

## INTERVIEW VII

DATE: March 4, 1996

INTERVIEWEE: NASH CASTRO

INTERVIEWER: Harry Middleton

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

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

M: We're going to talk now about the establishment of the Wildflower Center. Ted Gittinger on our staff prepared a chronology, and he gave you a copy, and he gave me a copy. So I have read that and I am familiar with that in outline. I understand that since then he has also given you a copy of correspondence between you and Mrs. Johnson and I haven't seen that. So some of the questions that I might ask perhaps are covered in the correspondence. Nonetheless, I would like to ask some of this anyway.

What was the very first word you heard about the National Wildflower Research Center?

C: After the Johnsons left the White House, I suggested to Mrs. Johnson that she consider the establishment of her girlhood home in Karnack, Texas, as an historic site. All the years that I worked with her in Washington there were constant allusions to Karnack and Caddo Lake and her growing up there, her lifelong love affair with nature which began there. It occurred to me that it would be appropriate to suggest that her girlhood home might be established as an historic site. At that time no former first lady's home had been so recognized. This is no longer true, because Eleanor Roosevelt's home, Val-Kill, in

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Dutchess County, New York, was designated a national historic site about ten years ago. So I suggested to her repeatedly over the years that she consider doing this, and out of her great sense of modesty she consistently declined.

After she returned to Texas, she became involved in the beautification of the Texas highways with wildflowers, and made quite an impression. I remember attending the first presentation of her awards at the LBJ State Park, and several times in the intervening years I attended those ceremonies. More and more I realized that she was very serious about the beautification of America's landscapes with wildflowers, and she used Texas as the launching point, I might say, very successfully.

After trying repeatedly to interest her in the designation of her home as an historic site of some kind, she declined. At that point I had spoken with the then-director of the National Park Service, and I asked him, if she were to consent to this, is it likely the Park Service might recognize it as a national historic landmark and prevail upon the Congress to pass appropriate legislation? He said, "By all means. She'd be the first First Lady to be so recognized." Even that didn't convince her.

In the fall of 1980, I think in October, Bette [Mrs. Castro] and I were at the LBJ Ranch on a visit. In those days Mrs. Johnson did a lot of hiking. We went on a walk at the Ranch, just Bette and she and I, and two Secret Service agents, I think Jim Hardin and one other fellow. Bette fell behind and talked with the agents; Mrs. Johnson and I led the group. As we walked along one of the trails I stopped to admire a wildflower and I said, "Mrs. Johnson, I'm not getting any younger, and you're not getting any younger, and if we're going to do something about your home in East Texas, the time is now. We

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shouldn't wait much longer. Besides that, we have the added attraction of developing some kind of a wildflower project in concert with the designation of the house as an historic property." At the time, my recollection is there were still twenty-five acres that went with the house. She said, "I think you're right."

In 1981, we met in Austin and flew to Karnack to look at the house. Patsy Steves was among those in the party, along with Betty Tilson, Carole Bryant, and she and I. We went in her private plane, landed in Marshall, Texas, which is right next to Karnack, and spent the next two days in the area looking at the house, talking with her stepmother's son who met with us; Mrs. Johnson's stepmother, Mrs. Taylor, was not present. We looked at the house and I became convinced that it indeed was worthy of preservation as an historic property.

When I got back to New York I heard--I think from Don Thomas--that Mrs. Taylor had decided she was not interested in selling the house after all. That was a big disappointment and it put a real crimp in our plans.

The next time we went to Karnack, Laurance and Mary went with Bette and me. It was the spring of 1982. We flew to Shreveport, Louisiana, in Laurance's plane and rented a car, and we drove to Marshall, Texas, where we met Lady Bird. We looked at the house, and again Mrs. Taylor was not present. Her [Mrs. Johnson's] stepmother's son showed us the house. We got back to New York and got another call saying that Mrs. Taylor had again decided she did not want to sell the house after all.

At that point I said to Lady Bird, "Why don't we go ahead without the historic property and establish a wildflower center here in Austin?" She said, "I have property at

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the LBJ Ranch, at the Haywood Ranch, and at the radio station. Think about the possibilities of all of them." I didn't hesitate. I said, "Austin would be the place. The university is here, the airport is here; it would be infinitely easier to operate in and out of Austin than some sixty miles away."

One thing begat another, and she said that she would give us sixty acres of land at the radio station site. I talked with her about putting together a board and forming a nonprofit corporation, and I even suggested the name, the "National Wildflower Research Center," to her. She went to Europe for the summer of 1982, as I recall, and I undertook to put a board together. I think my files at the LBJ Library will reflect that. There is a list there. We started calling it the Lady Bird Association, Inc. at the time.

On my own I developed the list of potential board members, drawing on friends and associates of the beautification program in Washington. Many of the people on the list came on the board. I wrote to them, inviting them to serve on the board, in her absence, knowing she would approve of them. That was the genesis of the Wildflower Center.

Don Thomas assumed responsibility for giving final review and approval to the articles of incorporation. We incorporated in Texas as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. We had to have a Texas resident as our first president. Patsy Steves kindly agreed to fill this role. After we incorporated, she became president pro-tem. I was subsequently elected to succeed her and served for eight years.

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We started with nothing, and succeeded in building an endowment over the years that amounted to about three and half to four million, as I recall. Unfortunately we had to draw it down in order to complete our new headquarters in Austin last year.

M: Before we get into that, let me ask you this: When it was all in its formative stage, and you [were] talking about doing it, what did you have in mind, and what did those who were as committed as you have in mind, would be the purpose of this center?

C: Essentially to enhance the American public's understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of wildflowers. Also, to undertake research on wildflowers, which to my knowledge had never been done in any extensive degree.

M: And this very prestigious group that you put together that formed the first board, were they all as interested in wildflowers as you, or were you assuming that some of them would come on because of their interest in her?

C: I think a little of both; for the most part, because of their devotion to Lady Bird. There were exceptions. Mary Lasker, for example, was wild about the idea. Helen Hayes, a good friend and neighbor, [had] been a lover of flora all of her life. Laurance, whose interest in conservation goes back many, many years, was one of those keenly interested and continues to be interested to this day.

M: How has the original board survived? I don't mean specifically, but are a good many of them still there that were there when it began?

C: Unfortunately not, because time takes its toll of people. For example, we've lost Mary Lasker, and we've lost many of the original members.

M: How do you replace them?

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C: That's the challenge for the future. I'm not sure we can ever find people with the sense of commitment to Lady Bird that we have had in the past. To know Lady Bird is to love Lady Bird. I think without any question that much of the zeal that was demonstrated throughout this whole process came about as a result of the affection that people have felt for Lady Bird for so long.

One aspect of this that I overlooked, which I think is very important: There was a man called Carlton Lees, who was a vice president of the New York Botanical Garden for a number of years, whom I got to know during the beautification days in Washington. He was never a member of Mrs. Johnson's Beautification Committee, but I did consult him on occasion on behalf of the committee. When Bette and I moved to New York, we saw each other socially from time to time. When it came time to put the Center together, I called Carlton and sounded him out. He said, "Well, the country needs this. It will take somebody of Mrs. Johnson's standing to give it life." I prevailed upon him to round up copies of the charters of his own organization, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the New England Wildflower Society, and other organizations with a like bent. Out of that we were able to get Gil Denman to structure a charter and a set of bylaws. Not only did Carlton provide the ingredients for our charter, but he also became a member of our board. At the time he was quite ill. He had been on a botanizing trip, I think in India, and developed a rare form of--oh, what's that liver disease?

M: Hepatitis?

C: Hepatitis, yes. And had to be hospitalized in England for several months before he returned to this country. Because of that illness he was forced to retire.

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But even so, he was so committed to this project that he moved to Austin for a period of three months and developed the first master plan for us. Concurrently with that, he agreed to co-author a book with Lady Bird called *Wildflowers Across America*, which as you know is a real classic, published by Abbeville Press. Carlton was a steadfast member of the board until he died, which was about four or five years later. He left a legacy for the Center that is timeless in its benefits.

Another very key person was Don Thomas, whom you knew well. Don was a real doubting Thomas; I say this as a pun and also as a matter of fact. Don never believed this project would ever get off the ground. Years after we got it structured and established, he finally said to me, "I have to salute you. I never, never would have given odds, or even made a bet that this project would fly." I felt gratified.

M: Of course. When it began and business opened on the original land out east of Austin that Mrs. Johnson contributed, was it envisioned that that would be the Center, or was it always assumed that eventually it would move somewhere else?

C: We never visualized moving from our original home; however, much to our disappointment, we learned there was no groundwater there, although the site is on the Colorado River. We probed and probed and spent a lot of money drilling for water. We never succeeded in finding it. The water in the adjacent river is badly polluted and unusable. We had to truck water to the Center for years, which was very expensive.

That's the compelling reason that caused us to find another location. Don Thomas took the initiative in finding the choice site where we are now. Mrs. Johnson very

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generously contributed the money--\$100,000--with which to purchase the thirty-four-acre site.

M: In those early years, looking over the minutes of your meetings during the years you were in charge, it is not clear to me what the big decisions that were made at those meetings were. As you would call this group together, at least once a year and sometimes twice, what were the big decisions that had to be made in those early years?

C: One of the bigger decisions was the relocation of the Center; that had to be. Establishing policies in terms of our work program, our research, sales, and fundraising programs, all so critical to the operation. It was a combination of all those factors.

M: The research part of it, of course, is what seems to me, as a neophyte in this, is going to be very critical in the years ahead. In your judgment, how much progress has been made in developing the research arm of the Center?

C: Not as much as we had visualized, the reason being that we've never been able to afford extensive research work, the appointment of scientists such as botanists, horticulturists, and others in more than minimum numbers to carry on a wide program of research.

At the moment the most important challenge is reestablishing our endowment and building it up so that we can derive funds from it to enable us to provide for research in the future. As I said earlier, we had to draw on the endowment to complete the Center. We have to rebuild it if we are going to stay in business.

M: It's a beautiful Center. Was there unanimity among your advisors on the board on locating the Center there and the kind of design it should be and all that?



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C: Without any question. I never heard one dissent about the location of the Center. I never heard one dissent about the architectural style of the Center. The only criticism I heard was that we went over budget. We had established a budget of seven million and exceeded it by a little over two and a half million. Unfortunately we were forced into this situation.

M: Has Mrs. Johnson been generally in support of everything that the Center has done to this point?

C: No question about it. She has been the inspiration for it all along, the spearhead of everything that we do. She has been a hands-on chairman, I'm happy to say, as opposed to one who sits on the sidelines and lets things take care of themselves. You know her style of working. She digs in and is very much a participant.

In the last year she's probably been less visible, from that point of view, than ever before. But then I'm reminded that she's on her way to being eighty-three years of age, and that makes a difference.

M: She's passed that, she's on her way to being eighty-four.

C: My gosh, I forgot; that's right. (Laughter) That's right, because Lurance is on his way to being eighty-six; I keep forgetting that.

M: Is there a feeling now that the Center should begin to separate itself from her and not depend upon her as heavily as it has in the past?

C: Not on my part. I believe the distinction between the time I was president and the present time is that the new leadership has no way of knowing how much this means to her, and doesn't have the benefit of knowing her as some of us have. I do not feel that the

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personal devotion to her is as strong as it has been in the past, because those of us who have known her have found it inspiring and joyous to work with her. I don't see that obtain in the case of some of the new directors who, for the most part, are meeting her for the first time and don't have the same sense of appreciation for what she has done as some of us do.

M: After the many years of your being in charge, what were the circumstances that led you to decide to give up the leadership?

C: First of all, I went into retirement five years ago, when I gave up the leadership. I had always planned to retire in 1990, at age seventy. I realized that when I retired I was not going to have secretarial help to work with me on the Wildflower Center. When I worked both on the LBJ Grove and the Wildflower Center, I ascribed most of the time of one of my three secretaries to each of those projects. Happily they didn't come together; they came one after the other. But without that kind of help, I knew I couldn't continue as president of the Center.

Also, the requirement of going to Texas at least six times a year for meetings, reviews, consultations, and the like was more than I could comfortably handle.

Remember that when you reach age seventy--I don't know about you, because you are a long way from there. (Laughter) When one attains age seventy, one experiences a decline in one's energy level. However, that was not as much a consideration as the loss of secretarial help and the ability to do all the mechanical things that need to be done when you're in a job like that.

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- M: But even though you gave up the leadership you have still maintained your interest, and that stays.
- C: Oh yes, and I will for as long as I'm able. I don't know that I will ascribe as much time as I have in the past. As long as Mrs. Johnson is alive, and as long as I am physically and mentally able to help the Center, I will certainly do it. I can't imagine the Center not being a part of my life, [but] not in the degree it has been in the last fifteen years or so.
- M: You mentioned new directors a while ago. I don't know how often this happens, but every once in a while new directors are brought in. How are they selected? Is this an election?
- C: Yes, it's an election by the board. But there is a nominating process that is new, relatively, introduced about eight years ago. It is very formal. My style was a rather informal style. And because of that informal style we developed a camaraderie, a spirit of familyship, so to speak, among the directors and the staff that unfortunately I don't believe continues to exist.

One of my techniques in the way of unifying our board and staff was to issue, six times a year, a memorandum to the directors, entitled "Update." I would share with each director everything I knew that was going on in respect to the Center. It seemed to help crystallize a camaraderie that unfortunately I don't see anymore. And it troubles me because that was very, very helpful to us, not only in the formative years, but in the developing years. And whether that will ever be restored, I don't know. I have suggested to the present president, and I did to the one who succeeded me before him, that it was

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very important to keep in close touch with the directors and that my means was the "Update" memo that I sent six times a year. Unfortunately they never followed up on it.

M: As you know, the rules for these oral history interviews are that you will see the transcript in its rough form before it is ever finished, so that anything that I ask and that you answer, you'll have a chance to delete if you want to.

C: I hope I haven't said anything untoward.

M: You have not; now you are about to, that's why I'm warning you.

C: I am?

(Laughter)

M: You are about to be presented with a question that you can either refuse to answer, or that you can know will be deleted.

C: I must be circumspect, but I must also be honest.

M: Are there members of the board whom you have known through the years who you think to have been the most useful, and are there others, and would you care to name them, that you think have been the least useful?

C: Well, I would rather name the useful ones. (Laughter)

I'm not skittish about responding to your question, but I think it would be rude and discourteous for me to name our least useful brethren. In any organization we have leaders and we have followers. The more dynamic people on this board have been Laurance Rockefeller; Helen Hayes; Marie Schwartz; Patsy and Marshal Steves; Don Thomas; John Barr; Roy Butler; Carlton Lees, bless his heart. Carolyn Curtis was very dynamic, and I'm sorry that she moved on to The University of Texas because we lost a

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great, great deal of talent and devotion to Lady Bird when she left us. I think Jake Pickle has been a very effective member of the board. Liz Carpenter in her way--never able, unfortunately, to help us financially, which is very understandable, but she certainly has been with us in spirit and has always delivered most effectively when asked to do anything.

I think Gil Denman has been highly effective. I wish there were some way we could prevail upon him to get his Moody Foundation to help more than it has, because it has the resources. Jane Engelhard, while never a member of the board, has been very generous in supporting us financially. Former President Ford, curiously enough, has been on our board from inception; he's never attended a meeting but every year he sends a check, not a big check, but enough to let Mrs. Johnson know that he still respects her and honors what she's doing, and it always gives us a lift. I think Carol Fortas in the beginning was very effective; she withdrew because of age. Pamela Harriman has been a good board member throughout the years. George Hartzog in the beginning was very helpful, and Mary Lasker, of course. Bob Lederer, who was the executive v.p. of the American Association of Nurserymen and who worked with us in Washington during the beautification days, was effective until his death. Bob Ench, Dede Rose, Tex Cook, Warrie Price, Luci [Johnson], Marybeth Weston-Lobdell, Jack and Laura Lee Blanton, Eloise Rouse, Carlton Lees, whom I mentioned earlier, others.

Lew Wasserman has been very generous through the years, as you know, in providing financial support to us. Mrs. Johnson is reluctant ever to ask him, so we have to sneak in. But we haven't done that for a long time, because she's serious about not

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imposing upon him, knowing he is a great supporter of the Library, and Harry, we never want to compete with you.

M: We've managed to stay *not* in competition all these years.

C: That's right. There are some who have served on the board of whom I had higher expectations. But who are we to question why they didn't get the spirit or the fire? I can understand; some people will accept membership on a board and, when they realize what it's going to mean in the way of responsibility, withdraw in one form or another. And I respect them for that. And I have no quarrel with anyone who has ever served on this board.

M: Do you have any quarrel at all--well, quarrel is not the word--do you have a sense of disappointment in the direction that the Wildflower Center is taking now?

C: I'm not as privy to what's going on in the Center now as I was when I was president. I think the work program is very well suited to the purposes and objectives of the Center. I think there is a lot of motivation on the part of the staff. One disappointment I've had over the years, and Mrs. Johnson too, has been the consistent turnover of staff. I believe that we are more stable now, staff-wise, than we have been in years, and I hope this will continue to be the case. For a long time she and I had grave concerns about constant turnover; at times it was reminiscent of a revolving door. But I think we are past that. I think perhaps it's David Northington's leadership that has brought about this stability; I hope so. I can't think of any other single source or reason for it happening this way.

There is still a lot to be done. I think, for example, that we need to develop a financial plan that is realistic, attainable, acceptable, and practical. Mrs. Johnson and I

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both had concerns about fiscal discipline in the organization. In the latter formative years, perhaps, more financial discipline would have been helpful. In my years as president I tried to keep an eye on everything, including financial matters. This is not to say there has been reckless spending, nothing of the kind. We've never had sufficient money to work with. But I know that at one time Mrs. Johnson raised the same question I did: Is so much staff travel necessary? She is a very practical woman, a very disciplined woman, more so in the area of finance, as you so well know.

I remember when I was working with her in Washington that she would ask about the cost of a beautification project--not so much the cost of developing it but the cost of maintaining it. Is it going to be expensive to maintain? That's an example of her practicality.

M: Was there at one time a feeling that the Center should develop an endowment before it began to spend, to put the endowment in place? Or was that never a matter of contention?

C: I don't believe so. I know you did that in the case of the Library.

M: We did, yes. Well, President Johnson did.

C: Which was very smart. The point is that--among other considerations--we outgrew our headquarters in Austin at the site Mrs. Johnson gave us. We had to find a new location. We ventured into it with the expectation that we could build the endowment and build the new Center at the same time. Unfortunately, it didn't work out quite that way, in the sense that we had to draw down the endowment, as I said earlier. But we're going to rebuild it. It's going to be hard; it's proving itself to be hard, but we can't give up.

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M: This Center is probably going to be the enduring legacy of Lady Bird Johnson, more than anything else. I'd like to claim her for the Library, and certainly she will always be a very important part of that, but her mark is going to be on this Center more than anything else. That being the case, what would you like to see the Center doing fifty years from now? What do you hope it will be?

C: I like to think that more and more we are going to rely on the natural world to heal the environmental degradations of the day, for the benefit of our generation and generations to come. I wrote this in my original concept of the Center: Among other things, the Center would give impetus to the utilization of plants for their medicinal values, working with pharmaceutical organizations like Merck, Pfizer, Upjohn. They would contract with us to grow certain species of wild plants which they would research for medicinal purposes. That is still an objective, but it has to be promoted. With the leadership in the right place and at the right time, we will still be able to do that, more so as science gives more and more credence to alternative medicine. I like to think that the Center will do more than provide inspiration, education, and enjoyment of wildflowers for our people, but that it will also serve as a research element that will benefit our civilization.

M: That's the perfect place to end, but I want to ask one more question about it. What about water tables? Is that going to be a--?

C: Absolutely, water tables will be an important consideration. As the population of the world continues to proliferate, the use of wildflowers and other native plants in lieu of cultured plants will help save our declining water resources. It is going to become a



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necessity as the world's population grows. I believe we are going to have to rely more and more on our legacy of native plants.

M: I do have one final question. Do you see the Johnson daughters, or the grandchildren, as becoming active in the leadership of the Center in the years ahead?

C: I see good signs on the part of Luci and Ian, her husband. They are both doing very good work on behalf of the Center, and they have done so for years. I see Luci becoming more and more involved in partially filling the role of her mother. I don't think anybody can fill her mother's role completely. One of Luci's children, Nicole has taken a very strong interest in the Wildflower Center; she has been spearheading several annual functions that raise money in Austin. Those are good signs.

Unfortunately Lynda, living in the eastern part of the country, has not had as much time to devote to the Center as Luci, although Lynda has been a generous contributor and a devoted member of our board. Yes, I am optimistic that we will see a continuity of interest on the part of the children and grandchildren.

M: How about your own children? Has there been any interest there?

C: Our oldest daughter, Kim, is very interested in the flora of the world. She is a great gardener, surpassing even my feeble efforts. I think, once her children are farther along in years, she will seriously consider getting involved. I think when the time comes for me to bow out that I might propose her as a director of the Center.

M: I think that is a marvelous place to stop. This has been a rewarding tape. If Bette were here I would ask her to recite one of her poems. (Laughter)

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VII

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