

INTERVIEW VIII covering 1937

DATE: January 23, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Casa Leonor, Acapulco, Mexico

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J: Well, the really funny incident that time when he was in the hospital--at least it was funny to me; it sure wasn't funny to him. He was just really so uncomfortable. I was standing guard to try to ward off any visitors and a man came to the door, and I didn't know him. He said it was just so important that he see Mr. Johnson. He just had to see Mr. Johnson. You have to use your judgment in cases like that, and I didn't have much judgment. I was pretty new at that sort of thing. So I decided to let him in. It turned out Lyndon didn't know him at all and the man wanted to get a job as a cook at a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp. So, poor soul, needless to say, he didn't get the job and left in rather a hurry.

 But I learned from that. And there was a sequel to it years later, when Lyndon was in Mayo's once more having had an operation. He'd had a number of interruptions. Several people had come to see him--one of them wanting to sell him something, one of them wanting to give him a haircut, oh, just various people. Finally he said to me, "Don't you let anybody else in that door. I want to take a nap." I stationed myself at the door.

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Presently down the hall came an affable, self-assured, nice-looking man and said, "I'd like to go in and see Congressman Johnson, please." And I said, "Oh, no, you can't." I said, "What is your name, sir?" He looked sort of flustered, and he said, "I'm Dr. Charlie Mayo." (Laughter) Well, we both laughed and it turned out to be a pleasant encounter.

But that's one of the facets of politics. People do want to get in to see you at a time when they shouldn't, and you, too, ask constituents for things when you shouldn't.

(Interruption)

G: Is there anything else you remember about the recuperation period in the hospital?

J: He did indeed have a lot of visitors that fired him up and that he learned from. I remember Governor Jimmie Allred came to see him. Jimmie Allred was an extraordinary man, young, handsome, pretty liberal for that day or for any day. He and Lyndon, at least from my viewpoint, were natural friends, and Lyndon was later helpful in getting him onto the federal bench. Then Mr. C. N. Avery very graciously came to see him. I think he had a wire or a visit from just about every one of his--was it nine or ten opponents? I believe there were ten in the race. That was a lifelong pattern. I was to learn that he always set out to win his opponents over after a race, or after an argument was over, sometimes to the annoyance of some of his close friends who had carried his banner. C. N. Avery, his family threaded through our lives from then on. His daughter, Helen, and son-in-law, Bob Phinney, became lifelong friends and actually headed a later campaign for us.

G: He won over Polk Shelton, too, didn't he?

J: Oh, yes. He and Polk Shelton, they were both sort of old-time Hill Country boys, had a

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lot in common.

I do not remember much about those days. They are dim in my mind. We did go to Karnack. I believe Bill Deason and Carroll Keach went with us. That's another one of those funny things. Lyndon always took his staff and his close friends with him wherever he went if he could get them to go. Somewhat to my dismay, I must say, there was not always enough time for just the two of us. But he didn't realize that. We stayed at Karnack, at Daddy's great big red Brick House built before the Civil War, sometime in the 1850s. We must have stayed there about ten days; it's uncertain. We went walking a lot. My friend, Dorris Powell, used to take her little two-year old child along, Lyndon always wanting to walk fast and the child just toddling along behind us. He would keep on encouraging the child to walk faster. He actually ate a lot and ate well and gained I think quite a lot of weight.

Then, the important thing of that time was him going to meet President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt in Galveston. Now just how he got there I don't know, and isn't it strange that something that important should have dimmed in my mind? In any case, I know he worked it out because of the Governor, because that stands to reason. Jimmie Allred no doubt asked the President if it would be acceptable, and the President must have been pleased that somebody was elected on his court plan.

(Interruption)

We were talking about how Lyndon actually met President Roosevelt and how he rode with him on the train and where. Isn't it [odd]? Just to think that something as important in our lives I should not have a clear memory of. It's very frustrating. I don't. I know he

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went down there. That picture is as clear as crystal in my mind: Lyndon, FDR, Governor Allred, all of them so young, so wonderfully young and handsome, and every one of them looking like they were setting out to conquer the world. The President in profile, Allred with a great big smile and a white oleander in his buttonhole, and Lyndon so slim and young, in spite of having gained about twenty pounds at Daddy's house, on the right with an equally big smile. That picture was used by Lyndon in his 1941 race for the Senate. Later on, I have a memory of Jimmie Allred using that same picture, and this time cutting off Lyndon's part of it, in his race for the Senate. Both of them, as you will remember, lost.

I do not know just where Lyndon went with President Roosevelt on the train, perhaps to Houston and College Station, and then on to Fort Worth, and then catching a plane to Washington, where he was sworn in. I remember him saying that he wanted Sam Rayburn to walk down the aisle with him when he was sworn in, because Sam Rayburn was his father's old friend. They had been deskmates back when Mr. Sam Johnson was in the Texas House of Representatives and so was Mr. Rayburn.

In any case, I drove to Washington with Delle [Ethel?] Birdwell. Her husband, Sherman Birdwell, Lyndon had asked to be his secretary. So Delle and I set forth on this great adventure by car. We drove by Alabama to see my Aunt Effie, who was ill. I believe it was Montgomery; I think we stopped there. I'm not sure whether she was in the hospital or whether she was at my Cousin Elaine's house. I think the latter.

The main thing I remember about that trip to Washington was that all through the southern states we ate ham. We just couldn't get enough, you know, that marvelous spicy

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ham, whether you call it North Carolina ham or Virginia ham. Then going through the mountains and all along the winding roads there would be little stands where arts and crafts were for sale, baskets, chairs made out of slats, quilts. Beautiful country. Ah, how many times I've traveled that road, and I've always loved it.

We arrived in Washington and went to an apartment which Lyndon had already obtained for us. It's remarkable that we had such a great place. It was at the Kennedy-Warren, Number 1127, I think. It belonged, I think, to Dr. M. W. Splawn, who had been a president of the University of Texas, and Roosevelt had appointed him to some government office. I think it was ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission]. The apartment was spacious and comfortable, and much more attractively furnished than most of those that I lived in thereafter for some time in Washington. And true to Lyndon's habits, the Birdwells moved right in with us. I'm trying to remember whether there was anybody else living with us that first little stage.

(Interruption)

Oh, yes, there was Sam Houston [Johnson].

The office was made up of Sherman Birdwell and little Gene Latimer, and Carroll Keach came up for a while, I think, to help set up the office, and we borrowed L. E. Jones from another government agency. They went to work in the Old House Office Building, I think the number was 116. Sherman says when he first opened the door he fell over twelve full sacks of mail. You see, a good little while had elapsed since Lyndon was elected on the tenth of April and then his stay in the hospital and then his recuperation at Daddy's, and then getting up there. Sherman came by car. And there were these twelve

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full sacks of mail. One after another, after another, all of those, much of that mail was concerned with "getting a job for me." The desperate shadow of the Depression was still hanging over the land. And they worked such long hours.

I can't say, though, that I really understood the tragedy of that then. I was terribly excited about being there in Washington. I looked out of the windows of that apartment, down onto Connecticut Avenue. I thought what a fascinating new step this was. Lyndon would talk about the members of the delegation. Always the head man to him was Sam Rayburn. Ewing Thomason was another one that he looked up to greatly, and he, too, was one of his father's friends. There was Judge Jones, Marvin Jones. And of course George Mahon was there and Bob Poage. It was a marvelous delegation. They had a great *esprit de corps* among them. The women did indeed, too.

We all got together, the women of the delegation, once a month and had a luncheon. We could invite our constituents, and I soon learned that "constituents" was a word spelled in capital letters and mighty important to a congressman and to his wife. And [I learned] that one thing I could do to help Lyndon was to take those constituents out when they came to Washington. Even in those days when all the traveling, or nearly all the travel was by train, there were quite a few people coming, on business and on vacations. Washington was a great big lodestone for everybody's summer vacation. So I would take constituents out to Mount Vernon, even beginning that very first summer, just lots of times, and through the Capitol. Soon I began to take them to our monthly meetings of the Texas ladies delegation. One lady would be in charge and would choose the place to go. Maybe we would go to a lovely place out in the country called

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Normandy Farms, or maybe we'd go out to a huge old colonial house on the banks of the Potomac called Collingwood. In any case, it was a big event.

Another big event on the women's side for me was belonging to the Congressional Club. There every Friday afternoon we would have a tea where someone would speak to us. Occasionally, we would have even somebody from the cabinet, or we might have an ambassador, or we might have someone give us a lecture on interior decoration. They were very interesting times and well planned. Also, soon I learned about the existence of something called--well, the clubs were named after the year in which one's husband came to Congress and therefore ours was the 75th Club. The wives of the men who were elected then would get together once a month, and we would have a program. We were hungry to learn about the city, our husband's jobs, but we were very much on the periphery. Women's participation in politics in those days was nothing like as vigorous and equal as it later became, by any means. And so the summer passed with a great deal of excitement.

What Lyndon was doing I was not as aware of and close to as I wish now, looking back, I could have been. I do remember all through the first two and a half years of our lives in Congress, until the war began to grip us all, until the Depression sort of turned us loose and the war grabbed us, all during the first two and a half years dams, dams, dams, the series of dams along the lower Colorado River, which were built to furnish cheap power for that section of the country, and to produce and furnish the Rural Electric Administration to cause power to be available to all the farms in those ten counties and many more, in fact. That was the biggest thing that Lyndon was concerned with, just in

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love with. The soil conservation, the cheap power, the saving of property and even lives when those floods would strike, was just a goal that he was just totally committed to. Senator [Alvin] Wirtz was very much a part of it, because he had dreamed it back in the days when it was going to be done maybe by the Insull power, this great big organization from the East which had fallen apart, never got it done. So then the government had come on the scene, entered the project. The series of dams was under way when Lyndon came. There was Buchanan Dam, and then later Mansfield, which became I think Marshall Ford, didn't it?

G: I think it was the other way around. Marshall Ford became Mansfield, didn't it?

J: Maybe so. And then Inks Dam, which was the lovely scenic one, smaller dam. In any case, every step in the progress of those dams was something that would cause Lyndon to come home with a great big smile and a sense of euphoria.

Then there was another very important thing that took place that summer, future events casting their shadow before, and that is a minimum wage bill was proposed. Texas was a conservative state. Lyndon voted to report the minimum wage out of committee. Minimum wage, incidentally, was twenty-five cents an hour at that time. There were three Texas congressmen out of the whole delegation of some twenty-one or -two that voted to get it out of committee. There was [William D.] McFarlane and Lyndon and Maury Maverick. In the next election, McFarlane and Maury Maverick were defeated, and that was a big part of the cause. I suppose Lyndon just worked so hard for his constituents, and ran so many errands for them, and made them believe, whenever he could get an audience of them, [and] sold his side of the situation. At any rate, he

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remained after this hazardous vote for the minimum wage. The others were put out. And so the summer passed.

G: Let me ask you some more about the Marshall Ford appropriation. Do you remember who else came up from Texas to work with your husband on that project? Max Starcke, was he up?

J: I'm not sure. He later became, of course, head of the Lower Colorado River Authority. It was always Alvin Wirtz, and of course Mayor Tom Miller, a rare man, and the Browns who were building it, George Brown and Herman Brown, and [C. D.] McDonough who was the engineer, and I expect members of the boards.

G: Can you remember when your husband first became friends with George Brown? Was it during this period? Do you remember your own first impressions of George Brown?

J: No, I don't. It's easier to remember Herman better. I do remember both of them well and long and with admiration and love. But Herman, he came on so strong. He was extremely masculine, extremely volatile, very strong. George was soft and gentle and persuasive and always highly imaginative.

G: How so? Can you give me an example?

J: No, I really can't. But if you couldn't get it done one way, you could get it done another, and both of them were just marvelously optimistic. I think they were sort of period pieces out of what we imagine the American scene to be. They could get the job done. I know Lyndon always rejoiced in the fact that their contracts were done on time or sooner.

G: How about A. J. McKenzie?

J: I remember him as a name. I can't really remember him. He was just one of the people

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on the stage at that time.

G: Do you remember Senator Wirtz coming up and where he would stay, for example, when they were working on this together?

J: I think he would stay at the Mayflower. Most Texans in those days did stay at the Mayflower.

G: Would you get together a lot with him in the evenings?

J: Yes, yes. His coming was always an opportunity for a good dinner and good conversation, in which women were included, although we did not participate too much in the conversation. But at any rate, he always made a point of inviting me, and I would get to go along. And a night out was fun. We would very often go to a seafood place. Many Texans, Central Texans, were not all that used to eating seafood.

G: I gather that the great contribution that Lyndon Johnson made throughout all of this was being able to go to all the people in the administration and convince them that the various facets, whether it be a loan from the RFC [Reconstruction Finance Corporation?] or PWA [Public Works Administration] funds or a presidential signature on an appropriation bill, all of these things needed to be done. Is that essentially what he did here?

J: Yes. He soon met a great many people in the administration. I do not know exactly how and when. I remember he made friends with Grace Tully, who was a private secretary to FDR. To the end of his life and still now that she's alive, she is our good friend. I learned early that secretaries could be very helpful. Lyndon had known that since his own time as being one. He became early, somehow, a friend of Tom Corcoran. He knew Ben Cohen, and [he became] a friend of Jim Rowe--let's see, wasn't he FDR's secretary

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also, executive assistant? And a little bit later [we met] Abe and Carol Fortas. So we early became, if not an intimate, at least a friend and of increasing intimacy, with some of the young people in the New Deal, some of those who kept the lights burning all night in those offices while they rolled up their sleeves to remake America, so to speak. It was a time of high excitement.

G: Do you recall his going to the President to talk to him about getting funds for the dam?

J: Oh, yes. Yes, I do indeed. I can't quote him exactly, but I know he would go to him and explain it with so much enthusiasm and zest and belief in his own project. He could paint a mental picture of all those women out there, old before their time, bending over the wash pot, and all those men getting up before day on a cold winter morning to milk those cows when there could have been electric washing machines and milking machines. He could explain how drudgery could be lifted from the lives of so many farmers in the sort of fashion that would make you want to go out and help him get the drudgery lifted. Then there was a whole lot of good soil rolling down the Colorado into the ocean that could have been saved if there were dams and soil conservation measures. The utility of the dams was multi-faceted. So he was a persuasive advocate, and Roosevelt came to like him.

I remember one time he got invited to lunch. Actually, I think he was invited for an appointment at eleven or twelve o'clock and the President said, "Stay and have some lunch." I remember he described how they just set up a bridge table in the President's office and brought it in and Roosevelt's wheelchair was wheeled up and he sat there with him. I remember another time he talked about the President was not very well and was

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lying in bed and he had a dark cape around his shoulders, which I think was sort of a navy cape, which was to keep him warm. I think it was sort of a favorite piece of apparel of his. And it was always, of course, big news when one went to see FDR.

G: Did he have a great admiration for FDR?

J: Intense. Yes. Warm and intense and unwavering. Although I think there were times when he did not agree with him or follow him on legislation. But it never altered his great devotion to him.

G: You were going to talk about the Naval Affairs Committee.

J: Yes. Lyndon was put on Naval Affairs. I've always had it in the back of my mind that it was an interest of President Roosevelt's and that President Roosevelt encouraged him to ask for it or to get put on it. I don't know quite why, because of course as it turned out, for years and years Appropriations was what he always had his eye on, never successfully. But Naval Affairs turned out to be a wonderful source of interest. Many of the people on it became lifelong friends and great influences, particularly the chairman, Carl Vinson of Georgia, one of those rock-like figures in the Congress who just live forever, practically, and just taught whole generations of younger men. Then there was Warren Magnuson, who later became a fellow senator and always a good friend. Then on the other side of the political line there was Sterling Cole of New York. So he made many friends on that. We saw a good deal of the members of the Naval Affairs Committee. It was a big part of his life.

He would get lots of letters from his daddy, who was so proud of his son being in Congress, and nearly all of them dealt with, "Can't you help get a pension for poor old so

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and so?" They were all expressing some human need for somebody. And believe me, the Depression, we were still in its grip. There were always those needs.

Then his father, who had heart trouble, began to have a series of attacks. I don't know just when it was. I remember at one point Lyndon was down in the district on business--I think Congress was still in session--and he called me and he said, "I wish you would come. My father is very ill. I'd like for you to come." I got on a plane and left Washington. It was the only time I ever rode on a sleeper plane. But I remember distinctly there was a berth. The airport in Washington was very small indeed. The one in Austin, of course, was just quite primitive.

From then on--and I think that was late summer--until his death in late October, Lyndon's father had a series of recurring attacks. He was, I believe, a part of the time in Scott & White in Temple. The family always had great faith and confidence and affection in Scott & White and the doctors there. He was some time in the hospital in Austin, I think. But where he wanted to be always was in his own home back there in Johnson City.

I remember one of the stories that Lyndon used to love to tell was when Lyndon went to see his father in the hospital somewhere, Scott & White perhaps. His father said, "Son, bring me my britches." Lyndon said, "What do you want with your britches, Daddy?" "I'm going to put them on. You're going to take me home." And Lyndon said, "Daddy, we can't get you any oxygen at home, and you won't have the sort of nurses you have here. They can do things for you here. You ought to stay here." And Mr. Johnson said, "No, son. Bring me my britches. I want to go home where they know when you're

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sick and they care when you die." And he did go home to Johnson City, at least for a while. I remember being there visiting him and I remember all the people that would just come and go, and just sort of make it a part of the routine of their day to call on Mr. Sam. I think Miss Lula Stribling [?] was his nurse, and Dr. Claude Martin attended him. I remembered one funny time when Dr. Martin had just turned around and left the room and I heard Mr. Johnson kind of mumbling to himself. This is what he was saying: "What had I better have him do next?" (Laughter) As though he were directing the doctor what to do.

But his father was old before his time, at least to my thinking, because he was only sixty. I think he actually died a few days after his sixtieth birthday, and that was something that Lyndon always remembered and often quoted. He had an uncle, too, who died of heart trouble at about that age. Lyndon always felt that that was something that ran in the family. I used to remind him with considerable asperity that he also had--all of this was in later years--Aunt Frank, who lived to be eighty or so, and Aunt Jessie, who lived to be up in her eighties.

G: Do you recall where you were when his father passed away? Where you heard the news?

J: Yes. I have the feeling that his father, at his own insistence, had asked to be taken from the hospital to our home in little Number Four, Happy Hollow Lane. I have a memory of that. Or it could be he was in the hospital in Austin. At any rate, I know we were in Number Four, Happy Hollow Lane. Mrs. Johnson was there with us. My first act was to bring her a cup of hot tea, a small foolish thing to do, but tea was always her small little bit of help. She used to say, "the drink that cheers yet not inebriates," or something,

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quoting some poet. She never had a drink of liquor in her life, I'm sure. No crisis could have compelled her to have a drink. Nor did she like others to.

I remember distinctly what Lyndon did, and that was so much in character. He got on the phone and began to make all the calls to the undertaker, the close relatives, to other people. In between making a call, he would sob. Then he would get back on the phone and he would make another call. Then he would catch his breath and let out a sob. Well, anyhow, he was totally business, but he was doing it at the same time he was deeply grieved. The rest of us kind of sitting around and he was handling everything.

G: He really took charge then.

J: Yes, he took charge. There's a very beautiful little mental picture in my mind of Mr. Johnson lying in his own bed in his own home in Johnson City, very sick. They were talking about some good friend of long ago, and Mr. Johnson said, "He was a thoroughbred." Mrs. Johnson went up and put her hand on his brow and said, "You are too, Sam."

Actually, except for visiting his father, Lyndon spent a very busy fall covering the district. I was to learn that was the pattern of our lives for many years. One covered the district whenever Congress was not in session. The minute Congress adjourned you started packing and went home. I used to say dark didn't catch us in Washington on the day that Congress adjourned. His goal was to visit every post office and almost every country store. That is, any community that was big enough to have a post office he would make at least a call there, let the people know he was coming, through whatever services they had, a local paper or through his always-friend, the postmaster. Anybody

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that wanted to [could] come and talk to him or listen to him, maybe he'd have a set-up speech or maybe he would just walk around the square and speak to the merchants and everybody he met. At any rate, he was not one to spend the time between sessions in Washington, or, to my great dismay, to take any of those wonderful trips that so many congressmen seemed to be taking.

G: I gather even before his father's death he had already assumed the role of helping other members of the family, his brother and his sisters. Now that his father was gone, did he have to do even more of this? Was he sort of a surrogate father?

J: Yes, he was, for several reasons: one, he was the oldest; two, he was a naturally strong person that people turned to for help, advice and management; and three, because of his mother, whom he loved dearly and who did load him up with a lot of that. She was one of the dearest and most marvelous people I was ever to know, and *never* wanted anything for herself. We really just had to work at buying her a pretty outfit when we could afford it, or taking her on a pleasure trip, because she only wanted things for her other children, not for herself. She really did turn to Lyndon very often to secure jobs, loans, help of any and every sort for them all. And of course, naturally, that's not the best of climates. It made them resentful. They didn't want him to boss them, and yet there was a close feeling. They needed each other. But it taught me the value of independence. It's something I sought and cherished. Because sometimes, although Lyndon practically always did it, he sometimes resented having to do it.

G: Did his father leave behind debts that had to be taken care of?

J: Yes, he left behind quite a lot of debts. And yet, they were debts that were accumulated

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only because he was a real victim of one of the earlier depressions--I think it was the depression of 1922 or 1924 or something like that--from which he did not recover. They had five children to raise and put through college, and he worked like a beaver, and just did the best he could. But in one of those depressions, and I forget the year, but it was a time when cotton was selling for about forty cents a pound and everybody thought, "I'll just plant all the cotton I can and I'll make a killing." He borrowed a lot of money, bought tractors, rented land--mostly, I must say, from his brothers and sisters, land that had belonged to his father, and his father left him of course some, too--hired Mexican families and stood for them at the store, as the expression was. Whatever they got from the store to eat and live on during the year he promised to pay for. Then cotton dropped that fall to some hideously low price, I think five cents a pound, from forty cents to five cents. So he took such a licking and was so much in debt. He just spent the rest of his life bailing out of that, and paid just as much of it as he could with great sweat of his brow and great honesty.

But from then on it was hard sledding. Mrs. Johnson borrowed from her relatives. All of the children who could work did work in varying degrees. You see, I'm only saying all of this from what people have told me and from what family members have told me, because I only entered the family in 1934. But for about ten years or so they'd been hard going. Before that they had been the best off in their own setting.

So his father did leave debts. And Lyndon, one of his first actions was to make a list of them, see how much he felt he really was honor bound to pay, and he paid and he paid and he paid. But he didn't pay them all, because some of them, I don't know, were

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too shadowy, too vague, too--I don't know. That is my perception of it across the years, and I do think it is correct.

(Interruption)

But to go backward in time to that summer, our first summer in Congress, there were some light moments and fun moments, too. One time Bill Deason and Marion Fore came up to visit us. Marion was courting Carroll Keach, or I should say it the other way around, at that time. Anyhow, they wanted to see each other and see whether this was for real or not, and Bill came to see how Lyndon was getting on. They stayed with us at the apartment. Then we went to New York. I can't remember quite who all went. I know Lyndon didn't go, but Bill Deason and Carroll and Marion, and I think maybe Charles Henderson and his wife, Mary Kay [went]. We stayed at the Taft Hotel, which was really a very inexpensive hotel, to put it politely. We did all sorts of things. We rode the tour bus and went all over town, went down into the real slums of New York and went past Grant's Tomb and went all up Fifth Avenue. I had done that before, the one time I went up there with Cecille [Harrison Marshall]. We went to the theater. I think I saw *Tobacco Road*. The theater is a long, long love of mine that's enriched my life a long time. There was a song, "Harbor Lights," that I will always associate with that period of time.

(Interruption)

An influence that was to permeate our lives for the next, oh, many years, I think started that summer of 1937. That was Lyndon getting to know Charles Marsh. I am a little uncertain whether it was 1937 or perhaps 1938. But in any case, I used to know Alice Maffett Glass in Austin when I was in the University and she worked at the Texas

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Legislature. She was a tall, statuesque, beautiful, highly intelligent, young woman, a little bit older than me, and [with] very intellectual interests. She sort of dropped out of my life. We heard that she had married a man named Manners [?] who was a diplomat and spent most of his life traveling, and that she had a beautiful home where he had ensconced her in Virginia, out from Culpeper [Longlea, a home owned by Charles Marsh at that time]. Then, that summer of 1937, I believe it was, she called me, and said, "Come down and have lunch with me at the Mayflower Hotel," and I did. It was just so pleasant. She was even more beautiful than ever and many interesting things had happened to her. She said she wanted to meet my husband, and she wanted us to come out and spend the weekend at her place in Virginia sometime soon, but that she was leaving right then, very soon, to go to the music festival in Salzburg, Austria. She did call us later. I don't know whether it would have been later that summer of 1937. All of these things get shrouded in the mist of time. It certainly was not later than 1938 and knowing Lyndon, I think he would have taken his own steps to meet the man who owned a number of important newspapers in his district. But nevertheless, that is how we did meet Charles Marsh, at Alice Maffet's house in Virginia, where he was there every time we went.

[He was] one of the most interesting men I was ever to know. He had a head like a Roman emperor, like you think a Roman emperor ought to look. He was exceedingly intelligent with wide-ranging interests. He was pretty domineering. His lifestyle was on purpose different from other people's, and I think he did it in a way perhaps to irritate some people. He was a very picturesque character, had a lot of staunch men friends and

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[in] particular, George Brown and Herman Brown were among them. He no doubt also had a lot of women who were in love with him in the course of his life. He had quite a lot of newspapers and a great facility for making money, and yet money was never, to him, the end. It was just a--he had a certain amount of contempt for it, too.

This house was a lovely house called Longlea, beautifully furnished, great view of the Virginia countryside. It was a new way of life to me. They had gardens and a tennis court and a swimming pool. They had a real salon, which would include people from politics or business, or particularly the world of art, in which he was very interested, and Alice was also very interested. It was there that Lyndon and I met Erich Leinsdorf and many other people who wrote.

He affected Lyndon's life in many ways. He formed a very strong attachment for him, I think, and it certainly went both ways.

G: How did he affect him?

J: A minor way is that he introduced us to a world of elegance, which neither one of us were acquainted with, not only that home, but also he would take us down one or several times, several I think, to this lovely resort in [West] Virginia that's been there forever, White Sulphur Springs.

G: The Greenbrier Hotel.

J: Greenbrier, oh, yes, sheer heaven.

Second, in a much more substantive and important way, he affected Lyndon in opening up to him the vast world outside the United States, I mean intellectually speaking. Lyndon's interests had been *greatly* centered in the Tenth District of Texas and

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in the state of Texas and in the United States. But he had not cared intensely or studied much about the global world. That is the way I remember it. But Charles could range through civilizations and centuries and countries in a very exciting fashion. He was the first person that ever made me realize what a threat Nazism could be to our country, and what a fearsome thing it could be to Europe, to that whole continent and also to us, and just to the whole world. I was happily provincial. I think maybe I might say that Lyndon was, too. But he sure did pull back the curtains to me, let me say, and I think to some extent to Lyndon, on a wider world, fascinating, dangerous and bound to affect us, whether we liked it or not. Perhaps Charles Marsh and the Naval Affairs Committee together opened Lyndon's eyes for what was going to be the next stage of his development, and that was his interest in the war.

So, so much for the social sides, the pleasure sides of that summer. There were two more things that I remember of a very substantive fashion. One of them was what I sort of think of as Lyndon's first almost misstep, at least he got started off on, on believing what--well, let me just tell the story.

A bill came up sponsored by a congressman from South Dakota, North Dakota, some very interior state over there, that said that you had to have a public referendum before you could declare war. Lyndon thought about that, and thought about all the young people that would go to fight the war, and thought it was only fair they have a chance to vote on whether it ought to be declared or not. He made some statements to that effect and was about to get interested on the side in favor of a referendum. And Senator Wirtz called us. I forget how they got together, but he just drenched Lyndon in

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all the reasons why that wouldn't work. Senator Wirtz was one of the most effective persuaders I have ever known. He never beat the table. He never made you do anything. He just laid out the alternatives. Somehow or another when you walked out of that room, you know which alternative you wanted to lay your bet and lay your life on. Lyndon did a complete change, and, I think, was scared at how close he had come to committing himself to what would have been a totally pandemonium-producing thing.

G: I notice he was very concerned with public housing.

J: Yes.

G: Do you recall the genesis of that interest?

J: I do. I don't know exactly what and how the genesis was, but I certainly do know something that fueled it. It was a very clear picture in my mind and a fascinating episode. The subject of government housing had come up and he was trying to get it for his district, for Austin. We were home for Christmas and on Christmas morning or Christmas Eve morning, I forget which, one or the other--I believe it was Christmas morning--he got up real early, before sunup, and made a walk all over East Austin, a section where a lot of poor people lived, and counted the privies, the outdoor toilets. [He] just walked around, up and down the streets and into people's yards. If anybody saw him I guess they thought he was touched. He saw that there were many houses where there were outdoor water taps, faucets, and people could go out there and get themselves a bucket of water and take it inside for washing the dishes or bathing, but no inside plumbing facilities whatever, and toilets out behind each house, just as one had in the country, the old fashioned privy. He spent several hours doing that and just came back

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all fueled up and ready to do battle for a better type of housing in Austin.

That was a long and very satisfying episode. He enlisted immediately some of the good businessmen, the real establishment. How he got them is really remarkable, but he got Mr. E. H. Perry, who was one of the most respected and successful businessmen in the town, to be, I think, the title was chairman of the housing commission. [He got] several businessmen whose reputations standing behind it would give appeal to the citizens and make them think this had to be a responsible, worthy, going concern.

I don't know how long it took before those housing units were built, but I remember him--and it must have been I assume one, two, three years later--being very proud of the finished product. I can see in my mind's eye a picture of him and Mr. E. H. Perry and I think a man named [Nathan] Straus, who was Washington head of the whole national housing authority, standing in front of a plaque pointing it out, and Lyndon beaming from ear to ear that this was the first--or was it the first?--it was certainly one of the first--

G: It was, I think.

J: --finished public housing units in the country. And then [I remember] a picture of him leaning over talking to a bunch of little Mexican children who were going to live in the houses.

G: This really, I guess, seemed to foreshadow what he did in later years and his attitude that people were entitled to a decent living or should be given the opportunity to have at least a minimum standard of housing. Is this the way he viewed it at the time, do you recall? Was this a philosophy that went with it?

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J: Well, I know that he was deeply impressed at what he saw. There was an optimistic strain in him that made him think that the government could be better and the government could take a hand in making it better. You have to remember in all of this the Depression was very much with us. That also furnished jobs; the housing did furnish jobs for a lot of people in desperate need of them.

G: I guess other members of the authority were Senator Wirtz, W. R. Nabours. Do you remember him?

J: No, I don't.

C: And a Hubert Jones, any of these?

J: No, but I know he made a concerted effort in all of the things that he engaged in to bring in the business community, the establishment, so to speak. Because he had a lot of respect for them, and he thought that they would help make the operation one, work; two, be acceptable to the town in general.

C: Well, now, looking over this first year in Congress, do you think he grew with the job?

J: Yes, I'm sure he did. I distinctly remember that at first there was a mood--a brief mood--of almost depression, of just gasping for--he saw the enormity of the job before him, the vast details, the information that he had to have to do it well, and he just wasn't sure he was up to it. But that was true in every job, as I remember, that he undertook. A period, brief, but real, of just almost breathless concern of whether he could handle it successfully. Then he always settled down and went to work and applied himself about eighteen hours a day and did pretty well.

G: During these periods when he perhaps needed support or needed to convince himself that

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he could do the job, would he talk to you about it?

J: Yes, but I can't say that I was any great inspiration. But you know, I was fairly sturdy about it: "You're here! You've got to!"

G: Is there anything else about 1937 before we [move on]?

J: Not that I can recall at the moment. I'm sure that there were many delicious little nuggets that I'll later on wish I had put in.

G: Were you glad to be back in Washington?

J: Excited, thrilled. Well, you know, we never really felt that we left Texas. Austin was always home, but Washington was the job, so we had one foot in both places.

(Interruption)

I think we ought to insert, right after Lyndon's philosophy of traveling all over his district in the summertime when Congress was not in session, that then I did begin going around with him some, particularly where there were social events planned.

I especially remember that at Brenham there was always a lot going on and he took me down there in the late summer or early fall of 1937. While he would be traveling around with the county agent, Dutch Hohn, or going to men's barbecues or fish fries put on by Mayor Reese Lockett, T. A. Low or some of the folks, I would be going to ladies' bridge parties and teas. We got to know that community very well. It was an active and delightful community. There was a Mrs. J. V. Carroll [who] was very often our hostess. She knew just as much about politics as the men, particularly with all the Catholics, of whom there were a great many in the Polish and Czech communities around there. It was a gala area, a Mayfest, a lot of beer drinking, a lot of barbecues. I think I

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came to know Brenham better than most of the areas in his district.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VIII

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

CLAUDIA TAYLOR JOHNSON

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, I, Claudia Taylor Johnson of Austin, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with me and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. A list of the interviews is attached.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available to all researchers.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to all researchers.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to other institutions.

Claudia Taylor Johnson 6/20/02
Claudia Taylor Johnson Date

Sharon Everett 5-10-2011
Archivist of the United States Date

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Appendix A

Attached to and forming part of the instrument of gift of oral history interviews, executed by Claudia Taylor Johnson, and accepted by the ~~Archivist of the United States~~ on 5-10-2011.

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

**Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries**

May 26, 1975, with Merle Miller
June 25, 1976, with Merle Miller
June 29, 1976, with Merle Miller
January 30, 1977, with Merle Miller
February 14, 1977, with Merle Miller
August 12, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 13, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 14, 1977, with Michael Gillette
February 4, 1978, with Michael Gillette
April 1, 1978, with Michael Gillette
August 6, 1978, with Michael Gillette
October 9, 1978, with Michael Gillette
January 23, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 24, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 25-26, 1979, with Michael Gillette
February 27-28, 1979, with Michael Gillette
August 19, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 2-3, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 9, 1979, with Michael Gillette
November 13, 1979, with Anthony Champagne
January 4-5, 1980, with Michael Gillette
January 29-30, with Michael Gillette
September 20, 1980, with Michael Gillette
September 26-27, 1980, with Michael Gillette
February 6-7, 1981, with Michael Gillette
February 20-21, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 10, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 23, 1981, with Michael Gillette
September 5, 1981, with Michael Gillette
November 15, 1981, with Michael Gillette
January 2-3, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 10, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 30, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 15, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 19-20, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 22, 1982, with Michael Gillette

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March 29, 1982, with Michael Gillette
August 3-4, 1982, with Michael Gillette
September 4, 1983, with Michael Gillette
December 30, 1984, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
January 4, 1985, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
February 23, 1991, with Michael Gillette
March 4, 1991, with W. C. Trueheart
March 8, 1991, with Michael Gillette
August 1994, with Harry Middleton (six interviews)
November 5, 1994, with Harry Middleton
January 23, 1987, with Nancy Smith
August 18, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 19, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 20, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, and John and Sandy Brice
August 1994, with S. Douglass Cater
March 22, 1985, with Louis S. Gomolak
July 16, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell
July 17, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell