

INTERVIEW XVII covering 1943

DATE: September 20, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: LBJ Ranch, Stonewall, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

J: 1943 began, as all our congressional years, by returning to Washington in the first week of January. Lyndon always hit the ground running, and this year was a passionate, full-blooded year, a year of using himself at full capacity in which he was terrifically committed to the work at hand. That work was getting on with the war. He was angry at the delay, inefficiency, red tape, foot-dragging; that became evident both in the military and in the private sector at home. He was at war against it, using as his tool the Naval Affairs Committee.

That, from beginning to the end, was always one of the things he loved being a part of, the Naval Affairs Committee, with old Mr. [Carl] Vinson of Georgia, whom we called the Admiral, in charge since time began.

(Interruption)

A good many evenings and weekends out at our house, or down at the Capitol, were spent with fellow members of the Naval Affairs Committee: Andy Biemiller who later represented labor; Sterling Cole; Ed Hébert of Louisiana; Mendel Rivers of South

Johnson -- XVII -- 2

Carolina; Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. He had a curious disregard for which side of the aisle they were on, whether Republican or Democrat, and I never was sure who was who. Somewhere along the line Maggie--Warren Magnuson--was a member of Naval Affairs.

Lyndon got the Chairman to appoint a committee to investigate naval personnel itself, to make sure that able-bodied men who could go to sea were not sitting at desk jobs. But the main focus of his wrath and his main effort at that time related to absenteeism, which had gotten pretty high. Something like out of ten men, nine plus would show up for work in war plants or other places, particularly in war plants, and that was what he was concerned about. He wrote a really marvelous speech in which he got the navy to say the number of battleships or carriers, or whatever the different classifications of ships were, [which] could have been built with the man-hours that were lost through absenteeism. Then he talked about the ghost ships that never got there, that didn't show up to protect the men at whatever the crucial battles were of that day.

It was effective. It also put him at cross purposes with labor and with some of his good friends, like Jim Rowe. But he wrote scorching rejoinders to them. I remember one particular phrase, something like, "If we don't clean house ourselves, now, some more"--I don't know, what was the word he used? Not totalitarian, but--some more people later on "are going to clean house and they're going to break a lot of precious things as they throw around them."

He was always--not always perhaps, but a great deal of the time, he was looking down the road to what would be the results of the legislation. Somewhere along then, he

Johnson -- XVII -- 3

got to know Don Cook from New York, who became special counsel of one of those subcommittees.

Absenteeism involved his hours and his brain and his passion, but some of his thoughts were always back home. How are the folks, and are they backing me? He would get word from, oh, Lorraine Barnes or Buck Hood or Charlie Green or Gordon Fulcher, especially Gordon--good long letters about how things were going--and from some of his old NYA [National Youth Administration] folks, particularly Harvey Payne, who got around the district a lot. And Jesse [Kellam], of course.

"Work or Fight" was one of the slogans of the day. Food rationing was in. It was well accepted by the people. There were a lot of funny stories that I remember about it. Have I told them to you before?

G: The only one I remember is the one about buying a ham in West Virginia--

J: In East Texas, in some of the country that Mr. Ed Clark knows about. Mr. Ed Clark, he told that story, so I won't repeat it.

G: I'm not sure, now that I think about it, that you actually put it on tape. I remember your telling the story, but I don't remember if we have it on tape.

J: Well, at one time, Lyndon and Ed and I were over in deep East Texas, and at a country store they had some home-cured hams for sale. So Lyndon bought a ham and he paid for it, and then he said, "How many stamps do I owe you?" And the store man said, "Which?" Lyndon said, "You know, stamps. OPA [Office of Price Administration] stamps. How many do I owe you for this ham?" This old gentleman said, "Oh, the OP and A, we ain't put that in over here." (Laughter) He was calling it like you would a

Johnson -- XVII -- 4

railroad, you know, the OP and A.

Then I remember, this wasn't quite in this year, I think it probably was a year or so later when things were tighter and scarier and more--wasn't it the 36th Division from Texas that landed on the shores of Italy?

G: Yes. The lost battalion.

J: But since I'm thinking of it right now, I will tell it. I was standing in a line at the local Safeway buying our groceries, and the woman behind me was really bitching about how she didn't have any more sugar stamps. And I was saying, "Well, I don't mind." She looked at me real angry and said something, and I replied, just as angrily--and I don't very often get angry--"I'll tell you why I don't mind: because the 36th landed in Texas [Italy] yesterday, and they're slugging it out and a lot of them dying. You hear it on the radio and in the papers and they don't have any sugar!" That was the way most of the country felt. Most of it absorbed food rationing with a grin and a lot of good stories and it was universal.

I'm sure I've told you the one though about the coffee--I believe it was the coffee--could've been the coffee--and Lyndon. Zephyr [Wright] was our cook, and Mary Rather in the office was our great sort of keeper and mother superior and one we always turned to with all sorts of questions. So one day I was out of town and Zephyr called up Mary and said, "Miss Mary, we ain't got no more coffee stamps and I got to get Mr. Johnson some coffee. We're out of coffee." And Mary said, "Well, I gave you all I had last week. Any of the extras in the office we've been saving them for y'all. I don't think there's a one left around here. You'll just have to tell him, don't you know, Zephyr, 'There's a war on!'"

Johnson -- XVII -- 5

Zephyr said, "Yes'm, I know. But I don't want to be the one to have to tell him!" I should have inserted, "And he can't have any more coffee!"

G: How about the atmosphere in Washington at this time? Did the war really change the normal, day-to-day existence, other than, say, the rationing? I know in one of the letters that the President wrote, he said that he had gone to New York, and he said, "but it's not the same city now that the war is on." How did your life change?

J: I rode the bus more than I ever had, and rode it rather a lot. [I'd] walk or perhaps drive my car just two and a half blocks up from our dear home on Thirtieth Place to Connecticut Avenue where the bus went. [It] went by real regular, stayed real full; frequently you had to stand up. I also picked up strangers in my car when I had gas, thought nothing of it, nothing bad ever happened, always got a nice smile and a nice thank you. And when you were riding in a taxi you didn't mind a bit if they stopped and loaded it until you were practically sitting on each other's laps. You rather expected it. There was a sizeable amount of good will and camaraderie, and "we're all in this together." If you had gas, they understood. If your menus were limited, they might bring you a stick of butter. I remember a wife of a Supreme Court justice arriving at dinner one day bringing me a stick of butter, and many other similar things.

There was also a lot of people who were dead set in getting into Officer Training School that ought to have been in there, and some that were dead set in getting in there that ought not to have been in there. There was all sorts of people that wanted to get in and get in quick, and get to where the fighting was. I think perhaps there were more that wanted occupational deferments.

Johnson -- XVII -- 6

G: How about prominent men who wanted to be made admirals or generals or colonels?

You get this in some of the constituent mail. Was there a pressure on congressmen to [promote them]?

J: Yes, I'm sure there was a good deal of that. It doesn't seem--our constituency, which at that time was still pretty much rural and agricultural, and not full of fat cats by any means, or men of power wielders of sizeable stature, were not big on that. We had little trouble with it.

"Work or Fight" was the slogan of the day, and getting in there and making sure that absenteeism got stopped was Lyndon's life at that time.

G: How did he become conscious of this as an issue, as a problem? Did it relate to, say, the navy itself or the ship-building operations? Do you know how it first came to his attention that there was an inordinate amount of absenteeism and that this was hurting the war effort?

J: I cannot say for sure, but I think it was through his going through shipyards, munition plants, everything that was handling military production because of being on the Naval Affairs Committee.

G: I noticed that George Brown, his good friend, was building ships in Houston, and he seemed to complain--

J: Oh, yes, and yet he always cranked them out on time, and got a navy "E" for efficiency--or maybe it stood for excellence, I don't know, but I think efficiency--anyhow, with a big celebration, and that was not probably in this year, 1943, but it was certainly soon thereafter. I remember how youthful everybody is in that picture, and the big smile on

Johnson -- XVII -- 7

the face of George and Herman and their aging mother and all the politicians in that picture.

It was a passionate year. There was a lot of feeling of we, all of us in this together, America is a great country and we can and we will. And then there was also some undertow.

G: You had a lot of German-Americans in your district, I suppose, and I know that President Johnson's father had been given credit for protecting the civil liberties of the Germans during the first World War, who were living in Hill Country. Did you notice any problems that they had during the second World War, because they were of German ancestry?

J: With us, as the 10th District was comprised at that time, Blanco [County] was the farthest west that it went and so we would not have had the Hill Country and the Germans in it. But we definitely had a lot of Germans in Brenham, and no, I do not remember any lack of patriotism or going along with the war effort, as it was called, in a vigorous way. I don't.

I do remember one happy little social occasion in that busy year, not that I was there, because this was just a stag party. Speaker Sam Rayburn's birthday was always celebrated in great fashion, not by one, but by half a dozen parties. But this party Lyndon somehow or another got President Roosevelt either to host it or to be present, I don't remember quite which. He also arranged for a fine Stetson hat to come into the hands of President [Franklin] Roosevelt and to be presented to the Speaker by FDR, because he was always trying to get people to work together better if it would move things along

Johnson -- XVII -- 8

faster.

G: Now I believe that birthday party at the White House was a surprise. Do you recall?

J: I think it was. I think it was a surprise. I believe Lyndon came home just real elated saying it all went off fine and the Speaker was real pleased.

And big things happened in industry all that time. For instance, the Big Inch pipeline that went all the way from my own East Texas way up somewhere into Illinois was completed. It was a lot of topic of conversation in our house.

G: We really don't have much on the President's attitude toward the Big Inch. I know that he worked on it. Do you recall his describing what this meant for Texas or what it meant for the country to have it?

J: Not clearly enough to give you any vivid reminders. I just know that he thought it was . . . He had a lot of admiration for big business. At the same time he thought they had to be reined in, R-E-I-N-E-D, and . . . Well, government ought to at least be aware and look over their shoulder a bit. He thought if big business could succeed, the war could succeed, and later on in years he thought if big business could produce lots of money and national growth or production, all of the social forms that he worked hard on in the sixties could succeed. So it was not an enemy, but an ally to him, and so he was proud of, and interested in, the Big Inch. I do not remember any personal connections.

G: I wonder if he saw it as an economic benefit to his state?

J: I don't know.

G: A way to raise the price of Texas oil, which I suppose then was just dirt cheap, and eventually get it to the eastern market?

Johnson -- XVII -- 9

J: My constant wish, with hindsight, is that I had been more observant, more knowledgeable, and had kept more records. Unfortunately, a lot of them are just sort of the montage of memory.

G: Anything on Secretary [Harold] Ickes here and the Big Inch that you recall? Secretary Ickes during this year I think was--

J: No, I don't. By and large Lyndon admired him the whole time, thought him irascible as everybody else did, got along with him all right and was always deferential.

The big news for us, of course, was that in February, or maybe it was late January, the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] worked out its final yes on us buying KTBC.

G: What considerations does the FCC make in agreeing to a purchase like this? Do you know what the issues are?

J: Whether the licensee, or the person who wants to purchase it, has the financial capability of running it, the moral standing of doing a good job--to send out over the airwaves that belonged to the whole country something that would be beneficial and not harmful.

G: Is there a political dimension, do you think? For example, if someone who is far to the right, like maybe Jim West was regarded, do you think maybe he might have been refused earlier because he wasn't either pro-New Deal or wasn't in the thinking of the American mainstream?

J: Well, I think a separate body, like the FCC, would guard its political detachment very warily and sternly, and yet it's composed of human beings and there will always be some in there with leanings one way or another, philosophies and opinions. So to answer your

Johnson -- XVII -- 10

question, I think they would always try to be judicious and sometimes maybe they're not. But I do think their intentions are always to base it on what's better for the community and the general public.

At any rate, we bought it for a very modest consideration; I think seventeen thousand is the figure that sticks in my mind as something my daddy wanted to pay me right away from Mother's estate.

G: Do you recall how you first became aware that the station was available?

J: I can't remember exactly. We knew at least one of the three absentee owners, and that was Bob Anderson who used to be from Vernon. He'd been on Lyndon's advisory committee in the NYA. It was there in our hometown. We could have found it out from any business person there.

G: I just wonder if you remember--

J: I don't remember a vignette of who might have first [told us]. At this time I guess we had the nesting instinct, too, the desire to put down roots, to become more a part of our community. Then we had Daddy, who wanted us to relieve him of the responsibility of continuing to manage [Mother's estate].

G: Did you seek his advice on the advisability of purchasing the station? Do you recall if he had any [advice]?

J: I'm sure that I always respected and wanted Daddy's advice on everything involving a dollar. But on the other hand, he would not have known anything about radio, the communications industry. It was far outside his bailiwick.

G: Part of the story on the acquisition of the station has it that I think Jim West had an option

Johnson -- XVII -- 11

on the station, and it was necessary for the President to buy out his option or get him to turn it over or something, and that he went down to Houston to meet him and everything.

Do you recall that? Do you know if that's apocryphal?

J: No, I think it quite true, and maybe it was the West family and the West brothers. I think I covered that in [the interview covering] last year, but what came out of it actually, as I told you before, was getting to know Wesley and Neva. Jim was somewhat more unapproachable and eccentric. I'm sure that it was at first a hostile meeting with either or both. It mellowed and soon, especially with Wesley, we became dear, lifelong friends. But I think I went into a good bit of that the last time.

G: How about Bill Drake? Do you recall his attempt to buy the station?

J: Just that it existed. I think there were several people interested in buying it. I think we presented our proposal quicker than [the others]--I think when we heard about it we got in there real quick with all the best backup of reasons why.

G: Do you recall if you were both enthusiastic about buying the station originally, or did one have to persuade the other of you to do it?

J: Well, Lyndon was always the more adventurous, daring, visionary in the sense of looking down the road. I guess the better word to use is having vision of what something may become.

I was completely willing, because I trusted his judgment, and I wanted and always have wanted, and always will want, a foothold in the city of Austin, a piece in the life of Austin. It was out of reason for us to ever imagine we could have a newspaper. We didn't have that kind of money. This little station went off the air at sunset, had a low

Johnson -- XVII -- 12

power. I forget what. I didn't have a network, had nine employees and poor management, and [was] in debt to everybody in town, and absentee managers had just sort of given up on any supervision. So we got it in, either January or February of 1943, and there began a long and happy, mostly happy, story.

Meanwhile, besides his work in Congress, Lyndon was keeping up with the home front and various postmasters, with old John Brunner of, I believe, Taylor leading the pack, would keep him informed about what was going on in all of their towns. His old NYA friends were also good about that. Mayor Tom Miller was his most faithful correspondent. And Mr. E. H. Perry, whom Lyndon regarded with a great deal of admiration and deference; E. H. Perry and Theo Davis from the business community were his staunch friends and advisers. Also Harris Melasky over at--I think he was from Taylor. But there were always certain faithful friends that you could call on for advice or help.

He acquired a new one sometime in 1943, out of our district actually. But newspaper pulp got extremely short. There were ever so many shortages: rubber and fuel oil and gasoline and all sort of things. Rubber, especially, became Lyndon's great interest later on. But in regard to this newspaper pulp, rationing and the difficulty of getting it from Canada and getting it from other sources across the seas, where much had come from previously, made our East Texas pulp plants want to increase their production. At the same time they ran up against the shortages of steel and other materials. But if you could work it out, and prove that if they could increase them, it would reduce shipping from the Scandinavian peninsula and from Canada to the point

Johnson -- XVII -- 13

where you would really be saving a lot of money and shortages and time. So Lyndon was very helpful to Mr. Kurth--E. H. Kurth, Ernest Kurth--who was head of a big mill over there. I think it was named Southland Paper Mills [Southland Paper Company].

G: Did he just cut some of the red tape?

J: Yes, sort of take him by the hand and find his way through the jungle of red tape from administrator to administrator and help him present his case. You know, a citizen with an absolutely good reason, and an honest proposal can fumble around in Washington and get lost and never get [it] accomplished, unless he's got a determined congressman who tries awfully hard to be helpful. Lyndon did, and the mill did expand. And Ernest Kurth, until the day he died, was our good friend. I will always remember that when our child was born, our first child, Lynda, the next year, in March of that year, he sent her a baby bond with a sweet letter. And every year for I don't know how many, perhaps twelve, maybe more, years, he would send her a bond--not a huge one, I think they were fifty-dollar bonds--accompanied by, in each year, a different letter, with some aspect on the life of her parents that he wanted her to know. I'm going to look up those letters sometime, because I kept on thinking they would stop. One says thank you once, twice, maybe three times and then one forgets. Most people do.

His newspaper friends would keep in constant touch with him, but I think I've mentioned that.

Then big news was that Nellie [Connally] had a baby girl, Kathleen, in February of that year, at a hospital there in Washington, had a really quite dreadful time. I think John was there, but if so, he was just in and out. He was in the service, of course, in the

Johnson -- XVII -- 14

navy. I have a pang whenever I think of that, because her life was only to be sixteen years and end tragically. But at that time we were all young and vigorous and full of hope and full of work.

The months of February and March were taken up with the absenteeism bill, which became known as the work-or-fight bill, and which ran into a lot of difficulties, principally with labor. Also the Labor Committee itself wanted to have jurisdiction over it. Chairwoman Mary Norton called LBJ's bill "labor-baiting." Jim Rowe felt the same way. Lyndon only became more adamant in his feeling that every last person ought to have the opportunity to do what he could for his country. I would say generally with the public it was a popular bill. He made two speeches on the floor on it, I think. He was also active in something called, at least it was thought of as a watchdog committee, investigating expenditures in operations of the Navy Department.

There was a rash of strikes either breaking out or threatening to break out, and that fueled the fire for such a bill [on absenteeism] and raised the temperature of the country. Finally he got it out of the Naval Affairs Committee and it went to the floor of the House.

Meanwhile, our own personal little family life was on a pretty happy keel. Lyndon and Mrs. Johnson were, as always, worried about family affairs but they were smoother than most years. Sam Houston had a job; he was going to work for the War Production Board. He got an apartment. He brought his wife and, I believe it was child at that time--could have been children--to Washington and he was a pretty happy man.

G: He and Albertine lived with you all for a while, I gather.

Johnson -- XVII -- 15

J: Yes, first and last, everybody lived with us for a while. (Laughter) I mean, staff, close friends, family members. Sam Houston would spend as much as six months at a time there.

Josefa had a job back home, which she seemed to enjoy. Mrs. Johnson was living in her little house in Austin where Lyndon helped her. I'm trying to remember, I think Lucia's husband [Birge Alexander] was already out of school at that time and was at a paying job. In any case, Lucia was a great comfort to her mother in her presence and companionship and every other way. Birge, as always, was capable of doing just anything for the comfort of his wife and mother-in-law.

So that spring passed with me knowing that I must leave my brand new house, which I just cherished beyond everything, and get on down to Austin and take a look at the new business.

G: When you bought the station, was it understood at that time that you would go down and get it in shape or was this--?

J: Nothing was really understood. It was just sort of in complete confusion and high hopes. But Lyndon always loaded me up with any jobs that he couldn't do, and just insisted that I had the intelligence, strength, judgment--he was big on that word, "judgment"--to handle it. And so, far from my own conclusions about it, but I went down there with a good deal of trepidation. Let's see, was that late in March or was it early in April?

G: Right, late March. There is a letter in late March saying that he had put you on a train.

J: I used to love our train trips. It was my favorite. No, I loved automobile trips, too. [I liked] planes least of all. But trains were often--you were insulated from the world for

Johnson -- XVII -- 16

two days. You could read all you wanted to and just look out at passing America. Sometimes Lyndon was along. The principal lure to him was if the session was over and the Speaker was going. That was the only way he [the Speaker] would go. He wouldn't fly except under *dire* necessity. Lyndon would have him for two days as a captive audience, or--it worked both ways, because they both had plenty to get started in the other's field of operation. One always changed, no matter where on earth you were going, you always changed in St. Louis if you went by train. We would sometimes be met by good friends. I remember Tony Buford frequently. I rather think that Mr. Gussie [August A.] Busch also met us. Maybe there would be other congressmen along the way, and it was very convivial, especially the dinner hour, which to me was high style and big living.

G: Was Speaker Rayburn recognized on those train trips? Did other passengers know who he was and come up and visit with him, do you recall?

J: I don't particularly. He was always gracious if anybody did, but he did not prolong the conversations.

G: I guess before the advent of television, someone--

J: His face was not all that familiar. Old timers, big businessmen, most people knew who he was. But television, you know, has made it so that we know everybody's face.

So, it began a new chapter when I went down. I think I got to work on it actually in early April and once more stayed at Mrs. Johnson's house, as I recall, and went down. It was appalling to climb those stairs into that place of business, and see how sloppy it was, physically dirty I mean. It looked like it hadn't had a janitor in days and days. Nine employees. I think [Aubrey] Escoe was the name of the manager. We soon realized that

Johnson -- XVII -- 17

he would have to go.

Two little vignettes that I remember. One was trying to see why we had such a long list of accounts receivable--and of course what we paid for the station had been, to some extent, based on accounts receivable--which didn't get received. Lots of reasons. Some of them were defunct businesses. Some should never have been placed in the first time, because they were kind of fly-by-nights, by this time a hundred and twenty days old or more. But I came across one, Kellogg Company, quite a sizeable account receivable. I thought to myself, that's a big cereal company; they don't fail to pay their bills. What can this be? So I asked to see the contract. There was one department of the place that was well run, that was the bookkeeping department, [by] a red-headed young woman named Louise Vine, and she found the contract and the work orders for me. Reading the contract, it clearly stated they bought spots five days a week. Then when I asked for a copy of the bills sent to them, they were billed for seven days a week, which indeed we had run, because why not, we didn't have much to lose. They didn't have anything, not much business on, and maybe that bookkeeper in that faraway town wouldn't notice a difference. I guess that that was the reasoning of the previous management. In any case, they were more efficient than that; they paid for the five days that they had ordered, and this was no such thing as any account receivable for all of those two days covering a span of maybe a year, a long time.

Then another vignette I remember. I knew that nobody in that place was going to have any respect and *esprit de corps* to get up and get if the place wasn't clean. So I had a staff meeting, and told them that, and I think I attempted to get a regular janitor. But I

Johnson -- XVII -- 18

know that I spent one day myself with a bucket full of soap and rags and whatever suitable things there were, washing the windows, while some of them just stood around there with their mouths open, thinking what kind of person have we got here.

Louise Vine and I became good friends, and I still see her from time to time. She stayed with us quite a long time. She married a man named Sneed, whose family had long been in politics, in Austin, county chairman, I think, various ones were. He went, as everybody did, to the war, he to the South Pacific I think, New Guinea maybe, and she was greatly strained and lonely and concerned. When Lyndon [returned], there were some films developed of his trip down there; they were in a very similar place. I don't know whether he ever ran into this young man or not, I can't remember that. I think it quite likely he did. But at any rate, exactly similar. It showed the tents where they slept, the messes where they ate, the general look of the land, which was lush, sort of jungle-type country. I remember showing those to her.

I cannot recall how soon we got a new manager. I will though, and I will tell you at a later date.

So, I soon instituted the practice of asking everybody--the salesmen, that is--to give me a report every week: who had they called on, what had they tried to sell them, did they say yes or no. That was most unhappily received. Book work they really took a dim view of, and what they had done with their time they thought was darn well their own business. Well, we didn't think so as long as they were on salary. If they were supposed to work eight hours, we wanted them to. But we finally got that ironed out after a few sassy reports, sort of amusing ones, you know.

Johnson -- XVII -- 19

G: Must have been quite a transition from the old ownership, too . . . (Laughter)

J: Yes.

G: Did many of them stay on? You mentioned Louise Vine. Are there any other names of-- that you recall--people who were there when you took over the station who remained with you for years?

J: I'm not sure. I could readily see. Of course, Paul Bolton very soon became a member of our team, as did Cactus Pryor. I don't know exactly what time, but they go back to the beginning, to very soon after the beginning.

(Interruption)

G: Do you recall any special instructions when you left Washington for Austin to take over the station?

J: Just that Lyndon said, "Write me every day. Tell me what you're doing, how you find things, what you plan you're going to change, and I'll write you. Sometimes we'll phone each other." The use of the long distance telephone was always a scary thing to me; it ran into so much money. So, it turned out that I spent from late March actually until late June down there, a full three months. I hadn't been there two days before I realized it was such a tangled skein and there was so much to be done. It was very hard to figure out what to do first, but I decided the cleanup was the first thing, as I've already mentioned to you. The manager was named Escoe; there were nine people, the bookkeeper, Louise Vine, and I. I soon began to feel that I knew her better than anyone else.

G: Well now, where was the station?

J: The station was on the second floor of a second-rate building, I would classify it, on

Johnson -- XVII -- 20

about 9th Street I think, at the corner of oh, one of the parallel streets running south and north.

G: It wasn't near where it is now, Brazos?

J: No, no, no. It was on the west side of town, west side.

G: Oh, I see. Colorado or--

J: West side. It very likely may have been Colorado. I think actually we were the tenants of the Durham Business School, or of some business school, which alas, was not any more pleased about having those loud bands there than we were pleased by the quality of the building.

So we had a big cleanup job. I found tapes from Pappy O'Daniel just lying around. It was an incredible mess dating back more than eighteen months. But interestingly enough in that day of shortages, you couldn't buy new film unless you could turn in something to be reprocessed, so our potential customer, Mr. J. R. Reed--I think I first wrote Pappy O'Daniel himself asking him if he wanted them back. If he didn't, I'd give them to Reed.

Then it was more and more disheartening, and we thought, just to start out fresh in the world, we'd better have, one, a nicer looking location. That meant a move, some nicer-looking furniture. Our furniture was just awfully beat up. I decided on some that could be refinished, repaired, a piano, a few desks and things. [I] finally decided I had to have two desks, I think it was, and seven chairs. It's very interesting to read that correspondence of those times because I phoned every furniture store in town, got all the prices. It was going to be a fantastically small amount for those nine pieces.

Johnson -- XVII -- 21

Paul Bolton helped me a lot in advice, and Jesse Kellam, on how to proceed on accounts receivable and accounts payable. Lyndon kept on sending every penny he could spare. I remember one time he sent a check for fifteen hundred and attached to it the words, "Now I have about enough left to buy my cigarettes until the end of the month." At one time I wrote him that we had a balance of eighty-four dollars in the account. Another time he sent me three hundred dollars out of his monthly check or bank balance. I called on the three thousand that was owed to me at that time, about all that was due for some time from Uncle Claud's estate in Alabama.

G: Did you ever feel after you got down there and saw that some of these accounts were lost, were not going to be receivable, did you ever reach a point where you felt maybe you had made a mistake, that you weren't going to be able to turn the station around?

J: No. I never did really feel--I just felt like we had to push on. I suppose after the cleanup, the next thing was to clean up the accounts receivable, and I soon discovered, as I've said, that they were a phantom pretty much, a puff job, for somebody preparing to make a sale. I can't point the blame at anybody, just it was slack, just very slack. Three absentee owners, I think besides Bob Anderson they were named Stewart and Walker, I believe. Nobody knew. The right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing.

On the other hand, unfortunately, it turned out that most of the accounts payable were indeed payable. We compromised as many as we reasonably could. We paid them, down to the bone, until we used up all our resources, those that were deemed to be actually payable. And I remember at one time Lyndon issued an ultimatum that he wanted everything paid and all our obligations clean by June 1. It was, I think, the fact

Johnson -- XVII -- 22

that Escoe, the manager, really didn't know all that he ought to have known about the accounts receivable, and accounts payable, and the contracts that finally drove us to the conclusion that we had to get a new manager.

So we talked to Harfield Weedon, who had had ten years experience in Texas radio in sizeable jobs and who had stage-managed and announced all of the radio and appearances in Lyndon's campaign of 1941. [A] most attractive man, flamboyant perhaps, but a good personality, beautiful voice. So he agreed to come with us, and to be there by May 17. We did not fire Escoe actually out and out, but it was about that time, sometime along then, we agreed at the same time that it really wasn't a future that he wanted or could look to, and he told us that he wanted to leave. He would stay for a full month after the new manager was found, teach him everything he could. His attitude was just fine and very helpful.

G: I gather that you talked to people who had radio stations in other cities, too, and learned that way.

J: Oh, believe me we did. We had lots of friends in the industry and we talked about [the station] to people in Texas and people in New York who knew a lot about it.

As far as the staff went, we had this dual process going on. We knew we needed to weed out; we needed to get new people who were our people, who were can-do people. We needed to wait until the manager came to start that process, and at the same time the draft was nibbling at us. Two people were called up by the draft and more were going to be in doubt, and their time was uncertain and short. Harfield soon hired John Hicks to come with him as program director, and he was going to get there I think by June 1. So

Johnson -- XVII -- 23

we had sort of set the date for June 1 for a new start.

Lyndon said we ought to advertise that. No matter how little money we had, we just had to get it from somewhere, for an advertising campaign to be divided between the *Austin American* [-*Statesman*] and the country weeklies with particular attention to the weeklies covering the coverage of KTBC, and especially those that were in the Tenth District. Don't forget the other side of the coin. Alas, on reading the correspondence, I thought [we needed] billboards, just a few within the city limits--I'm against it myself--and also amused to see that it was in a letter back that Lyndon wrote me that he says, "I do not think billboards are wise." (Laughter)

He also thought, at the same time, that the new manager Harfield Weedon ought to write--and here he gets a little grandiloquent--a thousand letters to the civic and business leaders in Austin.

Every now and then in a letter I would mention that, "Now it's ten-thirty and I guess I'll go home to bed," or maybe that I'd say that, "I was here until eleven last night." They were long days, and as I look back on it I'm just real pleased to think that I tried that hard and learned that much.

There was still the problem of the move to a new location. I don't think I've talked about that. We decided we'd like to rent space in the Brown Building, but we had to go through the long red tape process of getting the priorities for whatever materials were needed. We started it the very minute we made the decision, kept after it, herded it through all the bureaus, finally got it--oh, let's see, I guess we got it about the middle of May. It was presumptuous of us to imagine we could get it built by June; I don't really

Johnson -- XVII -- 24

remember by when we got it built. But Jamie Odom was going to do it, and we could depend on him hurrying.

In fact, if it hadn't been for the help of friends on every front, we never would have made a go out of that station. We did have a lot of friends in Texas, in New York, everywhere, who were helpful to us, beginning with Ed Weisl, who knew everybody or knew, well, most everybody, and could help us on every front, in how to apply for a network--I think we may have tried NBC first. We wound up by making our big push to get CBS. We did get it.

G: He went up to New York, I guess, and met with Dick Berlin and maybe Bill Paley.

J: Bill Paley, and of course Ed Weisl. Bill Clark knew a lot of people who could help us with advertising, and he was chief counsel for a lot of--

G: What was the issue here? Did you have to represent a large enough market in order to attract network affiliation?

J: And be that far--and I do not know what the measurement here is, but the coverage of another CBS station could not be close enough to interfere with their sales. We had to choose a network that didn't have a contract with anybody close enough to us to serve them.

G: Was there anything about the programming of CBS or any other consideration that lead you to approach CBS? Or was it more geographic?

J: I'm sure it was geographic necessity, but it was a happy marriage, as we very soon did get to know Frank Stanton, the manager. He may not have been manager at that time, but it must not have been long before he came because he had a very long tenure.

Johnson -- XVII -- 25

G: Do you recall how you learned that CBS had agreed to affiliate?

J: The very time, I don't. Well, Ed Weisl actually opened so many doors to us, made so many people feel that this was a competent, able young couple who would fulfill their obligations in the community and do a good job whether it was in politics or in business.

G: What about Senator [Alvin] Wirtz? Did he help you a lot?

J: On the Texas scene, in many ways. We soon began to feel that to get higher power and to go night-time probably would not be possible for the duration. "The duration" was the term that was on everybody's lips in those days. I don't actually remember when we did. I know we kept after it and got it as soon as we could.

G: There again, I guess the increase in power was in part determined by whether or not it would interfere with another station in the same [vicinity]?

J: Yes, and I think very much getting the priorities for some kind of materials. Speaking of getting materials, I'm more and more amused to go back through that old correspondence and to see the costs of things, a matter of which I was very cognizant, as all my friends knew and still know.

(Interruption)

For instance, the big heavy equipment for which we have grown so used to paying enormous prices, I look back and see that when we ordered a Gates Series Deluxe Console, it was priced at eight hundred and thirty dollars, and that we ordered two microphones for fifty-five and an analyzer for seventy-five. I had to learn an awful lot about technical material. I learned it, got it down to some sense of understanding, and then promptly forgot it within a few months. Haven't missed it at all, but I surely did

Johnson -- XVII -- 26

know it for the time that I had to know it. We maybe were going to need a limited amplifier which would have cost three hundred and ninety. I think the total was going to be something like thirteen hundred and thirty dollars. I've already mentioned about two desks and seven chairs. Everything turns out to be more. We soon discovered that some of the employees had brought down their own desks, Jane Mabel Busfield[?], for instance. So gradually we had to replace borrowed things and broken down things.

And salaries. We'd been paying an announcer twenty dollars. He was called up by the army; we had to get a new one. We had to pay him twenty-five a week. We talked about the program director, John Hicks, that Harfield Weedon thought was excellent and he wanted to get. He was getting seventy-five a week. He thought with the great allure of living in Austin--and it does have allure--maybe we could get him for fifty. I think we finally got him for sixty-five a week. When you think of it in terms of today, it really rocks you. But the funny thing was, that I had a picnic for all of the employees and their wives--in one case a husband, Jane Mabel and her husband--no, two cases, Louise. We had two women. I had a picnic. I bought all the food for nineteen people, cooked it all myself out at Mrs. Johnson's house, cost twelve dollars. (Laughter) I think we had it out at the marvelous, cold, cold spring there at Austin that all of us old-timers love so much, Barton Springs.

G: Do you think that any of the employees resented the new pace that the new ownership brought?

J: Oh, yes, they resented it, and they let it be known. It was not abated, although I tried always to win them.

Johnson -- XVII -- 27

G: Did you ever sense that they resented the fact that a woman was now the boss?

J: No, I didn't ever feel that.

Out at this picnic, it was to celebrate the fact that Harfield Weedin had come to join us, and we just wanted to give everybody a feeling that this is a clean slate, a new start. We're going to forge ahead. We can all do it together. We recognize the amount of problems. And that was the sort of front we tried to present to the advertisers in town, and also to those people to whom we had owed bills and whom we finally got paid. Whether we did it by the first of June I'm not quite sure. Incidentally, have I said that Harfield came, I think, on May 17?

G: Do you recall anything about your education in the radio business, learning from other station owners about the business, going and traveling and talking with other station owners?

J: Or people who were knowledgeable about it. Oh, yes indeed. I went to Abilene. At any rate, I saw Bernard Hanks. Paul Bolton was helpful every step of the way.

G: How about Roy Hofheinz?

J: Roy Hofheinz came up, and yes, he was very helpful. You know, he was something of a genius in that field, as in so many, and it was . . .

G: I have two other names: Colonel Wakefield.

J: Yes.

G: Do you remember him?

J: Yes. Delightful man. I happened to have known him longer than Lyndon had, and he had some great ideas about [how] we must be the first ones to catch and interview any

Johnson -- XVII -- 28

celebrities that came to town. What with the war bond drives, and because it was the capital of the state, there was a trickle if not a stream of celebrities that came to Austin.

Then he suggested reading human interest stories over the radio.

G: Particularly, I think, from the weeklies, a lot of them from the county weekly rural.

J: Was that his idea or was that somebody else's? I can't remember.

G: Well, it was one that was suggested. Another one was Ted Taylor, who had a station, I guess, in Amarillo.

J: Yes, and in the Valley, too. Yes, we learned a lot from people who knew something. I think I went to Corpus [Christi], and probably stayed with Bob Jackson.

G: What sort of relationship did you have with your competition, say, KNOW? Was there any sort of understanding among the stations that they wouldn't hire away from each other or wouldn't--?

J: There came to be that as time went on. I do not remember during this period.

G: Who was the competition when you bought the station? Do you recall the other main stations?

J: KNOW, and I cannot recall any others. There must have been some others. I'm not even sure. KVET certainly came along later. It's proliferated now, of course, to about fourteen, but KNOW is all I remember.

Of course, there were just a lot of things to clean up. There was the ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers] contract and INS [International News Service] news service. We bought an expensive library, so called, that we got very little use out of it. I think it was called the Standard Library. We were

Johnson -- XVII -- 29

able to resolve that contract and ship back the library. Physically packing it up was one back-breaking job.

G: These were libraries of records?

J: Yes.

G: Did you yourself get involved with the programming? Did that interest you, what was broadcast on the air, for example? Or were you more interested in the business?

J: More interested in the business, probably. I should have been more interested in the programming. I really wanted it to serve the community and fill its needs and make money, and be respected, and deserve respect. For the actual programming, I can't remember having had a lot to do with it.

Oh, one little bit of programming that I did suggest was that we give a little vignette of news about a war hero, particularly a local one, from time to time. There was one lady from somewhere in our district who had six sons in the service. There were some kids in Bastrop carrying on a house-to-house campaign to collect grease and nylon hose. (Laughter)

Also, I must say that my thoughts were always--in the back of my mind was always the Tenth District and Lyndon's job. There was a lot of that, too. People would call me with messages to give to Lyndon about their husband who was trying to get in Officer Training School, or [they] had not heard from their son who had been missing in action for a long time. The more determined, and courteous, but persistent, congressman can hurry those things up. The answer may not always be yes, but you can get an answer.

G: So you really had sort of a district office there?

Johnson -- XVII -- 30

J: In a minor way. I had always had a district interest. Lyndon was interested in everything that happened. We never wrote more regularly to each other during a separation. I remember one time I got a seven-page single-spaced typewritten letter from him, full of about that many things to do. Always the tenor of it was setting deadlines to get things done, always a deadline so short that I couldn't meet it: "Get all of the bills paid up by X date. Get into the Brown Building by X date. Set a time when you think you can get out of the red."

He was big on staff meetings, too. We had several of them. He wanted us to show them--the people who worked for us--the financial statements to show them why it was so urgent to keep down expenses. The station had lost five thousand dollars the year before and fifteen hundred in January and fifteen hundred in February. So that's what we came into, and we needed to make all these improvements, and at the same time didn't have vast capital to outlay. So we had to call on them for long hours, hard work, a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of team spirit, and mostly they came up with it after we got the new group together. He would use very graphic expressions, for instance saying, "In order to raise a good crop, we must plant good seed corn." That is, we had to spend this money to pay the bills, get a good reputation, put in all the new equipment, move into a new building, get our ASCAP license going and a good news service and try to get on a network.

G: He seems to have learned a great deal in a hurry, too, about how stations should operate.

J: Oh, yes.

G: How do you think he assimilated all of that?

Johnson -- XVII -- 31

- J: As the modern expression is, he was a very fast study. He learned it all quick.
- G: Did you send him stuff to read or did he talk to experts up there?
- J: He talked to everybody he could that knew something about it, and yet we had lots of friends and so many friends in those days who were willing to be helpful. He also was always talking about such things as cutting down expenses on water and lights and telephone and insurance, briefly, until we could afford them.
- G: He was never wishy-washy in his suggestions, I noticed.
- J: And he always wanted us to have a budget and know what to expect our next month's expenses were. At the same time, he warned me several times to go on and load up, and spend the money, on certain things that might become impossible to get as the war went on. Maybe they wouldn't, but against the chance that they would, he wanted us to have a good in-depth supply of tubes and necessary equipment.

So March went into April, and April went into May, and there would be news from home, too, in Washington, all of the people that Lyndon had talked to about the business but other news, too. Gene Latimer came up and stayed with him at the house. There was nearly always somebody staying at our house, sometimes from a night to six months. [O. P.] Bobbitt was there with us for a while.

War was heating up between him and labor as he grew more and more determined to get his absenteeism bill passed. Meanwhile, John L. Lewis was threatening to call out the mine workers. I think finally he did in late April, and a whole lots of mines closed.

Lyndon also came down toward the end of April. We got together sometimes during those months of late March, April, and May.

Johnson -- XVII -- 32

G: He spoke at UT [the University of Texas], I guess, at a big bond sale rally. Do you remember that, on the main mall of the university?

J: Not that particular one, but I remember lots of bond rallies. They became part of our life and we would have such people as the movie actor named Taylor--?

G: Robert Taylor.

J: Robert Taylor. And his favorite one by all odds was Jack Dempsey. There was a young war hero from our own district who later became a congressman, Joe Kilgore, and the four of them did travel around over rural Central Texas in bond selling. I know you've heard me tell the tale about Jack Dempsey and the autographs, and it's something that taught Lyndon a lot about his own profession.

Lyndon was not all that absorbed in what was happening to me and my business life down home, but he was working hard at his committee on overseeing the deferment for civilian employees in the navy and all the ramifications of pushing through the absenteeism bill.

Then something else very interesting that had been going on and on, a thread through the years, which was one of our chief contacts with a lifelong friend, Virginia Durr. That was the anti-poll tax measure. It finally got through the House of Representatives and went to the Senate, in that spring.

I think maybe I did take a little breather and go over to see my daddy in East Texas sometime in May. Also there was something very nice, one of the first honors that happened to Lyndon. When he made a graduation speech at Southwestern University over at Georgetown, which was in his district, he received an honorary degree of law, and

Johnson -- XVII -- 33

that was big time.

G: What was his reaction to that?

J: He was excited and proud. And nicest of all, his old mentor and good friend, Dr. C. E. Evans, was there, who had been president of the school where he went. Good gracious, he may have still been president, although during our long friendship old age did cause him to retire. I don't remember whether he was retired or not in 1943.

Lyndon was always very active in trying to get ROTC units and everything like that for the schools in his district that wanted it, and I think he got one for Southwestern.

Then he was going to bring his committee and come down for a couple of weeks, and this was in early June, and visit Austin and Corpus [Christi] and Houston and Orange, to investigate, help streamline the internal organization of the Navy Department. Don Cook was going to come down. Don Cook also entered our life through Ed Weisl. I don't know whether I've mentioned it, but a long stream of able people that we knew and whose lives we shared stemmed from Ed Weisl. Don Cook was one of them. Cy Vance was another.

Then I was speaking earlier about Ernest Kurth of the Southland Paper Mill. The Texas Press Association paid a tribute to him, a pioneer in the newsprint industry, and Lyndon came down for that. Sometimes I must look up those letters from Ernest Kurth. We began without strong ties to the business community or much knowledge of those who peopled it, particularly those in high place. We came to know them, and in so many instances they were our lifelong friends, and Ernest Kurth was one of those.

Bill Deason got assigned to Washington. I think maybe he had been in New

Johnson -- XVII -- 34

Orleans before. He was going to work with Commander Bird, whom we called Dick Bird, although his name is H. V. It was just awfully nice to look forward to Bill back in Washington. Nobody was more of a continuing part of our lives than Jesse Kellam and Bill Deason.

Finally I got to go home--home being Washington, which I was just so anxious to see--sometime late in June, with some sense of satisfaction in the months' activities and in the hope for the station. Actually, it turned out to be August before we got in the black, and I remember very well the first amount of money we got was eighteen dollars in August, and I used it to go get a much-needed dental repair where the nerve had been killed in one of my front teeth, and it was all black, as you may have seen in some of the pictures, some of the campaign pictures. So I got me a new tooth put in.

G: I notice as an incidental, in one of those letters you wrote and discussed the possibility of hanging three pictures of the men that you admired most in different branches of government.

J: Oh, yes. We wanted something for the walls. We were getting this new furniture and having other furniture done over, and we wanted everything new and bright, but also cheap, or free if possible. You can always get a picture of the President, even if you just go buy one like the post office has. So I asked Lyndon to arrange to get us one of those, and if he didn't think it would be [in] bad taste, that I'd love to have one of the Speaker and of Bill Douglas as my favorite two from other branches of government.

C: Did you end up with the pictures?

J: I don't remember. I rather expect so. Then a good sure thing to get--and this was

Johnson -- XVII -- 35

probably free, because they probably had some extras--I went to see Max Starcke and got pictures of some of Lyndon's beloved achievements in his early years in Congress relating to the dams. I think we got one of Buchanan Dam and of the administration building and of some power lines going over the mountains with some beautiful yucca in bloom down there at the base of them.

And every now and then there would be a shadow of things to come. I think Lyndon went to the hospital for a checkup or something, and I wrote him very insistently that he must be very thorough about that checkup and not eat too much or drink too much and go back to getting some exercise, because nothing mattered except that. Particularly in light of the fact I'd just been to see an old and very highly esteemed friend of ours who was shrunken and pitiful-looking and had a stroke and who was really at the very end of life, and sort of, to some extent, neglected by his friends. Not for lack of love, but just because they were all so busy.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XVII]

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

CTJ Appendix A -- 2

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