

INTERVIEW VI

DATE: March 4, 1996

INTERVIEWEE: NASH CASTRO

INTERVIEWER: Harry Middleton

PLACE: Mr. Castro's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

M: We are going to talk about some of the things that have not found their way into the oral histories in the Johnson Library. The first of those is going to be the creation of the LBJ Memorial Grove.

C: Okay, Harry, we are on the fifty-sixth floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, looking to the west on a bright, sunny day. And it's a joy to get together with you.

M: On the creation of the LBJ Memorial Grove, you started to tell me a little bit ago about the beginning of it. Why don't you go over that again and I will stop you when I have a question.

C: Okay. The day that the President died, Bette and I were home. I had just gotten home from the office and the phone rang, and a friend of ours in Rockland County, New York, where we lived--and live--reported that she had heard on the news that President Johnson had died. As everyone else, of course, we were stunned and Bette became, in fact, quite weepy. After we composed ourselves a bit, I decided to call Laurance Rockefeller to make sure that he knew. Mary Rockefeller answered the phone in their New York City apartment and said that, yes, they had heard about it. Laurance came on the phone and said, "Nash, we should make plans to attend whatever services are held for the

Castro -- VI -- 2

President." He asked me if I would keep him apprised of plans and so forth, which of course, I did.

As I recall, I got in touch with Ashton Gonella, who I was sure would be very much in the whole process of the services and arrangements in Washington. She very kindly kept me apprised of everything.

Once the plans were formulated, Laurance and Mary, Nelson and Happy, and Brooke Astor, and Bette and I flew down to Washington in the family plane. As we were approaching National Airport, with Laurance, Brooke, and I engaged in a three-way conversation, Laurance said to me, "Nash, it's time to start thinking about a memorial to President Johnson." I said, "Well, Laurance, I certainly agree. It would be so appropriate." Brooke Astor piped up and said, "And it should be something very simple, in keeping with his character. Something like a grove of trees." I remember saying at the time, "I know just the place to put it, in Lady Bird Johnson Park," which in 1969 had been named after Lady Bird at my suggestion, by Stewart Udall. This is on the Virginia side of the Potomac River between the Memorial Bridge and the 14th Street Bridge. That was all that was said about it at the time.

That evening at Blair House, where Mrs. Johnson, and Luci, and Lynda held a reception, I was asked by Dorothy McCardle--I was told, I guess, would be more correct--I was told by Dorothy McCardle that Laurance had indicated to her that--no, she said to me, "I heard that you are in charge of doing a memorial to President Johnson," that was it.

M: Dorothy McCardle was with the *Washington Post*.

Castro -- VI -- 3

C: Dorothy McCardle was one of the society writers of the *Washington Post* who traveled with us for all the years that Mrs. Johnson's beautification program was in effect. She was one of many, many newswomen who traveled with us. Anyway Dorothy said to me, "Nash, Mr. Rockefeller tells me that you are in charge of doing a memorial to President Johnson"-- (Laughter) --which of course surprised me. And I said, "Well, Dorothy, we've talked about it but we have not formulated any plans. I think it is a bit premature." "Well," she said, "where would it be?" I said, "Even that is undecided. The form, the design is something to be considered; professionals need to be hired, arrangements have to be made with whoever is in charge of the land where it would be installed." That was all that was said. The next morning, the *Washington Post* came out with the headline, "Memorial to President Johnson." It quoted Laurance and it quoted me.

After the funeral services in Texas, Mrs. Johnson and Laurance and I spoke a number of times and decided to put together a committee. In the process I was asked if I would be chairman. I suggested that Laurance be chairman, but I was overruled, so he became president; I became chairman. He retained Liz Carpenter to work with me in getting things going; and so Mrs. Johnson, Liz and I, and Laurance, put together a committee that numbered a good many of those who were on her beautification committee. Jane--not Jane Engelhard; she was not on the Beautification Committee but she did come on this committee--Mary Lasker, Brooke Astor, all kinds of friends of hers. And in no time we raised the money that was necessary to build a memorial.

M: You did that before deciding what the memorial was going to be?

Castro -- VI -- 4

C: No, we did it as plans for the memorial developed. But the real fund raising began after we had a model made. For this purpose we retained a very distinguished landscape architect in Culpeper, Virginia, by the name of Meade Palmer. Carol Fortas became our treasurer, as I remember. I also remember holding a press conference in my old office building at Hains Point, the Park Service office building, where we had the model of the project. We had good press coverage, as I recall.

We had started raising money before that, but once we had a model and photographs of it the impetus grew, and we succeeded in raising--I've forgotten how much, I think it was two and a half million or something like that.

M: Let's talk about the model. Did that model include the rock and all of that?

C: The model included the megalith, yes, the stone.

M: Who first came up with the idea of a stone?

C: Meade Palmer, the landscape architect. The idea was to bring a stone from Texas. And more ideally, to bring it from the LBJ Ranch. For this purpose Liz Carpenter and Meade Palmer and I flew out to Texas and spent the weekend with Lady Bird, and devoted most of the Saturday driving all over the LBJ Ranch looking for a proper stone. Well, we found that the stones at the ranch were weathered and pretty evenly rounded. They looked perfect in that setting, with the background of the live oaks, which of course wouldn't be appropriate in Washington because they simply wouldn't thrive in Washington. So we thought that we'd have to do something other than that.

At dinner that night at the Ranch, Liz Carpenter came up with the idea of going to the quarry at Marble Falls and looking for a stone there. Mrs. Johnson was tied up that

Castro -- VI -- 5

Sunday morning with some event in the community. But the three of us drove out to Marble Falls with a picnic basket that Mrs. Johnson had prepared. Liz made arrangements with the management of the quarry for us to look around. About a minute after we entered this quarry I saw a stone and said to Meade and Liz, "That's our stone." Just like that. It turned out that it had been quarried, of course, and it was about fourteen feet long; we measured it. And it had the right configuration for a megalith. We took pictures of it; Mrs. Johnson liked it, and Laurance liked the pictures. We made arrangements for a Texas foundation, as I remember, to pay for the shipping of the stone. It weighed fourteen tons. It came on a flatbed truck to Washington.

Meanwhile, work had started on the memorial and the site of the placement of the stone had been determined. The four tablets that were to go on the four sides of the stone relating to education, civil rights, and other subjects close to the President's agenda, and heart--the text for them was reviewed by you, as I remember. I think you wrote most of that language, as a speech writer for the President. I also remember that you and I had to doctor the language on two of the tablets because grammatically it was not correct.

M: That's correct. I remember that too.

C: And you authorized me to change it. (Laughter)

We shall see someday; some scholar will probably want to compare what we changed with that which was originally said. (Laughter) But that will be fun.

M: Back to the--you said earlier, but I think not in this recording, two things. One, it was determined that the grove should be carved out of the space that had already been called Lady Bird Johnson Park.

Castro -- VI -- 6

C: Yes, I forgot about that.

M: And then, second, at some point--you couldn't just do this on your own, you had to get Congress involved.

C: Well, of course, I overlooked those two important points. First of all, at the time that we discussed the memorial on the plane, that is between Brooke, and Laurance, and myself, when Brooke said, "It should be something simple, like a grove of trees," and I said, "I know the perfect place to put it, and that's in Lady Bird Johnson Park."

In 1968 I came up with the idea of changing the name of Columbia Island to Lady Bird Johnson Park, because her favorite sculpture in the whole city of Washington was on the Virginia side of the river, the Marine Memorial with the seagulls, which we had planted with several thousand tulips. She always remarked on the beauty of that memorial as we drove by it on our beautification excursions. So it occurred to me that this would be the place to rename after her. I talked with Stu Udall and in fact gave him a memo, and he approved it. We had a ceremony in the Interior Department auditorium: a total surprise to Lady Bird; she had no idea this was going to happen. We did some kind of a guise--oh, I know; I think we announced the planting of dogwood trees on the Virginia side of Memorial Bridge. That was the guise that we used. She was totally surprised when the place was renamed Lady Bird Johnson Park.

As far as getting authorization for the memorial, we went to Jake Pickle, and Jake carried the banners for us in the Congress. [We] had no trouble getting legislation approved, with Lloyd Bentsen in the Senate looking after it. In no time we had all the approvals we needed. Fund raising was not difficult.

Castro -- VI -- 7

M: Did the Congress, in approving it, have to put up money?

C: Oh, gosh, no. This was done totally with private funds. Not one penny of public money was spent on this project, which I think is unprecedented as far as presidential memorials are concerned.

M: I bet it is.

C: We had a ground-breaking ceremony; President Ford participated, of course. When we dedicated the project--I think in the fall of 1974, September, I think--President Ford made a speech there that was appropriate to the occasion. Mrs. Ford was there; you were there, Rogers Morton was there, the secretary of the interior. I was master of ceremonies. For the first and only time in my life I introduced a president of the United States to an audience. President Ford had been a ranger at Yellowstone National Park when he was a college student. I alluded to that and said that never in my dreams did I expect that I, as a former National Park Service man, would be introducing the President of the United States, a former park ranger. (Laughter) And the President laughed, I remember that.

Incidentally, after that I was asked to assume the directorship of the National Park Service, by Rogers Morton. I declined it because I was very happily occupied in my role as director of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. Besides that, it would have been a political appointment and I never once accepted a political appointment. I thought they were too tenuous. I'm glad I never did.

Getting back to the memorial. We, as you know, with Meade Palmer as designer, constructed what is a relatively simple project in the sense that it is a very natural type of project, with relatively little construction except for paths and the central area where we

Castro -- VI -- 8

placed the megalith. We planted nine hundred and ninety-two white pines, which at the time were in scale with the stone. Now, the white pines have grown very substantially so that the stone looks like a small appendage. (Laughter) We also planted wildflowers, of course, to complement Mrs. Johnson's interest in native plants.

I have to tell you that I derive great joy from the use the memorial receives. It plays host to lots of joggers, mostly from the Pentagon, I guess, because it is right across Boundary Channel. Incidentally, we constructed a bridge across Boundary Channel also, a beautiful wooden bridge that complements the aesthetics of the memorial very appropriately.

So all in all it's been a project that I feel has lent to the greatness of the city of Washington and environs.

M: How much money did you set out to raise? And how much money did you raise? And how did you do it?

C: We raised two and a half million, as I recall. We had a half-million-dollar surplus. We turned that over to the National Park Foundation to be used for the benefit of the National Park Service in maintaining the memorial. As it turned out, the National Park Foundation invested the money and I think it's multiplied to two or three million by now, if I remember correctly. The Park Service has always assumed the maintenance responsibility for the site, and our money has been used consistently for the purchase of equipment for capital work, so that a lot of that surplus has been preserved and in fact even enhanced.

Castro -- VI -- 9

M: It does raise this question: Park Service appears to be looking with new eyes on some of the areas that it maintains, because of the budget consideration. Has that come under any kind of scrutiny?

C: Not to my knowledge. I think as a precaution I'm going to check in with my successor, four or five times [removed]. He used to be director of parks of the nation's capital, as you probably know. And Bob Stanton is, I think my fifth successor, something like that, my successor five times removed. I think I'll give him a ring one of these days and ask him if anybody has any designs on that money, and if so I'm going to have to find a way to ensure that it's not tampered with.

M: Did the money come from big subscribers, or small ones, or a mix, or how was this?

C: I think a mixture. The bigger amount came from people like Laurance, and Jane Engelhard, and Lew Wasserman. People that you know, that you've worked with. They were the big benefactors.

M: Did Mrs. Johnson show continued interest in planning of the thing right all the way through?

C: To this day she does. You know her. (Laughter) When she gets committed to something she hangs on to it and stays with it, which I think is part of the charm of working with her. She assumes a responsibility and completely discharges it, and she will continue to do so as long as she lives.

From time to time she asks me about the LBJ Memorial Grove, and I try at times when I'm in Washington to go by and check it out. The Park Service has done a very nice job of maintaining it.

Castro -- VI -- 10

M: While we are on it, though, what about the Lady Bird Johnson Park that surrounds it?
What is it doing today?

C: Same standard; they have been maintaining it very well, I'm happy to say. I see no decline in the standard of maintenance, at least up to this point. Now, next spring may tell a different story; I hope not.

One of the funny things about the LBJ Memorial Grove I have to tell you about is that, a couple of years after we finished the project Laurance and I were talking about it and going over the success that it turned out to be. He said to me, "Nash, now that we know all about building presidential memorials, I'm afraid there isn't a market for our services." (Laughter) Even now he reflects on it from time to time. And we have fun doing that. We certainly did; it was a great project and probably the only one in the history of the country that hasn't cost the public any money to build.

M: This is a scattershot question, but I don't recall a memorial for President Nixon, unless it's next to his library. Is there one that you know of?

C: I don't believe anyone's even discussed a memorial to President Nixon in Washington, or President Carter, or President Reagan, or President Ford.

M: I was just thinking that Nixon is the only one who has died since. But I'm sure there will be one for others.

C: Do you realize that the FDR memorial, the Franklin Roosevelt memorial, is finally being built--

M: I know. Isn't that amazing.

C: --after all of these years. (Laughter)

Castro -- VI -- 11

So who knows what the future holds in terms of memorials to some of the other presidents? Not all presidents are commemorated in Washington, as you know. If so, some in such minor ways that I can't even remember--Buchanan, Garfield, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt--yes, there is a wonderful sculpture of him on Theodore Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River. That memorial was designed by a neighbor of mine in New York, a very distinguished architect named Eric Gugler, who has died. And Eric worked in the White House with Franklin Roosevelt. He redesigned the Oval Office and designed the grand piano in the East Room. Eric was a very talented man.

M: While we are on this tape, and I'm going to pose another question before we get into the other and this is one that you are not even prepared for, but it just occurred to me as we were talking about this; it's an obvious question--maybe it's recorded somewhere, and if it is we can abandon it. But I've never seen any explanation of why there was such a *simpático* relationship between President Johnson and the Rockefellers, particularly Laurance Rockefeller. They would appear to be out of totally different backgrounds, totally different political faiths, and yet there was an undeniably close association and relationship. Is that something that you have thought about or pondered?

C: Not really. I have to tell you something that President Johnson said to me one time at the Ranch about Nelson. He said, "Nelson would make a great president." I told Nelson about it and he was visibly touched.

I think the LBJ-Laurance alliance began with Laurance's involvement with the 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty. When Eisenhower was president he appointed the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, and appointed

Castro -- VI -- 12

Laurance as its chairman. When Kennedy was president, the Commission's work was completed and arrangements were made for the report to be presented to him. Something came up and JFK was not available to receive the report. He asked Vice President Johnson to receive it for him. I believe that was the beginning of this mutual admiration each one held for the other.

The Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission formulated a report that resulted in milestone legislation, for example the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Scenic Rivers Act, the Wild Rivers Act, the Highway Beautification Act; countless good [things] that President Johnson followed through on in the way of Laurance's commission's recommendations. There will never be anything as sweeping, conservation-wise, as that commission's work. It stands above anything else, as far as I know, in the way of conservation achievements, absolutely unprecedented.

Laurance was appointed by President Johnson as chairman of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty. I was there when Laurance presented his report to President Johnson, and Mrs. Johnson made a wonderful statement. Subsequently, he came on her First Lady's Beautification Committee as a member and worked with her for all the years that she was first lady, traveling with her to many places, as I did. In the context of that association, he saw quite a bit of President Johnson.

There developed a sort of camaraderie between the two that I had occasion to witness even more after LBJ returned to Texas. We were out there together, Bette and Mary and Laurance and I, quite a number of times. It was clear to me that they had a deep respect and admiration for each other.

Castro -- VI -- 13

I think it also transcended itself into admiration for Nelson. I don't know where that friendship began, to tell you the truth, but I do know that LBJ could not have paid Nelson a greater tribute than to say to me he would make a great president.

M: Do you know that in Joe Califano's book [*The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*] that was published just a couple years ago he says, flatly, that President Johnson wanted Nelson Rockefeller to become president in 1968?

C: Now that I didn't know. I've never read that book. I must get it.

M: It is a great book.

C: Is it? I have to read it.

M: It's Johnson with the bark off. There are a lot of things that I read that I flinched at. But nonetheless it is a good book. But that was one of the surprises to me, what he said about that.

C: Well, you see, he was consistent, I didn't know that. But out of the blue one day we were talking about Nelson. I think it was in his bedroom, we were both having breakfast, I on a tray, he on a tray; he in bed, I on a chair right next to the bed. That's where it came up. I've forgotten the reason that it came up, but it did and he said, "He would make a great president."

M: That relationship in the White House involving them and you, that was your first association with Rockefeller.

C: Yes, as a matter of fact that's when I first got to know him, and somehow we meshed well. I can't tell you what precipitated it. As a member of the committee he was very

Castro -- VI -- 14

diligent and conscientious about doing things. I, as an associate of Lady Bird's, presented ideas for the committee to consider.

Laurance underwrote a project on Watts Branch in Southeast Washington, and I worked very closely with him on it. That's where we really got to know each other. It is a friendship that has blossomed through the years. It's been one of the highlights of my life, having this friendship and association and camaraderie with him. He is a very special human being, believe me.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI

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