

INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 1, 1968
INTERVIEWEE: BEN F. CRIDER
INTERVIEWER: PAUL BOLTON
PLACE: Mr. Crider's home in Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

B: Where are you from, Mr. Crider?

C: I was raised in Johnson City, Texas.

B: I understand that you and Mr. Johnson were boyhood friends.

C: I don't know very much about that part of that boyhood period of the President's life before he was seven years old. We weren't neighbors in Johnson City. We lived on a ranch out near Johnson City three miles from town and Lyndon lived there where the old Johnson City homestead is now. We visited quite often and were lifelong friends with most of the family since Indian time.

B: Your father was a rancher?

C: A county commissioner and a rancher.

B: I thought he was a merchant.

C: No, he was not a merchant; [he] was a county commissioner and a rancher. We had 1900 acres of land.

B: What did you raise on that ranch?

C: Mostly sheep and goats and some cattle.

B: You went to school in Johnson City with Lyndon?

C: Yes, I went to school with Lyndon. He was in a lower grade, but I am seven years older than he is.

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B: How come you all got to be such good buddies?

C: Well, the families were great friends ahead of us, and Lyndon took a liking to them.

One thing about Lyndon, he wouldn't run with anyone his own age. He wanted to be with older people, usually five to ten years older. He is a very brilliant young man and the boys his age wasn't his class mentally.

B: When did this friendship start? I mean what age were you all?

C: He was probably seven years old when I first knew Lyndon there in town. But we really started teaming up together when I was twenty-five and he was about seventeen.

B: Going back to the earlier period, I have heard the story--it may not be correct--that Mrs. Johnson said that when she went in to wake him up in the morning to get him ready for school that she never knew who would be in bed--probably one of the Crider boys.

C: That is right. Usually, in fact every time, me. I have two brothers that were old pals, all the family, all the boys.

Then two of them come to California with Lyndon to where I was working.

B: Oh, you were working out there?

C: They came to me.

B: What were you doing out there?

C: I was working in a chemical laboratory for the Monolith Cement Company in Monolith, California.

B: How old were the boys when they made that trip?

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CC: One brother was about twenty and Lyndon was about seventeen and [my brother] Otto was about seventeen, about Lyndon's age.

B: I am sure they told you a whole lot about that trip. Can you tell us any of the experiences they had?

C: Yes, I know all about that trip. They told me the whole story, Lyndon with them. They got them an old car, an old pickup, patched it up. About fifteen or twenty dollars apiece, they got together and they decided to go to California. When they got there, they was pretty well broke and dirty and hadn't had--[they] camped out. One place on the route they got scared and they hid their money in the sand, afraid they would be robbed that night, and the next morning they had to dig it up. But the total amount wouldn't have run over fifty dollars.

B: What did they get scared about, do you know?

C: They were afraid of tramps and hijackers on the road. It was dangerous even in those days for you to camp out overnight. If you went to sleep they would steal everything you had, maybe your car. Lots of tramps on the road.

B: Tramps?

C: Road tramps.

Out in California Lyndon also had a cousin I believe named Tom Martin.

B: Yes, sir.

C: Tom Martin and Lyndon and my two brothers and Payne Rountree all came to where I was working, and my two brothers got a job. But Tom Martin persuaded Lyndon before he left to go back to Pasadena to work in his

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law office, which Lyndon did and stayed there for probably seven or eight months or a year.

B: I was interested in your statement while ago to the effect that Lyndon always cultivated boys older than he. Why do you think that was?

C: The reason why he, we called it run around or chased around with older boys was because Lyndon was more mature than anyone his age in Blanco County.

B: Oh, I see.

C: The young boys just didn't entertain him. He wanted to be with older boys and he always went with older girls than he was.

B: What did you all do for amusement in those days?

C: Well, we had snap parties and dances, lots of dances. Lyndon attended them all, and Lyndon would come out on the ranch and would ride yearling calves, you know. He couldn't ride very well, but he would try and we chased the sheep around, penned them. And we went hunting, deer hunting, squirrel hunting, and even went fishing in the Pedernales. Good fishing there. We'd go down there and catch fish and camp out. He was an outdoor boy even though he lived in the little town of Johnson City. He liked to be outdoors.

B: Well, your ranch was not on the Pedernales?

C: No, it was off the Pedernales about two miles on the Austin highway from Johnson City.

B: You were back this way.

C: Yes, towards Austin.

B: And his present ranch of course is on the other side of Johnson City?

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C: Yes.

B: What was that game you spoke of--snap?

C: Yes, snap. Most people in Johnson City played that every Saturday night. It is a game of the boy snaps the girl and she has to catch him and she will snap a boy and they catch him. It is called snap. It is not known very many other places, but that was a local game we all played.

B: What do you mean, snap--catch them?

C: Well, one girl would hold up her hand and you had to run around her until you could dart around and trick them into--tap them on the back, and then they was caught. Then they had to take the place of the one that was standing there and then they held hands while the one went back and got snapped or got caught. Then they went and snapped someone of the opposite sex and then they ran around. It was always out in the yards where they had the smokey lantern and we kept out a lot of light. (Laughter)

B: But the point of the thing was you got to hold hands with the girls.

C: That was the main thing--you held hands. Quite a few times we would tell them, "Don't be in a hurry to get back," because we wanted to talk to the gal--a good chance with the boys.

B: What kind of dances did you have in those days? What kind of music did you have?

C: We had a lot of brass bands. Then we had just a partying banjo and fiddle, but we had a lot of brass bands. We was in German country where they believed in those brass bands.

B: Oh, yes, that's right, up around Fredericksburg.

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- C: Yes. Also Stonewall, Luckenbach, Albert, Twin Sisters, Little Blanco. All those places in Blanco County, the majority of the people are German or German descent.
- B: Now, tell me something about Lyndon's family, particularly his mother. His mother had a great influence on him, didn't she?
- C: That is correct. His mother was one of the most brilliant women that ever lived in our country around here. She coached her high school people in literary events and taught them how to debate, how to stand, taught girls how to sit down properly, and helped in every way without any pay. We never did have any money to pay with. She did it on her own free will and accord. She was a brilliant woman, graduated from Baylor. We had visiting college graduates in our country at that time.
- B: What influence do you think she had on Lyndon? I mean any particular area that you could see now in the man that reflects some of the teachings of his mother?
- C: Well, the main thing, she wanted him to get an education because she knew he couldn't get anywhere in life without it. She wanted him to be important. She knew he had the qualifications. Her big struggle was to get Lyndon to finish college.
- B: Wonder why she picked on Lyndon rather than some of the other boys or girls, or did she have the same attitude toward all of them?
- C: She probably did, but Lyndon was the one that she could talk to and knew would make good.
- B: Was Lyndon the oldest boy?
- C: Yes. She could talk to him, and Lyndon was of fine character all the way.

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B: Now, you were out in California when the boys visited you out there, and they stayed out there for a while, but they finally came back to this part of the country.

C: Well, I came back and two of my brothers--one of them stayed. I stayed about a year on a visit and worked with Lyndon on the highway. We worked pick and shovel. He'd use the shovel and shoot the dirt up and I would pick it up out of the ground or vice versa.

B: About what year was that?

C: That was 1926. We worked about a year and a half or two years, and then came change of administrations. Governor Dan Moody went in and we all got laid off.

Then Mrs. Johnson persuaded Lyndon to go to school at San Marcos, and he went to college down there and I went on back to California. While I was in California working, Lyndon told me that he needed money to buy him some clothes, that it was embarrassing to go to class. He didn't ask me for any money, but he wanted a job, wanted me to get him a job out in California. He was going to quit school. So I just sent him a hundred dollars and told him that would help out and keep him in school, because I didn't think he could handle the job I had. It was too heavy and hard work. Because Mrs. Johnson had written me a letter and asked me to help keep Lyndon in college, and I sent the money and never did tell Lyndon anything about what his mother had asked me to do. He stayed in college.

Then when I came back from California he wanted to do something in return and do me a big favor. He was with Congressman Dick Kleberg at that

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time. Yes, he was Kleberg's secretary, and Congressman Kleberg's home was in Corpus Christi. Lyndon wanted to get me a job, and I didn't much want him to because it was the middle of 1933 and it was the Depression and times was hard. But he insisted and I went with him and he got me a job as a land appraiser for the Federal Land Bank of Houston at a salary of three hundred dollars a month.

B: Now, right there, Mr. Crider, people who didn't live through the Depression don't quite appreciate what the Depression was. Can you tell us a little bit about it or what a young man went through?

C: Well, I went through it. I was in the prime of life; I was twenty-nine years old and I couldn't get a job; I couldn't borrow any money. I was writing my friends in California and they said, "If you are eating where you are, stay because we are postponing meals out here; It is all over the country." The banks were full of money but they wouldn't loan a dime on any kind of collateral. You could put up all the land, but they wouldn't let you have any money. Nobody had money to hire anyone. It was a terrible thing. I don't know of anything that could be much worse than a depression.

B: There were very few people in the country who were not affected by the Depression.

C: It affected everybody. I heard a very wealthy man say that millionaires have not got a dime today, and that was about right, too. Men that had money couldn't do anything.

B: Well, anyway, at this period Mr. Johnson who was secretary to Congressman Kleberg got you this job in Houston.

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C: He got me a job with the Federal Land Bank in Houston and I worked all over Texas appraising land. The farms were being foreclosed and they were deeding them back to the mortgage holder, and we was to go out and redeem these mortgages the best we could. Maybe we would offer half of what they had loaned against the place and they would accept that half. That was what the Federal Land Bank was doing, and they saved many homes. I know I saved three or four hundred from the work I did.

B: At that time, as I understand, you again became pretty close to Lyndon, working with him, Is that right?

C: Oh, yes. Well, before I took the job over, it was like I said--I was broke, worse than broke. Didn't have any clothes, and when we got to San Antonio, Lyndon took me over to Frank Brothers and bought me the best suit of clothes I guess I ever owned in my life and a new coat and shirts, socks and everything. Then when he got down and going in the job, he signed a bunch of blank checks and told me to use them and just keep track of what I spent. I filled them out as I had to have the money and when it was over with, I counted it all up and paid him. But that kind of a friend and that kind of a man are very few and far between.

B: What did you do after you left the bank?

C: I was with the land bank three and a half years and then Lyndon was appointed state director of the National Youth Administration of Texas. And one of the first things he did was say, "I have got to have you. I want you to come over with me." Well, I liked the land bank job and it was the best job I ever had in my life, and he wanted

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me to come over and work with him. He said he had three million dollars to spend and he wanted somebody that was honest and he knew I was honest because he had known me all my life. Well, we resigned--Lyndon wrote the letter of resignation, and I worked for Lyndon until we elected him to Congress.

B: What did you do at NYA?

C: I was the area director and project superintendent.

B: What kind of hours did the NYA boys work?

C: They worked eight hours a day just probably ten days a month. That is all they could work and they got two dollars and something a day.

B: I was thinking in terms of people in the administration of NYA. Did you work an eight-hour day, too?

C: No, I started out in the morning and when I got through sometimes it would be ten or eleven o'clock at night before I got back to Austin. I had a big district, but we didn't get but a hundred and fifty a month anyway and expenses--we got car expenses.

B: You took quite a cut in salary then, didn't you?

C: Oh, yes, to go back to the Federal Land Bank, I got to where I wasn't working full time. I got ten dollars a day and all expenses and I didn't work full time. But I was making more than I got with the NYA.

B: Then after the NYA days what happened?

C: Well, Lyndon went to Congress and then I stayed with him four or five years. Then war come on and all I could do was go to Houston and work in the shipyards for Brown and Root until the war was over. Then I came back to Austin and I worked for the National Guard Bureau for fourteen years.

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- B: Now, when Mr. Johnson ran for Congress in 1937 you were working for the NYA and of course under the Hatch Act couldn't do any work for him at that time. What did you do?
- C: That is right. The Hatch Act had me covered, and I went and resigned from the NYA and worked for about five weeks for Lyndon until the election. Lyndon told me during the campaign that I was the only one that told him he was going to be elected. I believed it because I would take up my own straw vote [when] I could see as many as four or five men in the crowd, and I found out that Lyndon was going to get from two to three. There was ten in the race and the high man won, and Lyndon beat his nearest opponent probably three or four to one.
- B: In campaigning like you were working for him, what did you do?
- C: I put out literature, made personal talks to the people that I knew as I was raised in this country. Some of them would want me to help them get a job and I assured them I would, and after the election I had to stay hid out! (Laughter) The reason why they believed me was because they knew what Lyndon had done for me, and if he could do that for me, he could do it for just anybody.
- B: You kept up your contacts with the Johnsons all through the years, have you not?
- C: Yes, I have. Wrote him a letter not too long ago and got an answer.
- B: Have your politicked for him since then?
- C: Praised him every time I had a chance. I am always for him and always will be for him. But when it comes to running for president, one man can't do very much, you know. Just let everybody know how he stands,

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that is all he can do.

B: Well, I was thinking in terms of the 1948 senatorial race. Did you work in that race?

C: Oh, yes, I did on just weekends and days like that. That was the only time.

B: Mr. Crider, as one of the boyhood friends of LBJ, I am sure you have been interviewed by all manner of journalists, haven't you?

C: I sure have. I have probably talked to over a hundred different magazine writers, newspaper writers and what have you, and I told them the correct story about Lyndon just as we stood. And after they heard my story, they all would invariably want to know the bad things; said, "You have told the good things now and we know they aren't all good. There is something bad, and we can't print anything without we get the bad points that Lyndon has." I said, "As far as I know, he doesn't have any bad points. You'll have to get any bad points from somebody else because I never have found Lyndon Johnson with any bad points that you can say anything about." Another thing, these same people wanted every snapshot I have of Lyndon and me during our boyhood days and promised to send them right back, and I haven't gotten one back yet. I also haven't read one article that I reported on. I don't know whether they printed them or not, but I have put in many hours talking to these magazine guys and newspaper people.

B: Back in those early days when you all were boys together, did Lyndon ever express any ideas of what he was going to do and what he wanted to be?

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- C: He wanted to be a public servant. He has always wanted to hold office. The first office he thought about when he was a real young man was state senator. He talked to me about it, and I said, "Lyndon, it don't pay anything--five dollars a day--and you can't live on it." At that time that was all that it paid and that discouraged him. He had to have something he could make a living out of. But he had the desire to hold high office.
- B: Do you think part of that was due to the fact that his daddy was a member of the [Texas] House of Representatives?
- C: He was very proud of his daddy's record as a member of the House of Representatives. I have heard him speak of it a lot. And he liked public service. That is what he wanted to do and be in public life. I wasn't a bit surprised when he decided to run for Congress.
- B: During those days when you got this impression that he wanted to be in public service, did he show any qualities of leadership among the boys you all ran around with together?
- C: Lyndon Johnson was a natural born leader. He has been a leader all of his life and if he couldn't lead, he didn't care much about playing. He was always in the thick of it and had his own ideas. That is why he wanted to quit teaching school. He wanted to get in the public life of Congressman Kleberg where he could do something for the people when the Depression was at its worst. He was working for those farmers like some old gray-headed man. He was out there in his early twenties talking to them, patting them on the back and leading the appraisers. The appraisers told me it was a miracle that he can handle those old

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folks like he can. They were losing their farms and they were furious.

B: What was he doing out there?

C: He was representing Dick Kleberg from Congress who was trying to get the Congress to liberalize these appraisals. They were too tight. They wasn't allowing enough evaluation on the property. He was trying to get them to raise that. They finally did. They raised it where the land bank commission would loan another 25 per cent, but actually just half the value of the property was all the Federal Land Bank would loan, of the agriculture value. It wasn't enough to help them people because they hadn't paid their taxes for four or five years.

B: You remember any specific instances of how Lyndon showed his leadership quality and wanted to be a top dog among the boys he ran around with?

C: Yes, I can. He was going to college at San Marcos and he hadn't been there over a year, and I went down to visit with him. He was showing me around the college, and there is one thing I will never forget. Lyndon took me to the College Star newspaper and said, "Ben, I would like to edit this." The Editor-in-Chief Schnager poked fun at Lyndon making a remark like that--Lyndon hadn't had a haircut in probably two months--and called him just a kid. But I thought nothing more about it and went back to California, and it wasn't but about a year and I got a copy of this College Star. In the right-hand corner was Lyndon B. Johnson-Editor-in-Chief.

B: Did he have his name underlined for you?

C: Oh, yes, he had it all underlined. But the thing is he is a natural born politician. He was elected to anything he ran for. He talked

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to the old maids--most of them were teachers and were old maids--and told them, "You're not anything down here unless you are an athlete, ballplayer. The Black Stars run the whole college." So he organized the White Stars and defeated the whole athletic department.

B: What is a Black Star and White Star?

C: It is just an organization among the student body.

B: Now you say the Black Stars--

C: They were running the school, and Lyndon got these old maids and the vote and elected the White Stars and throwed the Black Stars out of running the whole school. I was told by Lyndon that President Evans down there congratulated him twice secretly after the vote.

B: For getting rid of the Black Stars?

C: Yes, they were too strong. They were put in charge of the newcomers and made some of Lyndon's closest friends real sore. They were top football players and active. They got real sore at Lyndon, but they got over it.

B: Mr. Crider, it seemed to me that Mr. Johnson had a facility for picking out bright young people and people he had known in earlier years and keeping them close to him down through the years. Have you noted that tendency? Do you know of any people in that category?

C: That is very noticeable that he always wanted to. When he had the opportunity to put somebody in that high position he picked the most brilliant and capable he could find. For instance, when he taught school in Houston he had two young fellows who debated for him, and they won, I think, second place in the state: L. E. Jones and Gene Latimer. He brought them in as his secretaries when he was with Congressman Kleberg. They worked for him in

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Washington and Corpus. And when he took over the NYA he got the most capable boys he could out of his college at San Marcos: Jesse Kellam, Bill Deason, John Coers, Fenner Roth and numerous others that he brought in and give them responsible positions because he said he had seen them operate and they was loyal and with proven ability. He didn't want to take chances with the federal government's money [with people] that he didn't know whether he could trust or not.

B: Was Jake Pickle one of his secretaries?

C: No, he never was a secretary to the Congressman, he was a NYA [employee]. [Texas Employment Commission] Chairman [Sherman] Birdwell was a secretary. So was John Connally.

B: I was trying to place Mr. Pickle since he is now congressman.

C: He worked in the NYA with me all right along for about five or six years. Then he went into business here in Austin for himself.

B: Mr. Crider, you named one of your sons for Lyndon, is that right?

C: That's right. That is the only son I have and his name is Lyndon Baines Crider.

B: Do you have a grandson?

C: Yes, I have four grandchildren and I have a grandson by the name of Lyndon Baines Crider, Jr.

B: That is what I was going to ask you, if that was right.

I have heard a story told that as a boy Lyndon was once taken on a snipe hunt. Do you think there is anything to that?

C: Well, I doubt it. I thought Lyndon by the time he was eight or ten years old would know better than to go snipe hunting. However a friend of mine tells it that he took Lyndon out snipe hunting. And of course he had Lyndon holding the sack. They always do, you know. And the rest of the

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boys went out to drive the snipes in, [they said]. After he stayed there four or five hours and saw they wasn't coming back, he went home. The point is there is no such thing as a snipe. The other boys went right straight home after they left him holding the sack. But Lyndon I don't think would appreciate that and I doubt if he ever went sniping.

B: You go in the dead of night when you go snipe hunting?

C: Oh, yes, you go some time after twelve o'clock at night when it is dark and hold that sack while they go drive the snipes in.

B: How about some of those early deer hunts that you went on? Do you recall any tales about any of those hunts?

C: Yes, I remember one in particular when Lyndon came up. He was real young, about fifteen. And one of the boys had killed a spike buck that was at that time illegal. The owners came by that night to see what kind of luck we had had, and Lyndon told them that we had killed a five point buck. We had to tell them that it had some points. Lyndon told them it was five points. The rest of the boys went to laughing after the owner left and told him, "You fool, you, they really don't have five points or seven or nine. They all have even points, four, six, eight or ten. Whoever heard of a deer with odd points?" It shook Lyndon up because he wasn't sure of it himself. But anyhow it worked and we didn't have to pay a fine.

B: Is it true that deer only have even number points?

C: No, they have odd points and even points. It doesn't make any difference. You see about as many seven point bucks as you see eight.

B: I imagine that it didn't take him long to catch on that you were

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putting him on.

C: Oh, yes, when he found out that we was joking, he started to laugh, too.

B: Mr. Crider, you spoke while ago about the fact that your worked on the highways and roads with Mr. Johnson when he was a boy. He was considerably younger than you, too?

C: Yes, he was.

B: What did you all do?

C: Our main jobs there was pick and shovel. We picked the adobe up and shoved it into a truck. We didn't have dump trucks. We had to shovel it back out in a washed out place that was pitted and a hole had been washed out by the rain or something. It was in the wintertime. I have seen ice on the timber. Lyndon he was about as tough as the rest of us. We didn't have any windshields in those old Ford pickups and sometime we would go out to the bar pit and we was so cold we could hardly strike a match to build us some kind of fire.

B: What is a bar pit?

C: That is doby--where you dig doby out of the ground. That is where we got our supplies to put doby on the highway.

B: In other words, the highways were not asphalt then. They were dirt surface for some time?

C: There was no asphalt in Blanco County at that time. They was all dirt

C: roads or dobe or caliche or whatever you want to call it. It was several years after before we ever got any paved roads.

B: How long did Mr. Johnson work on the highways? Do you know?

C: About a year and a half or two years he worked, and then the job

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terminated because they changed governors. In those days when one governor got let out, they cleaned house and put in new crews all the way around.

B: That was pretty hardening work, too, wasn't it? A man that could stand up under highway work was a pretty tough character.

C: That's right. Lyndon was raised pretty tough and like I say fighting calves and stuff like that, he made a good man. And he liked to work. It was so cold that that was the worst part of it, getting so cold that you had to build a fire to thaw out your hands before you could start with the pick and shovel. We have done that many a day: build us a fire and thaw out and then work all day and drive back in that cold with no top or windshield in the vehicle that we were driving.

B: You spoke of change of governors there. You all were hired then by whoever was in charge of highways during Mrs. Ferguson's administration.

C: That's right, Mrs. Ferguson was the Texas governor. Mrs. Ferguson was elected governor, and the Johnsons were Ferguson people and so was we. Under the Ferguson highway engineer, we worked for the two years that Ma Ferguson was governor, and when she was defeated by Dan Moody and he went in as governor, everybody had to go then.

B: Lyndon maintained his friendship with Mrs. Ferguson down through the years, I believe, Is that right?

C: That's right. Lyndon never did forget the Fergusons. They finally got to helping him although they didn't pay much attention to him until he got to be a congressman. But after he showed his power and ability to do things the Fergusons went over 100 per cent to Lyndon, but they

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didn't give him any help when he first started.

B: Mr. Crider, I would like to have one further comment from you. You were telling me a while ago about this trip to Chicago when the recorder was not running. I think it is a very interesting example of long friendship that has existed between you and Mr. Johnson, and if you wouldn't mind and if you are not too modest, I would like for you to tell me the story again for the tape recording.

C: Well, in 1956 the Democratic convention was in Chicago. Lyndon was going to go up there with his family and friends. He called me and wanted me to go with him. I told him I was scared to fly and had never been in a plane in my life. But he insisted that I go with him and said that he had to have me. I said, "Okay, Lyndon, I have never turned you down." So he sent his brother-in-law, Birge Alexander, here in Austin after me; this is about seventy-five miles. And we got on a private plane there that was flying to Chicago.

Before we left, he made the whole bunch a little speech about me and why I was on the plane. He said that I had been a lifelong friend and one of the most loyal friends that he had ever had and I had helped him when he needed it. One instance he mentioned was when I was in California and he got short on money at college and needed help to buy some new clothes and books and things. He didn't ask me for money, he said, which he didn't; he just wrote and told me he was thinking about quitting school and coming out there and wanted me to get him a job. Well, I wrote him in return and told him jobs was awful scarce out there and that I was enclosing a hundred dollars to help him out at school,

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and he was telling them about it. He said he had never appreciated a hundred dollars as much as that and that helped him a lot and kept him in school. He said he was very thankful and that is why he wanted me along, because of my loyalty all through his life, and that was [almost] ever since he was born.

B: That loyalty, I think, is a trait of Mr. Johnson.

Thank you very much, Mr. Crider. You have been very helpful.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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By Ben F. Crider

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3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.
4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed

Ben F. Crider

Date

Nov-12, 1968

Accepted

Harry J. Middleton - FN
Archivist of the United States

Date

May 15, 1975