

INTERVIEW XXVIII covering 1951-1952

DATE: March 15, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mrs. Johnson's apartment at KTBC, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

J: In our personal lives, one of the happy things that happened to us that fall were Gene and Helen Williams. We knew we needed more help. I forget exactly the circumstances. I guess Patsy [White] had come home with us to Texas with her husband to settle down and have her baby here. So we were interviewing folks and Gene and Helen responded to the ad and came walking in. I knew quickly I liked them. They seemed so solid and capable, Helen just a trifle more aggressive than Gene, but Gene with his big smile, he won you right away. Whatever he didn't know how to do, he was plumb willing to learn.

 So we reached an agreement, sitting in that big nice upstairs bedroom at 1901 Dillman, and it only ended when we left Washington in January of 1969, and actually, they came home with us for about six weeks to get us well settled. But life was too good for them in Washington, and so, with our blessing, they stayed on.

G: Did you set out to hire a couple, or did you just want to hire one and ended up getting two for the price of one?

J: We knew it would be nice to have a regular man to wait on the table, and to keep the yard, and to wax the floors and do the windows. So, yes, we would have liked to have

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 2

had a couple. We would have settled for a single if we had to.

G: Did you hire them or did the President?

J: I did it. I always did just about all the easier things and he did the hard ones, like income taxes and serious heavy trading, when the going got rough, as, for instance, in my daddy's difficult borrowing problems.

G: People have indicated that Helen was especially good at perceiving his moods and knowing how to react and if he had had a bad day.

J: She was. Helen was a completely dignified person, but she was also a very perceptive and understanding and soon became--as soon as she thought we deserved it--a loving person. They were a big asset to our life and fortunately got along all right, more or less, with Zephyr [Wright]. Because we couldn't have done without Zephyr either.

G: Did Helen do any cooking at all when Zephyr wasn't there?

J: Yes. There was a time when actually she did quite a good deal, and I do not remember the span of time, as I think I've told you, when Zephyr left on what turned out to be a brief marriage. I really do not remember when that was, but fortunately after about a year or two she was back with us. But for a while we got Helen to do some cooking. But Helen was not big on that, and so she politely declined after about six months or a year.

Life went on. Lots of football games and Jesse [Kellam] hosting. Our guests would be clients and agency heads from San Antonio and Dallas. There was a regular list, whom I knew well in those days. To take the children to the circus was an annual deal. The Halloween party--odd what people set the most store by, but as in my own childhood, the Halloween party was a big occasion. [It] always called for new and

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 3

different costumes, handmade, very inventive, and doing my best to put together something really memorable for the children.

A real personal indulgence of those times, perhaps I've mentioned it, was an old lady named Mrs. Nelson who gave marvelous massages. Liz Odom introduced me to her, and I spent many a comforting hour on her massage table right off of Blanco Street. [It] lasted for several years.

On the unhappy side of the ledger, I remember having lunch with Sugar Pickle, and she looked too sort of brave, too assuring that she was getting along all right. She had had cancer, been operated, felt like so many people feel that it was successful. And in that fall, things were beginning once again not to go well.

Things happened in regard to the Ranch. Have I told you that I took Jac Gubbels, who worked for the Highway Department, out there? A very artistic, imaginative, landscape man who did a lot to establish in the Highway Department the idea of propagating stands of wildflowers along the rights of way and making the highways aesthetic as well as functional, something I was later to become very attached to. But I knew about him, so I just asked him if he would go out there with me and walk and drive around and see where I thought the road should go after it crossed the dam. Lyndon was big on the dam; that was his project. We went out there and we walked through the grove of trees and laid out the road, a nice winding road.

G: This is, say, from the Ranch to the Birthplace?

J: From where you would cross the river on the dam, the low water dam. You do not now cross it; nobody does. The National Park Service has closed that entrance. But then you

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 4

climbed the hill a bit and at that time, as we laid it out, it would wind through the trees a bit until you reached the entrance to the house. The biggest flood in history, alas, changed our rather good plans.

Then I had my faithful Mr. Erb out and I think I've already told you about working on the trees, but we also made plans for the yard and got some St. Augustine grass.

G: Did you have to move in some dirt to get the--?

J: Yes, and we had to knock out--Aunt Frank had a--

G: Star-shaped--

J: --kind of a star-shaped flower bed and an old fountain, which no longer gave forth water, and sort of a crumbling sidewalk down to the front gate on the south side. We took out most of that and put in grass. We kept the old German-style picket fence, although it was very difficult to get any new pickets made. They were already kind of museum pieces. They're more lately come into fashion again, though.

Meanwhile, Lyndon, he never had any time in his life to mourn. He just picked right up from Senator [Alvin] Wirtz's death, and went right on with his round of speeches all over the state: Georgetown, San Marcos, and an address in Houston to the Independent Petroleum Association. And then a big important thing, the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner in Oklahoma City for Senator [Robert] Kerr and Senator [Mike] Monroney. But he did not get away from the lodestone, lodestar of the Ranch. He was getting Melvin Winters to look up possible people for him to have as a foreman. Melvin recommended a man named [Julius] Matus, and I went out to interview him. Then I feel

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 5

sure Lyndon also interviewed him, but anyhow. . . .

G: How did you know what to ask?

(Laughter)

J: Lordy mercy, I've tried to do more things that I didn't know how to do than nearly anybody. It was, in my case, pretty much just a sort of a judgment of character and temperament, and would they get along, and was he industrious. Lyndon knew a good many more things to ask about the care and tending of cattle.

Texas had just--every time we went up to Washington and came back, it looked like Texas had grown. We were now about seven million. The Speaker used to say, "Texas is just like a great big sixteen-year-old boy, just a-eating and a-growing."

The things that concerned us in those days were--the big bedrock of Lyndon's interest was national defense, and his subcommittee, the watchdog subcommittee, to try to root out and control waste, mismanagement, graft, corruption, to try to make the taxpayers' dollar go as far as it could. He was also fighting the battle for the depletion allowance of 27 ½ per cent. We were already besieged on all sides by states that didn't have oil wanting to lower that, saying it was a tax advantage that we shouldn't have. Phrases that you heard a lot were, "America is the arsenal of Democracy," and then, we in Texas would follow it right up by saying, "Texas is the arsenal of America with its oil and its chemical industries and synthetic industries." I think we had the only--was it lead or tin? Some kind of smelters and synthetic rubber.

G: On the watchdog committee, do you recall his ever earning the disfavor of the defense industries--?

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 6

J: I feel sure that he must have been anathema to them, because he was really always pointing out some instance where there had been over-purchasing, or just a failure to carefully consider cost. You see, one of the things that beset us all was the need for haste, haste, haste. Here we were, involved in trying to furnish our NATO allies with supplies and conduct the war in Korea, and everything needed to be done yesterday.

G: Do you recall any particular defense contractors that felt the heat of these investigations? Were there some that were adversaries then, or that he had an adversary relationship with at this point?

J: Not at the moment. I'm pretty sure I will.

We had an anniversary party in November. Let's see, how many years would we have been married then? From 1934--this was 1951, seventeen? Seventeen years. I think the Connallys, and Pickles, and Kellams, and Deasons, and Thornberrys, and Phinneys, and Max Brooks, and I don't know quite who all, were there.

There was a little girl that lived across the street, but I think I've told you about her, named Evelyn Coleman, who was Luci's best friend possibly at that time. Luci always had a great interest in going to church, and Sunday school, even at that young age. At this time she was only, what, four years old? But she began early just presenting herself at the door of the Colemans and asking if she could go to Sunday school with them. She was a searcher from an early time.

The tidelands was probably reaching the end of the battle, and as it turned out, we all know, a losing battle. But Lyndon was fighting for it right up until the end, and he had a very tart exchange with Truman on the subject. And who wouldn't, in Texas, be

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 7

entirely earnestly believing it was ours and we were being robbed by the rest of the United States? President Truman responded that as long as he was president, he intended to see that all the country got its share of the tidelands, and certainly Missouri.

(Laughter)

[A] big groundswell for Ike was sort of building up. He had been made commander by that time of the NATO forces in Europe, had he not? I think so.

G: When was he president at Columbia now?

J: I don't remember. But I remember he came and briefed Truman on what was going on in Europe, and that was--Sid Richardson was courting him, hoping for the Democratic Party. Many people were courting him, and it was unknown then whether he would really run at all or if so, which party he'd run on.

One of the things that Lyndon always loved doing was going back to San Marcos. This year he went to the homecoming in Evans Auditorium. I accompanied him. I remember one time, dear Lord, going there with him when I was the driver, and those hills were *straight* up and down and there was a brake fluid that you put in, which caused the brakes to work. The fluid all went out; the brakes wouldn't work. I remember realizing that there was something the matter with the brakes, and the brake fluid must all be gone. Well, we lived through the day, but we did zoom around some corners mighty fast, and I got the car parked and just insisted that we either had to start--somebody else had to drive some other vehicle.

G: Did he enjoy going back to San Marcos?

J: Oh, yes, he did, and he enjoyed paying any tribute to Dr. [Cecil] Evans that he could.

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 8

There was a lot of going backwards and forwards from Texas to Washington that fall. The work on the Preparedness Subcommittee was an all-absorbing thing. We had a *Newsweek* cover story on it with Lyndon's picture. Was this the first? I'm not sure. At any rate, we were just in late 1951 sort of being ushered into the world of being of more interest to the media nationally, and that may have been a first.

G: How did he respond to that, to suddenly being a national figure?

J: Well, he wasn't. I don't know that he was totally at ease with it, and I do not, I really do not think he sought it or batted on it, fed on it. He wanted to get done the things that he wanted to get done, and that was a tool. So I'm sure that it had its uses.

Stu Symington came down and spent the weekend in Texas with us, and it must have been at the Wesley West ranch because we didn't move into our own ranch until the following July. We have some hilarious pictures of Wesley and Stu and Lyndon--and I do believe that Paul Porter came down at the same time--of them all dressed up in cowboy outfits looking--they might as well have been dressed in clothes to go on a moon shot. I mean, they didn't look at home in them. The rest of them at least. Lyndon did. And besides, he didn't put on the curly, wooly chaps, hardly anybody [wore them], those belonged to West Texas and the brush country. Our folks never did have those. But they got a big kick out of setting on the fences of the corral and watching the work of the ranch go on. At any rate, we saw a lot of deer. I do not think our hunting began that early.

Oh, I do remember one of the particularly abrasive investigations concerned Lackland Air Force Base. There was lots of publicity, but Lyndon wanted to get a record

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 9

for fairness and in-depth study and not just for cutting up people, and he always strove for that.

G: Was that the one at Lackland where the--

J: Too many people were being--they were sort of warehousing officers and soldiers, so to speak, and crowding too many of them into sub-standard housing. He was investigating purchasing in all sorts of military affairs, even down to such things as several crates of dress gloves. And particularly was he concerned with getting people off of desk jobs where they were seeming to stack up, and out into actual combat areas, and making sure that they didn't get the higher pay, like you'd get for submarine duty and for flying, if you were indeed in a desk job. He asked a lot of impertinent questions, and some of the people who investigated for him went out and lived on the bases anonymously.

We had, of course, the great help at that time of Don Cook as counsel, although he was on the SEC [Securities Exchange Commission]. But he was not yet chairman, and it was not so compelling but what he could--I don't know whether he had the official title, but I know he was giving some help.

He [Lyndon] was very concerned about stockpiling of tin and making sure that synthetic rubber and nickel and all of those scarce materials were something he studied, and bored in on, and I don't even pretend to know the significance of what he did about them. But he wanted to make sure that the taxpayer got his dollar's worth, and that the defense effort moved forward with speed and efficiency. He was just a born enemy of mismanagement and slowness and inefficiency.

(Interruption)

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 10

--[Lyndon was reluctant to] leave Texas this time because of the growing attachment for the Ranch. He began buying some heifers, from Jay Taylor of Amarillo and Lawrence Hagy. Jay sent us a very sassy picture of some heifers knee-deep in beautiful grass and said, "This is what I have told those heifers they can expect when they get to the LBJ Ranch." It was really so pathetic, because Aunt Frank's land had been ill-used for years, and we were just going into the cycle of the dreadful drought of the fifties.

G: Did he have high hopes for a herd of cattle?

J: Oh, yes! It was a fascination and a real love of his.

G: Where do you think he acquired that interest?

J: I'm sure it was sort of bred in the bones, you know. Country man coming home.

G: His grandfather I guess had participated in some of the cattle drives.

J: Oh, yes.

G: Did he ever recall those stories that he had heard from his grandfather? Or do you think that there was an element of that?

J: No, in those days--those were the longhorn cattle that were driven up the Chisholm Trail, and this was a totally different picture. He had come to know some of the big ranchers who loved to brag about their bulls, and loved to give you the genealogy of their cattle, and swear that this one and that one was the best, and say that there was a certain new strain of grass that was going to be the salvation of the industry.

So, we went back up I think it was into January, early January, and the usual round of things began, all that series of stag things like the Alfalfa Club and my 81st Club, which took place this year at Mrs. Bob Kerr's house. We hosted a tea for the 82nd

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 11

Club and I was asked to pour, which is sort of a step up the ladder. In thinking back, when you begin to be the subject of a big story in *Newsweek*, or begin to [be] asked to sit at the celebrity table at these charity benefits, or to pour at the teas, that's sort of a funny little landmark. All of that began to happen in the spring of 1952.

I, in my own concern about the Ranch, began to call up moving companies and have them come out and give me estimates. I hardly ever did anything that was going to cost much money at all without getting two or more estimates. I know I got two this time, because we had a good deal of furniture that we could spare and that I wanted to upgrade. I thought that a good deal of the furniture that I got from the old lady--by now no further description is necessary--the brass bed, some of the tufted velvet slipper chairs and sofa, various things, would be better at the Ranch, and I was gradually, with much happiness, upgrading 4921 Thirtieth Place. So a big van took off sometime that spring. I was also busy with Genevieve Hendricks selecting wallpapers for the Ranch rooms.

G: Would this mean that you would not live at the Dillman Street home?

J: Well, it was an odd thing. We did not actually sell Dillman until the mid-fifties; I don't remember when, but I think it was 1955 or 1956. It could always be rented. Then there was an advantage in having a little *pied-à-terre* in the city of Austin.

January was the season for working on the income tax. I had kept all my checkbooks and made records of everything that was tax deductible year after year after year, and turned them over to Walter [Jenkins]. The thing that broke that rhythm was when we finally--somewhere in the vice presidency I began to slack off, and then I completely quit that in the presidency.

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 12

We were still going to Dr. Washington. The children at that time were--well, Luci was approaching five, and still the most gentle and docile and amiable of little girls. Lynda was eight and getting fat, when she was about to be eight.

Stu Symington left the government about that time, left the RFC [Reconstruction Finance Corporation] and Truman gave him the Distinguished Service Medal.

And back home, the sad final note came in Sugar's battle with cancer. She died on January 25. She was really one brave person, a most unlikely candidate for death.

Eisenhower's name began to show up on those early primaries that began to happen in New Hampshire and New Jersey and places like that. He finally came out with a statement that he would run on the Republican ticket if he heard the clear-cut call to political duty. Meanwhile, of course, Senator [Robert] Taft had been a *long-time* worker in the vineyard, was really seriously running, as was the perennial Harold Stassen.

When the time came for Truman's State of the Union Message, Lyndon was one of those appointed to escort him down the aisle. That is a piece of pageantry that repeated year after year for all of our twelve Senate years and all of our eight years watching it from the other side. Twenty years of it, it never ceased to lose its high drama and just the drumbeat. I wouldn't have missed them for anything.

Lyndon's work on his committee was reaching a crescendo. He was having hearings around over the country. [Estes] Kefauver and [John] Stennis and Senator [Lester] Hunt were among those who were sometimes dealing with him on those hearings. His main thrust continued to [be to] speed up the production of war materiel, but to make sure that the taxpayer got his dollar's worth, and that inefficiency and graft

Johnson -- XXVIII -- 13

were rooted out.

A sad scene often repeated in political life was the fading of that redoubtable figure, Tom Connally, from the scene. He had been a long-time national figure. He had ceased to have that firm Texas footing [that requires] returning many, many times, speaking all over, knowing the people he worked for. And it took its toll. There began to be editorials that he [had] forgotten Texas, and was thinking too much about Washington. Price Daniel announced against him. Actually Price acted like he was running more against Truman than he was against Tom Connally. In fact, *lots* of people were running against Truman at that time. The country was in a nit-picking, unhappy mood. All the ins were subject to criticism.

G: Particularly--wasn't the federal government regarded as an adversary?

J: Absolutely, yes. Senator Connally was accused of being out of touch with Texas. It was sad to see it happening, though we had never been close. Texas was very conservative. It was very much against Truman's civil rights policies and his tidelands policies. It was hard to hear a voice raised in his favor.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXVIII]

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