

INTERVIEW I

DATE: September 16, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: MARIE FEHMER

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy Pierce McSweeney

PLACE: Ms. Fehmer's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: This interview is with Marie Fehmer, who is secretary to President Johnson. Today is Tuesday, September 16, 1969 and it's about seven in the evening. We are at Miss Fehmer's residence, 2734 Olive Place, N. W., Washington, D.C. This is Dorothy Pierce McSweeney.

Marie, I'd like to dispense with last names, since I do know you. I think before we begin, I ought to announce that you warned me upon walking in the door that today is the day that you announced your engagement, and I think we ought to have that for posterity too.

Prior to that, could you begin by telling me what your background was, and training, leading up to the point where you came in, working for Mr. Johnson?

F: My background begins, I guess, with my birth. I'm a Texan by birth, born in a little small farm community near Rosebud, Texas.

M: Where is Rosebud, Texas?

F: Rosebud isCI don't know where Rosebud is. It's nowhere. It's in the middle of nowhere. It's close to Waco, close to Temple, somewhere in there. It had one main street, a hospital, a service station, a general store, and a funeral parlor. That's all that's left of Rosebud. I lived in a small family situation, I had only one sister, and of course mother

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and my dad. When I was three or four years old, my family moved to California. At age five they returned to Texas to Dallas, and I grew up in Dallas. So I call Dallas home, not Rosebud.

That's a wonderful thing that the President liked to kid anyone about, being from Rosebud. Mrs. Johnson said, when I first came on the payroll, "Thank goodness, Lyndon has been wanting someone from Rosebud for years; now there really is someone from Rosebud."

In Dallas I did the usual things that a girl will do growing up ^Cbackground, that kind of thing. A very strict German Catholic family, went to a Catholic high school. And then because of a family emergency when I was a senior in high school, the emergency being having the house burn completely ^Cour home burned completely ^Cthe family lost most of what it had and it was a severe setback. And then my strong German parents did not believe in insurance, so I could not start school. So I went to work for three years, and I worked for the telephone company in Dallas. I started out typing, doing something that I said I would never do, I couldn't do, and that's type all day. I couldn't think of anything more dull. I think I acquired stenographic skills because that would pay a little more. And during all this time I saved my money because I was determined that I was going to school.

So three years later I entered Southern Methodist University in Dallas, in February 1958, as a full-time student. Prior to this time at night I had taken about twelve hours in courses. I stayed at home and went to SMU during the day and then studied in

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the evening. That summer I decided to go to the University of Texas. I entered there in September 1958 as a full-time student.

M: Was that 1959?

F: That was 1958, because I started to SMU in the spring of 1958 just for the first semester, I mean the spring semester, and worked again in the summer, and then went to the University of Texas full-time.

M: I know something of how well your secretarial skills are thought of. Where did you learn to type? Was this just a course in high school?

F: It was a course in high school, yes, both typing and shorthand, going to night school. I took the course mainly because it was easier to type themes. It was a college prep school, and you were not required to take it, but I have always been a greedy thing when it came to learning and knowledge, and I would get as much as I could. So that's where they were developed, plus the working for three years. Call day, every day, you must develop this skill. It's a motor skill, and it comes with practice. And even if I would leave it, as I have left it now because I don't use it, you can reacquire it in two or three weeks, once you have the skill.

M: That's true. All right, we have you in the university in September 1958.

F: Those were the usual college years, except I was older than most students. I was twenty-one coming in and they were seventeen and eighteen.

M: Did you start as a sophomore?

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F: Yes, I did. But [in] the transferring of the night-school courses and SMU's courses, I lost a good many hours so I may as well have been a freshman. I spent a full four years at the university.

M: What did you major in?

F: I started out in business that was in John Arch White's school, he was dean of the school then. He was William White's brother, who will figure into the story a little later. I was fairly happy there, but I became a little worried and I decided that, being a practical, conservative female, why not pick up a teacher's certificate? So I went over to the School of Education and talked to them and discovered I could pick up a teaching certificate, plus a major in English and a major in business, and a minor in history and government, with the hours that I had had before and do it in four years.

So then I transferred to the School of Education and worked toward a B.S. in education, and that's what I came out with in 1962.

M: That was then June of 1962?

F: Yes.

M: All right, we've got you through college. As I understand it, your first contact with Mrs. Johnson's office came at this time, didn't it?

F: It came the day of my last final exam at the university.

M: I believe you had other plans too, didn't you?

F: Yes. I had returned to the sorority house, after taking the last exam, and found sort of an empty house. You know how schools empty the week before graduation. You finish your exams as quickly as you can and you go home, and then those of use who are

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squares and want to graduate and go through the ceremony where your parents come back; the others just say, "Mail my diploma." Well, my parents would have been very pleased for me to graduate and go through the ceremony, so I intended to do that.

But I came back to this empty house and found a note on the bulletin board, asking me to call Sarah Smith. Sarah was a sorority sister of mine who had graduated a year before I did, and she worked downtown somewhere. I had not talked to her the whole year. She had come to several alum meetings and chapter meetings, but I had not visited with her.

M: What sorority were you in?

F: Delta Zeta. When I called her, she asked me how things were, the usual amenities, and then she said: "Would you do a favor for me, please?" I said, "What is it, Sarah? I'm leaving in the morning. My parents will be here at noon to pick up my debris that has accumulated here for four years, and we're going back to Dallas for a week, and then I'll be back for graduation. Couldn't I help you when I get back?" She said, "No. My boss is interviewing some girls for jobs in Washington." "What does that have to do with me?" "Well, it's a secretarial position, and everybody's gone. I can't get anybody, and he thinks I'm not trying. So would you go interview for the job?" I said, "No, Sarah, I can't. I have to pack tonight, my parents will be here at noon, and I want to get out of here, I want to get back to Dallas by dark tomorrow so we don't have to drive late in the evening. And the last place that I'd like to be is Washington! I have a fellowship for next year and graduate assistance, and I'm going to graduate school and get my master's in education."

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She said, "Please do it, just for me. All you have to do is show up. There are two other girls that have secretarial skills that I know, and they've already left. If you don't show up, nobody will be there, and he really will think I didn't try." "Well, where is this job? Tell me a little more about it." "I really don't know, but it's a secretarial position." "Well, the last thing I want to do is spend the rest of my life taking shorthand and typewriting because I worked my way through school doing that and I'm finished. No more!" "Well, just go, just appear."

M: Who was she working for?

F: Warren Woodward. I said, "Well, all right. Where do I go?"

M: Did you know at the time who she was working for?

F: No. I hadn't talked to her for a year. So she told me to go to KTBC and to tell the receptionist there that I was to see a Mr. Woodward.

Well, I had been completely divorced from any kind of politics while I was on campus. I had no interest in politics. I was interested in campus activities, and I did everything I could. I was very busy in all sorts of activities and studies, but politics had no lure for me. I was not ever interested. So it didn't dawn on me, when I walked into KTBC, where I was. I did not know.

There were two men sitting in the lobby. I later learned that one of them was Clarence Knetsch, a Secret Service agent, and I don't remember who the other was. HeCKnetschC was in the San Antonio office then, and at that time, when the President was Vice President, whenever he'd be in Texas the San Antonio office would send men to supplement, because as vice president he did not travel with a large complement of Secret

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Service agents. In fact, he usually had two. When he first started out, when I was in the organization, in 1962 he always traveled with Jerry Kivett and Rufus Youngblood.

But the receptionist sent me up to Mr. Woodward's office, and Woody, as I later grew to know him, asked me the usual questions Cskills, beliefs, religion, family and grades Cthe kind of thing that you ask any girl if you were interviewing her for a job. I had come there just to do Sarah a favor, so I didn't ask any questions. I was interested in nothing. I just wanted to finish this and walk out the door nicely. A few minutes later a buzzer buzzed on Woody's desk, and he excused himself and he left the room.

M: Do you know what Mr. Woodward's position was at that time?

F: I don't know. He was with the station, but I didn't know the position, only that he was on the KTBC payroll, that I'm sure of. He left the room and I sat there. And as one would be inclined to do, I looked at the photographs on the wall and the footballs and trophies and the autographed things from Darrell Royal, who was then the coach of the team of Texas. And then sat quietly, thinking "When am I going to get out of here? Where am I?"

A few minutes a strange face appeared at the door. It was a lady and I had not seen her before. She said, "Would you follow me, please, Miss Fehmer?" I didn't know where else to go. We went up some stairs and into an elevator. A door opened and Woody said, "Mr. Vice President, this is Marie Fehmer." And this is the first that Marie Fehmer had heard of the Vice President because Cyou know the story by now so you know I didn't know. He was sitting in what was then his favorite green chair with his feet

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up on an ottoman. And he looked big and large and strong and very awesome and very fearsome.

M: Did you know anything about him by way of reputation?

F: Yes, and I was frightened of what I knew about his reputation, because you know how unkind the Texas papers can be. You know how unkind Ronnie Dugger was; you know everything he has written. You know how unkind the Texas campus^Cthe university campus even in 1962 was not well inclined toward the Johnsons. I can remember, before I met them, many of my sorority sisters asking permission to stay out late election night, to go downtown to see him because he spent that night in Austin, and I was not interested at all. I went to sleep.

M I'm sure he has kidded you about that.

F: But I don't remember who was in the room; I think that Earl Deathe was there. Earl was also a station employee, and he's the salt of the earth and the fellow who can get everything done in one way or another^Calways legal, but he can always get things done. The entourage is such that people come and go, and there's no static. People would walk in, they'd walk out. Woody was there.

The Vice President then sort of repeated the same questions. I can't remember many of them, because^Che thought I was poised, but I was not poised, I was numb from shock. So I don't remember many of the questions. There are two or three that stand out in my mind. He asked my religion; he asked my family connections and beliefs as far as families were concerned.

M: How do you mean?

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F: Well, what my family believed was the right thing to do in life; what my family had taught me as far as the difference between good and bad. I remember that very well. And he asked me if I had any prejudices, which I thought was an interesting question. And of course I explained absolutely not. He asked me if I would mind working with a Negro, and I said absolutely not. But I then learned that with the chairmanship of the several councils he was on, that this kind of thing could be very important.

M: Did he ask you about your politics?

F: Yes, he did. He asked me about my politics and the politics of my family. I took the path of least resistance, and I think I told him I was a middle-of-the-roader but that my family was Democratic.

I am having difficulty remembering the sequence of events. I remember having lunch with Mrs. Johnson and Mr. [Jesse] Kellam

M: That same day?

F: Oh, yes. We've not stopped yet, I'm still sitting in the room. And I think we had lunch--in fact, I know we had lunch. We had hamburgers. I always knew that the way that family loved hamburgers--Night Hawk hamburgers. And my first meal was the Night Hawk hamburger up on the fifth floor of KTBC in their apartment.

The apartment had sort of a living room-dining room combination, a small kitchen, large master bedroom, small guest bedroom, and a bath. And this was in the living room, I later discovered, where I had been taken to meet him, in the living room of their private apartment on the fifth floor of KTBC.

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We had lunch. And then I know Mrs. Johnson had things to do. Then Mary Margaret Wiley came in. I learned that he was hiring someone to take Mary Margaret's place, because the next weekend Mary Margaret was to be married in Houston to Jack Valenti. He said to me, "Would you like to go to the airport with me, and we'll take Mary Margaret to the plane?" So we drove to the airport, the three of us, [and] put Mary Margaret on the plane. We had sort of a secretarial-type visit there, you know, because she was telling me a little bit about what he liked and to handle things and credit cards for telephone calls andC

M: Had you accepted?

F: No.

M: What was she telling you that he liked, that you recall?

F: I think that he liked perfection, that he liked people who could answer a question in ten words or less, that he insisted upon complete honesty, and that if you gave him all the good in you, he in turn would give you all the good that he had.

But I remember taking them over to the airport, and then I remember going to the barbershop. He needed a haircut and so we continued our visit in the barber chair.

M: Did he explain that he wanted to talk to you while all of these things were happening?

F: Yes. This was now, I guess, about twelve noon, because we had an early lunch and it was about twelve noon. We went to the barbershop and we continued to talk, except there were periods of silence which I have learned later was his way of discovering whether or not I was a woman who could keep my mouth shut or one who had to chatter all the time. But I guess it was that strong Catholic background or something, because I

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spoke when I was spoken to at that time. So there was not much talking in the barbershop, and it didn't take long, just fifteen minutes. We then returned to the fifth floor of KTBC.

M: Were you beginning to wonder when you were going to get out?

F: Yes. I didn't really know what was happening. He can project so much trust that I didn't worry; I was completely comfortable with him, except for being very much in awe.

We got back to the fifth floor and he said: "When would you like to go to work?" And I said "Right now." He said, "There's the telephone, get me Senator So-and-so." I've forgotten who the first senator was that I got on the phone. Mary Margaret had given me her telephone book and the credit card number, and so I got Senator So-and-so on the phone. Then he said, "Who can I ask about you? Who knows you at the university?" I said, "Well, I worked for the associate dean at the School of Business." He said, "Oh, that's Bill White's brother." I said, "Well, I don't know if it's his brother. I think his brother is the dean of the school and I worked for the associate dean, but I do know the dean." So he called the associate dean, who was Dr. Bond, who's now in Colorado I think, and he said, "This is Lyndon Johnson. Tell me about Marie Fehmer." Dr. Bond proceeded to tell him, I suppose, and I sat quietly, wondering what was happening.

When he hung up the phone, the Vice President said, "Well, if you don't know how to spell a word, you at least know how to look it up in the dictionary. I think we'll probably make it." And he said, "Don't we have to be somewhere?" I kind of looked at him because I didn't know anything about his [schedule]. "I've got a speech in San Marcos; we have to go to San Marcos. Let's go."

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And I said, "But my parents are at the sorority house." He said, "Earl, go to the sorority house, pick up her clothes. Tell her roommate to pack her a bag, leave a note, tell her parents to call Woody." "Well, maybe perhaps I should call the sorority and tell my roommate what I might need." He said, "All right, go ahead and do that." I picked up the phone and asked my roommate to pack a bag and leave a note for my parents to call Mr. Woodward, and we went to San Marcos and he made a speech.

I cannot remember the event, but I know there was a Boy Scout troop, it was very much a very small Texas group, you know, like the Peanut Butter Festival or the National Association of Chicken Growers, or something. I don't know what it was, but it was a funny group. And I don't remember who went. I remember the two Secret Service agents. I know Rufus and Jerry and ClarenceCthere were three then. I remember the speech. I remember worrying about my parents arriving at the sorority house with a note to call Mr. Woodward, and I didn't know what this Mr. Woodward would tell them, so I really didn't quite understand.

I think that after the speech we then drove directly to Haywood, which is their lake place. And also there that night, I remember, were Judge and Mrs. [A. W.] Moursund, and Don and Jane Thomas, and Mr. Jesse Kellam. And we were on the lake until dark, riding in theCthey only had small, fast boats then, and he liked very fast boats.

M: Marie, how did you know where to go and what to do?

F: I prayed a lot. I didn't know. I used my instincts and sort of followed or just sat quietly until I was told. I can remember Mr. Kellam looking at me and sort of shaking his head and saying, "This one will never make it," because it was really a babe-in-the-woods, and

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I was as green as the grass. He said, "The only advice I can give you is to stay fluid. I do know that Mary Margaret keeps a diary." I said, "Well, what does the diary consist of?" "It's a combination of where he goes, when and with whom." So I then started doing that, because he had given me no instructions. I guess he was not in the business of training secretaries, he expected to have a trained one.

I remember later that night from the lake place talking to my parents, and my mother calling me. They had gone back to Dallas, and they had feared that I had been kidnapped, because "the Vice President of what?" Mr. Woodward told them that I was working for the Vice President.

But they packed me up at the sorority house and moved me. We had sort of a verbal agreement not to tell anybody, to let this thing work for a week and to see if he was happy with me and I was happy with him. Of course I was certainly going to be happy with them, but there was a trial period for them to look at me.

M: When had you decided that you would?

F: At that time when he said, "When do you want to go to work," and I said, "Now," and he said, "There's the phone, get me Senator so-and-so."

M: What was it that made you decide?

F: The complete, absolute persuasive power of that man. I think he could persuade a chair to turn into a sofa if he wanted to. That and the unbelievable trust and belief in him very quickly.

M: It must have also been a rather exciting idea, that you were going to Washington to work for the Vice President.

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F: It was amazing! That night after we left Haywood, and I found myself at the LBJ Ranch, this I had certainly heard of and about. I slept my first night in the children's room, which is the room that Luci and Lynda stay in. I remember Mrs. Johnson coming to me and asking if she could get me anything. I remember the only question that I had of her is "How do I get to mass in the morning? Because I'm a Catholic, and I'm a practicing Catholic." I saw myself in the middle of nowhere and this, tonight of all nights, I wanted to go to mass the next day. I figured I needed all the help I could get.

She told me that they could either give me a car, but since I didn't know my way around that one of the people who worked on the Ranch, Lawrence Klein, was Catholic and he could come and get me. She made the phone call and she asked him to come and get me for mass the next morning in Stonewall.

M: This was a Sunday morning, you mean?

F: Yes. So I found myself at the Ranch.

M: I guess I'd like to go to mass, too, after that.

F: I wished I had had tranquilizers at that time, I was thinking that I wished I had them but I didn't and for some reason slept very well; woke up the next morning and went to mass. That was my first day with them.

M: What happened in the next few days, immediately after? You must have been leaving for Washington?

F: I think we were at the Ranch for a week. Mary Margaret was gone, preparing for her wedding. But Geraldine Williams returned from Hillsboro. Geraldine was, I think, that lady who traveled with Mary Margaret, a sort of backup and helper, because it really took

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two to keep up with this man. Geraldine's home was in Hillsboro. I don't know how she came into the organization. She's now married to Bob Novak, of Evans and Novak. She left the organization I guess in late 1962 to marry Bob. Her wedding reception was in the Johnson's home at The Elms; they gave her a wedding reception.

M: I didn't know Mr. Johnson had had any contact with these people.

F: The reception was there, yes. It was very nice reception, too, I remember it. I've got a picture of it at home. Liz Carpenter returned the picture to me, after having seen it, because it showed Geraldine and Bob very happy, and other people very happy, and Marie with a very funny look on her face. Liz put one of her funny captions, saying, "Don't worry, Marie. Your day will come." And so I have that picture.

But Geraldine came back, and in their true, generous way, the Johnsons lent her one of their Lincolns. She had driven home for three days to be with her parents and had come back, the timing I'm not sure of, but it was during that week. So she was a great help, to sort of tell me what the usual procedure was.

M: Did he give you any more little assignments or duties that first day that you were traveling around?

F: No, he didn't. He just said, "Stay close and anticipate."

M: He didn't tell you what to anticipate though, did he?

F: That's right.

M: All right, tell me a little bit more about that first week that you recall.

F: The first week I remember, there was the usual flux of people in and out of the Ranch, a great amount of movement, a great amount of his enjoyment, which at that time was

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swimming, being out in the sun by the pool in hammocks, driving the boat at full speed on the lake, and riding around looking at his cattle and his deer. At this time he had not begun his project of the foreign exotics that are now there, he just had native deer. This was before the day of the deer fences. All that kind of construction started a little later. But the days were just filled with that; of getting up, spending most of the time at the Ranch, being at the pool for a swim, lunch outside, a nap, to the lake, and then dinner with Judge Moursund or with the Winters.

M: You were just always fully dressed and ready to go?

F: Yes. Always had everything ready. There was no time, because he'd walk through and say, "Let's go."

The work would come to us from Austin. Walter Jenkins each day would send an envelope to KTBC, and Earl Deathe would see that it got to us. We would either keep it with us or I would send it back to Washington again through Earl Deathe.

M: What about matters of security clearances and things like that?

F: Oh, I forgot that part of it. There were many, many papers to sign, and I signed those in the garage of KTBC the first day on the trunk of a car. No security things, no classified things were sent through the mail, you see, so I didn't handle anything illegally, because that could not be trusted to the U.S. mail. But all of those papers were signed in the basement, the garage, which I think is very interesting. All the witnesses, I think, were Mr. Kellam and the Vice President to my signature, it was a very exciting time.

M: Knowing what seems to be the usual slowness of bureaucracy, this is all very fantastic.

F: How are we doing on time, Dorothy?

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M: It's about that time.

F: I'm sorry to do it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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