course, in those days it was comparable to softball. I never saw him play basketball or volleyball. In those days and time we didn't have football.

G: Did you have any indication of what he wanted to do in his career?

C: Never, I never did, no.

G: What did you do for entertainment then in Johnson City?

C: There was very little, very little entertainment. An occasional picnic, a barbecue, would you call it snap parties on Friday night or Saturday night, something like that. Eventually they had the movie, had a moving picture. But entertainment per se was very conspicuous by its absence.

G: Did LBJ have an after-school job or a summer job that you remember?

C: Not to my knowledge, not to my knowledge, no.

Oh, I remember something else. It was during World War I. Some man, I've forgotten who it was, but he had a block, a city block, and he let the school use that for the children having war gardens. Of course we went down there and we all dug up our [plots]. We were assigned a certain amount of land and we made our own little garden. Mother sent me one day from home down to my garden, which was maybe two miles. I walked down there to get some vegetables. And I looked over in Lyndon's garden, he had some cucumbers, and he had beautiful cucumbers, so I stole one of Lyndon's cucumbers. Mother knew I didn't have any cucumbers, so coming back, why, my conscience hurt me and I

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knew I had to do something about it, so I started peeling this cucumber to eat raw. And just as I passed the church of which I'm a member I cut my finger and I still carry the scar right there. Cut my finger peeling a cucumber I stole from Lyndon's war garden, World War I garden.

G: Someone had remembered that LBJ often wore a necktie to school.

C: I can remember several times. Yes, I can remember that.

G: Do you recall him having any interest in dramatics?

C: No, no, I don't recall that at all.

Now, I know during the summer we would work in the fields, pick cotton, hoe cotton, top fodder, pull corn, stuff like that. I don't ever remember of Lyndon doing anything like that in the summertime. Now that's not to say or to imply that he didn't, but I don't ever remember him doing it and I know in reason that he didn't do it in the group that my brother and I and my cousin did. But his brother Sam Houston a couple of times did summer odd jobs in the fields with us.

G: Was LBJ interested in politics in those days at all?

C: I don't remember him--

G: Say, Jim Ferguson or anything?

C: Well, now, I know his father supported Jim Ferguson as did my father, but maybe in a joking way or a laughing way. One could gather the impression that Lyndon was a tease or liked to tease a lot. But discussing politics as such, I don't ever remember him.

G: Was he a practical joker?

C: More or less, yes.

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G: Can you recall any examples of this?

C: He liked to joke, he liked to joke and tease.

G: Was he popular?

C: Oh, I guess as much or maybe more so than anybody else.

But there's one thing. I don't know whether you have it in any of your tapes. It's a misnomer that Johnson City was named for his people.

G: Who was it named for?

C: There's another family of Johnsons. It's Truman Fawcett's mother's people.

G: I see.

C: That was the Johnson family from which Johnson City was named. That's a terrible error.

G: Were they related? Were the two related?

C: I'll swear if I know. I'll swear if I know.

G: Anything else on his speaking ability? You mentioned that your gestures were different. Can you recall his?

C: No, other than debating I don't remember him declaiming or speaking, orating as you'd call it. Now, his sister Josefa and sister Rebekah and I think Sam Houston declaimed, but I don't remember Lyndon doing it any other than just debating.

G: Well, what was his style like when he debated?

C: Well, one thing that I noticed about [him], instead of standing erect he kind of leaned forward or leaned to one side, gestured a lot with his hands.

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G: Can you describe the rivalry between Johnson City and Blanco?

C: Other than it was bitter.

G: Was it? Can you give me some examples of this?

C: No, other than it was just bitter, that's the only way I can say it. Johnson City wanted to win everything, and Blanco wanted to win everything. It all stemmed from the fact that in the beginning the county seat was in Blanco, and in an election it was moved to Johnson City. I think that started the rivalry, even between the cities as well as the schools.

G: Do you know anything about the Ku Klux Klan in that area? Was there a Ku Klux Klan in--?

C: Not that I know of, no, no.

G: Anything on the issue of Prohibition versus repeal?

C: Oh, yes, there was a lot of it.

G: Was there much bootlegging going on during Prohibition?

C: Really, I can't tell you. I don't know, I just don't know.

Now, I know for a while, a year or so after Prohibition, Daddy had brought wine home and we had wine, and had some whiskey that really, honest to God, was for medicinal purposes.

G: Anything else on LBJ at the high school? Johnson City High School.

C: Not that I can think of, no.

I know several times--you were talking about bootlegging--I can remember seeing Lyndon in the company of guys that were known to patronize bootleggers and get lit. Don Wilson was one of them. And I

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think Don Wilson was the brother of Georgia Cammack's sister's husband. But other than that, why, I don't know.

G: Were these primarily older?

C: Yes, I think they were a few years older than Lyndon.

G: Did you ever hear the story of him wrecking the family car or know the circumstances?

C: No, I never heard that story, no.

G: Were you aware of his attending college at San Marcos?

C: Yes, I knew he went to college, yes. I was here, I was here going to business college, and he was in San Marcos then.

G: Did you have any association with him during this period?

C: None whatsoever.

G: Now, in 1925 he went to California. Do you have any knowledge of that, how the trip came about?

C: No, only what I read here some time ago. I think that's when he went out with Fritz Koeniger.

G: He also went down and spent some time at Robstown one summer. Do you remember that?

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

G: Do you recall anything else about your association with him in Johnson City that we haven't talked about?

C: Offhand, no. All I know is that after he got his degree and taught school at Christine or down here in South Texas, he then met up with [Richard] Kleberg and that started his political career.

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G: Did you have any association with him while he was working for Kleberg?

C: No, no.

No, I went to, in 19--oh, jiminy--1948 or--I'd have to look at some of my records outside. But it was between 1948 and 1950, why, I had become interested in unionism and finally got to be a negotiator on the union's national bargaining committee that helped write the contract for Western Union Produce nationwide. We met the company in Washington, D.C., and Lyndon was majority leader of the Senate then. One evening I had a day off and I went up to the Capitol building to see him, and of course he was busy, and they had me leave my name and I did. A few days later I went up again and he was busy, and they had me leave my name and I did. And I did that the third time. I remember it real well because it was the year the King Ranch horse, Assault, won the Kentucky Derby [1946].

So we came home from bargaining committee work one day and there was a note in my box: "Please call Senator Johnson." Well, hell, I'd been up there three times, so I just took the note and wadded it and threw it away, because it was too late to call Senator Johnson at the Senate Office Building, and I didn't need a written memo. Well, the next day I came in, here was another one: "Please call Senator Johnson." Wadded it up and threw it away.

Well, I made a bet on the King Ranch horse, Assault, and bet him to win. My companion and I, being from Texas, why, we always gave the hotel clerk a fit about Texas, see. He chided me, said, "Well, you

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think so much of your horse, you're only betting two dollars to win." I said, "Well, hell, no, I'll bet ten dollars to win." So I gave him ten dollars and he placed it with a bookie. Well, we came in that evening and Assault had won, and here was the third note: "Please call Senator Johnson." And I wadded it up and threw it away. He said, "My God, man, do you know what you're doing?" I said, "Yes, this is the third note I've gotten to call Senator Johnson, and I've wadded it up and thrown it away." He said, "You can't do that." I said, "Well, I've done it."

Then the next free period I got off I went up and saw Lyndon. But he was busy. It was just more or less a hello and goodbye because he kept being interrupted on the telephone and [by] people I guess far more important than I was. So I didn't stay there very long and left. The only reason I went up and called upon him was because my mother and some of my aunts wanted me to go up and call on him. Otherwise, why, I wouldn't have even bothered him.

G: Anything else on the early years, his brothers or sisters, that you recall?

C: No, nothing.

G: Well, I sure do appreciate it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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