

INTERVIEW XXXIII covering 1953

DATE: September 4, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: LBJ Ranch, Stonewall, Texas

Tape 1 of 2

J: The spring of 1953 was a time when, on looking back through the lenses of the years, it seems that Lyndon's career in the Senate was on a steady ascendancy. He was minority leader opposite Senator [Robert] Taft, who had only a few months to go then, before illness took him from the scene.

Early April was always a time when I was moved to get out in the garden and finish up whatever I hadn't done in March about seeding for more grass and pruning and clipping. I kept Louis busy, and Gene, when I could get him.

Springs were always busy. There was the embassy tour for some charity in which I worked as a hostess, and that's one of the places where I first got the notion that if you accepted to be honorary chairman, you had to show. Because many is the time I've been disappointed, bringing my little group of constituents and getting there, promising them they were going to get to see the wife of a Supreme Court justice or maybe an ambassador's wife, or cabinet wife, sure enough the ladies weren't there, and I couldn't understand it for a long time. When I finally did, I decided--well, anyhow, there was rooted my aversion to giving my name to anything that I'm not also going to show up at,

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 2

buy tickets, work for.

We went to dinner at Senator [Robert] Kerr's and at Libby and Jim Rowe's. There were many devices for women to use their daytime hours, and one of them was called the Washington party, at which there was a celebrity table and a style show. And there was one with Luci in it. We could spend three hours in the middle of the day doing that. It hadn't dawned on--well, certainly not deeply rooted in the mores of the custom was the business of using your time for some public service thing. We sort of tipped our hats to charities and agencies to help in a cultural and medical way by buying a few tickets, but it certainly wasn't the all-consuming thing that it became in the decade or two later.

G: What do you think caused the change?

J: I don't know, but it's certainly a good change. But I tell you what I think maybe caused this period of time to be like it was. We had made such a strenuous effort from December 7, 1941, to the end of the war and on for several years. We'd done without so much, we'd worked so hard, we'd been so determined to win, that we were just happy to relax and just kind of live it up.

We'd go to dinner on the boat, the Secretary of Defense's boat, Jim Forrestal. We'd go to the annual cocktail party at the Clark Thompsons' on Massachusetts Avenue, usually given in honor of the Speaker or some prominent person. Commodore E. H. Perry came up from Austin to be our house guest, and I took him to all the sightseeing routine and lunch at the Senate Dining Room. That was my beat. We had a dinner at our house with Speaker [Sam] Rayburn and Wesley West and Sid Richardson, and Jesse Kellam, and Herman and George Brown, who brought Olga Weiss. And John Connally.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 3

Those were rich, good days of conversation and bantering exchange, and planning, and social events were very much a scene of conducting business, too.

Also in the early spring, in April, the Johnsons had a party, those non-party goers or givers. We really had a great big fancy, beautiful party at the Carlton Hotel for the two Texas members of [Dwight] Eisenhower's cabinet, Oveta Culp Hobby, who was secretary of HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], and Bob Anderson, who was secretary of the navy, both of whom had been our long-time friends. Lyndon was especially devoted to Oveta's husband, Governor [William] Hobby, because his father had been a great admirer and friend of Governor Hobby's.

G: Whose idea was it to have the party, do you recall?

J: Oh, it was his.

G: Was it really?

J: Yes. I'm sorry to say that I was much more responsive rather than initiative, and I don't recommend that one bit. I was late come to being a self-starter. But I was real proud of this party and I worked hard on it. It is--it *was* then, and I expect still is, one of the most elegant settings in Washington, the old Carlton Hotel. Oveta, absolutely elegant and cool, and her husband, older, sage, wry, witty. Lyndon had a great respect for his knowledge and character. And Bob Anderson, our friend from NYA [National Youth Administration] days, where he'd been on Lyndon's board of advisers, and his pretty, perky little wife. Everybody in town was there, probably a quorum of the Senate, Senators [Estes] Kefauver and Kerr with their wives, Dick Russell of course. Pretty little perky Nancy, redheaded and just so lively, interested in art. She departed from this scene

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 4

much too young.

G: This was who, Nancy--?

J: Nancy Kefauver. And Senator Tom Connally, our senior senator, and the perennial Lucile Connally, who was a beauty all her life, married to two senators in the course of life. I don't know of any other woman who has been. And of course one of the youngest and prettiest--they were from the House then--B. A. Bentsen and Lloyd. And Sid Richardson came up for that, and the Vice President, Mr. [Richard] Nixon, with Pat dropped by to pay his respects to his President's Cabinet members. In fact, we had a large quota of Republicans there: the Speaker, Joe Martin--it was a brief interlude when he was speaker; we always got along with him fine; so did the Speaker. We never ceased to call Mr. Rayburn the Speaker--but Speaker Joe Martin. The Joe McCarthys were there. How long was this before his departure from the scene? Was he--?

G: Well, 1954 I guess was the critical year. The censure came in late 1954.

J: It did?

G: December, I think.

J: And, of course, our dear friends, the Tom Clarks.

Lyndon went to a dinner at the White House--no, it was a luncheon--for Dr. [Konrad] Adenauer, chancellor of Germany. As I look back on the picture of them poised on the front steps of the White House, with Eisenhower so genial and warm and young and strong, there's an aura of sadness in hindsight as one looks at it. There's Lyndon, deferentially a few steps behind. Vice President Nixon. Lucius Clay. A very small group of the leadership, only about twenty people.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 5

April was a time of many meetings. The newspaper people always came for the ASNE [American Society of Newspaper Editors], to Washington, and then went on up to New York. Lyndon usually attended both things, quite often with Johnny Runyon and the *Dallas Times Herald* people. The American Legion had a big dinner.

G: Did you go to that event in New York with him, the newspaper--?

J: I often did, and I think that year.

The circus always came to town in the spring, and in the fifties and sixties I was a constant visitor, and never a bored one, taking my own children in the fifties, and in the White House years, taking the--or rather sitting with, and trying to share some of the fun of it with a bunch of underprivileged children who were given tickets by a very philanthropic-minded family in Washington.

We had our Senate Ladies luncheon for Mrs. Eisenhower. It was a year of tight waists, and full skirts, and mid-calf hemlines, and pancake hats, and the good black basic dress and gloves, gloves, gloves. It was quite a tyranny to always have a new hat for every important occasion. We have escaped from lots in the days since then.

G: Did Mamie Eisenhower influence the styles much, do you think?

J: No. Well, I don't know. She loved pink, and everybody knew that, and they always had pink decorations when she was going to be the guest of honor at a party. But no, I don't think she wished to. And one of the fun times was when she appeared at a party and somebody else had on the identical dress. She didn't seem to mind, and everybody laughed, and it was just sort of pleasant.

One time her husband came to the Senate Ladies luncheon for her when she was

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 6

ill. A most obliging, genial man. But in spite of that, there were some things that Lyndon, as the minority leader, opposite him and opposite Taft, did [to] fulfill his role as carrying the banner for the Democrats. I remember he made a speech calling the Republican Party "one of many faces." When you took a look at it you didn't know whether you were looking at the Republican Party of President Eisenhower, or the Republican Party of Senator Taft, or the Republican Party of Senator [Wayne] Morse, or the Republican Party of Senator McCarthy. He was saying it makes bipartisanship difficult. Nevertheless, bipartisanship was the aim and the guideline of his years opposite Eisenhower.

G: Do you think that he felt that the Republicans were consulting him enough on foreign policy?

J: I have no recollection of him thinking that he was left out. I think he was very much on top of it and that Eisenhower and the top echelon were needing him enough and valuing him enough, and his reaction to them was quite a patriotic one of, "If it's good for the country, I won't be against you."

G: Some have suggested that by 1953, particularly now that Mrs. Hobby was in and Bob Anderson was in, and you had people like Bryce Harlow and a number of other staff people at the White House that he had known for years, that now he had perhaps better sources within the White House than a lot of the Republicans did.

J: I know he did not feel excluded and he liked those years. Yes, he knew his way around the town. There was a network of friends in just about every place you needed to do business.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 7

G: Did he use these channels in the White House? Do you recall any specifics here?

J: I can't recall specifics, but I feel sure that he would use them; if there was something he needed to get done, and that was the route to take, he'd take it.

One of the things he loved to do was to be on the board of trustees of Scott & White, and he usually managed to get there for the meetings. The Atomic Energy Committee took up some of his time and his excitement. Of course, the Gridiron Dinner took place in the early spring, sometime in April I think, and Lyndon was a speaker representing the Democratic Party opposite Eisenhower. [There were] the usual series of receptions, and on Sunday afternoon, the *women* could go. That was the year they sang a song about Dick Russell, "Do not forsake me, oh, Dick Russell." It's to the tune of "High Noon," and it's been ringing in my ears for three decades. (Laughter) It was the Democratic Party that was appealing to Dick Russell not to forsake them.

Lyndon got to go to a lot of exciting things that I didn't. The business of the Senate would bring in its tow a lot of exciting social encounters, such as Senator [Leverett] Saltonstall's luncheon for Field Marshal [Bernard] Montgomery, a small luncheon in a small office. Lyndon was there, and I was intrigued that he got to have that look at the world.

G: What did he say about it? Do you recall what his reaction was?

J: No, I don't, except that he always soaked up--he was a quick study, a good learner, and I'm sure he didn't let those occasions go by him without leaving an impression.

There was sort of an interesting development in the Congress going on then. They were having hearings on whether there ought to be a TV channel for educational

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 8

programs. I suppose that was probably the first evidence that some day there was going to be public television. How long did that take? Somewhere in Lyndon's time, I know, and I think it was part of his program, public television. Did we bring that onto the scene?

G: I don't know exactly when it was inaugurated.

J: And of course, as sure as spring came, baseball came, and the President went out and tossed out the first ball. It was always a great picture opportunity, and Lyndon went right with him in as visible--close by.

And to me one of the most *delicious* things that happened to us was to go down to the Kentucky Derby, the one and only time I've ever been down there. We went on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad--wait a minute; is that the only time? No, because--well, I don't remember, except that it was glamorous, and it was through *beautiful* country.

G: Did you go with Earle Clements?

J: I don't remember Earle's being there. I know he was. I remember going to lovely parties, one of the nicest ones of which was at the home of the publisher of the Louisville paper. Gosh, how names do elude me now. A very handsome, now white-haired man, very patrician, was with me on the White House Fellows Board.

G: Did other senators make that trip?

J: Oh, yes. I'm sure there was a clutch of them along.

Lyndon was president of the Texas State Society that year, and I had President and Mrs. Eisenhower to the San Jacinto Day breakfast and gave them a gold membership card for President Eisenhower's very brief sojourn as an infant in Texas. He was born

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 9

there and stayed two months, I think.

The senators that Lyndon was working with mostly in those days were Senator [Walter] George of course, and [Mike] Mansfield, and [Stuart] Symington, and Dick Russell, Clements, and young Russell Long.

We went down that spring. I went to see my daddy at Karnack for a while, for a few days, and then Lyndon came down and went to Longview, made an industrial tour, Eastman, and LeTourneau [Technical Institute], had lunch at Carl Estes' house. Gene [Boehringer Lasseter] was there. And it was a very interesting comparison between the city of Marshall, just about twenty-odd miles up the road, which has always been content with itself--in fact it looks backward more than forward--and Longview, which had the catalyst of Carl Estes. He was always trying to make things happen, to bring in industry, to push it forward. I may have told you this story, but I like it. He said, "I'm just like an old farmer that's got just one daughter, and she's buck-toothed and freckle-faced, but I'm going to dress her up and get her educated. I'm going to make something out of her." And that's the way he felt about the community of Longview. And to a great extent he did.

Lyndon started doing a TV show that spring and shipping it to Texas, because we had just gone on the air ourselves at Thanksgiving of 1952. Mrs. Hobby was one of his first guests. He himself, one of the things he was saying over and over was warning against the defense cuts and against the--complacency must not take over; the Communists are sworn enemies of freedom. That was a thread that went through all of his talking and thinking.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 10

(Interruption)

In May our Senate ladies took one of the most memorable trips. We went, on the train, to Delaware to Winterthur. Esther Frear, whose husband was senator from Delaware--he was one of the most genial, obliging people I've ever known; both of them were--arranged the trip, and a whole lot of friends, everybody who wanted to pay the price of a train ticket, and it was such fun to ride up on the train. Then we were taken through that marvelous collection of early American china, furniture, art works with, fabulously enough, the company of Mr. Harry duPont himself. I remember Sara Clements was along, and Gladys Johnston, Ivo--no, Coy Stennis, Ivo [Sparkman] may have been. And Grace Kerr, Mary Ellen Monroney, Mrs. [Edna] McFarland, Elizabeth Hennings, Maureen Mansfield. We all went around with our eyes out on stems, listening to the story of two centuries of American good living, and nobody in the world more qualified to talk about it than Harry duPont. Little did I know that later on he was going to figure in my life and not from a distance, which it certainly was this time. Then we all lined up on the steps down into the garden, all of the Senate ladies, I guess between thirty and forty of us, and had our picture made. Then we were his guests for lunch. We sat out on the terrace. The dogwood was blooming and the trees were lovely. It was just a fabulous high point in the spring for me.

Lyndon had to go to Texas for two funerals. One of them was Wesley West's mother. Wesley had come to mean a lot to him. Lyndon always had a feeling for the older members of a family, a sort of a Chinese reverence for age. If your mother died, he knew that was an important time in your life and he wanted to be with Wesley. Then he

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 11

went on up for an absolutely heart-rending funeral. Mary Rather's brother and sister-in-law were killed in a tornado that went through Waco, Texas. It seems Waco is kind of on a strange dividing line for the weather. There's always some tornado, storm, natural disaster, weather-related, happening in Waco. They were out on their first little celebration trip after the birth of a child. Six weeks ago the baby was born. They were riding some place. Their car was simply picked up and hurled and dashed around, and they both were killed on the spot. Lyndon went down to the funeral.

G: Did he find out about that in Washington or was he already in Texas?

J: No. I think he left to attend all three of them, when he would have gone to any one. And Mary had written us a sad note. She flew down immediately, of course, and the funeral was two or three days later. She had already written us a sad note saying that she would have to leave working for us and stay there and tend to the children.

G: I want to ask how her departure affected the staff, because she had been, I guess, his secretary for a good while.

J: She was always the one who kept the lists, knew all the *jefes* in every community and all of his best friends. It was sort of a loving family joke that Mary would always tell you all about them maybe in more detail than you wanted to hear, taking up minutes instead of seconds. She wrote beautiful letters. She was close to us personally, socially, and in a business way; you could trust her with anything. It was just a great stab in the heart to lose her, but of course it was for something that you couldn't try to argue at all. As it turned out, she was to return to us a little later.

We went once more to Rosemont to Senator [Harry] Byrd's, to his annual May

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 12

Sunday lunch, fried chicken and crab meat. I shall always remember him as he was on those days, a most marvelous host, always standing on the front porch to greet us. How he got there for everybody, I don't know. We had mint juleps out on the front porch looking out on a broad sweep of Virginia apple orchards, his as far as the eye could see, and in the distance the rising hills of the Blue Ridge. A beautiful old house, Rosemont, and as you went through the rooms you certainly knew the life of the owners, because it was full of family pictures and furniture that you just knew had come from great grandmother this and great aunt and uncle that. Some of his three, or was it four, sons would be there. He'd only had one daughter. She had died, tragically, not too long before we began going to Rosemont. And Mrs. Byrd was sometimes there, more often not. She had health problems. But it was full of tradition, full of country neighbors, full of your fellow senators. He probably got around to most of us, although I think he probably would not have invited anybody unless he liked them. And a sprinkling of newspaper people. Always the Bill Whites were there. Our span of going to see him probably covered-- well, almost every year from 1949 to 1961, and then we went once, Lyndon did, as president.

G: Did he and Byrd have a good relationship?

J: Yes, a marvelous respectful relationship. Lyndon just admired him tremendously. He knew they would never come down on the same side of many things, which didn't keep him from--at least on our side it was a wonderful relation and I think I may say so safely from the Senator's.

G: The fact that he was more conservative didn't make him antagonistic?

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 13

J: Not at all. We were both workers in the same vineyard. There were lots of points where we met. He was a great proponent of the national parks. The Blue Ridge Mountain Skyline Drive probably wouldn't have been there except for him. A bunch of his friends used to give every year a small log cabin as a birthday salute to him placed on the Appalachian Trail, a spot where walkers could stop if they found themselves on the trail too late and they could spend the night or they could stop in a storm or just get out of the weather. They called them Byrd houses.

G: Of course he was quite senior. I guess he had been there a good twenty years in the Senate.

J: Yes.

G: Chairman of the Finance Committee. But I'm wondering if by this time there were younger members who actually ran the committee, people like Kerr.

J: I don't know. Senator Kerr had a great ability to run just about everything he touched. He also sometimes made people mad when he didn't really have to. Because I cared so much about him, it bothered me.

G: Well, do you think that Byrd was still the power on the committee?

J: I think he was still the power. The Senate is a very traditional body. He was the old *jefe*, in the language of the Southwest. He wore "ice cream suits" we called them, for no particular reason, sort of white Palm Beach, all summer long. Probably he was already into them by May.

Something about his house that I love and I drove by it not many years ago to see if it was still there. There's a sign right down by the fence, the gate--rather it's an

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 14

opening, there's no real gate there--where you ride into his grounds, and it says, "Welcome." Now, it may say something like, "Drive in." Anyhow, it's clear that he doesn't mind the public, or he didn't in that decade, driving in. It was a circular driveway, probably a couple of blocks long, lined with dogwoods and beautiful typical Virginia plantings. You approached what I expect was the back side of the house, because the front side was a broad veranda that looked out onto the orchards and mountains.

Lyndon was involved in his quota of political things. He went down to Jackson, Mississippi, for a Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner.

G: Did you go with him?

J: No, hardly ever. I didn't go to any of those if I could stay home without--

G: This one is regarded as being one of the best ones.

J: Really?

G: Yes. It really got a lot of play in the press. He was evidently in rare form. Do you recall him talking about it?

J: No. About the only one that I can remember him talking about very much--and I wish I could remember the details of this because he told the most marvelous story about it. But it went something like this: the senator from Missouri--and it wasn't Symington, some old-time senator, I don't even remember the span of time--invited him down there to dedicate a building. He kept on getting the word from *everybody* that he had to go, all kinds of fellow senators and good friends that were mutual acquaintances of the two. He just kept on resisting, saying "I'm just so busy I just don't see how I can." Finally, he went. And when he got down there, two things happened: first, the senator that had

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 15

urged him to come didn't show. And second, the hotel that he was in caught fire.

(Laughter) He used to make a marvelous story out of it.

And the Federated Women's Clubs paid a visit to Washington, and we had a picture on the Capitol steps with them and hosted a coffee. That was the one that I think was in the old Supreme Court chambers, which is one of the noblest rooms, one of the most filled-with-history rooms in that vast Capitol, to my thinking. I just loved it. I was very proud to host anything there. It seems to me--was Marietta Brooks?--she is a natural clubwoman and I feel sure she must have been one of the motive forces in getting us to do that.

And there were some other visitors that we had pictures with on the Capitol steps that year. The graduating class from several schools drove up, from Sealy and Bowie and from Karnack. Karnack was a pretty small graduating class, but of course how inevitable that we would get together. So we hosted an ice cream and cake party for them and had our picture made. They had driven up all the way in the school bus, a sizeable more number of girls than of boys, and several chaperones and the high school superintendent. It had a warm, nostalgic, pleasant feeling and it makes you feel good to do something for folks and it sure did make me feel good to have them there.

G: How many graduates were there?

J: I think there were just about twenty. Now there may well have been more graduates, but even traveling in the school bus took a little money, and Karnack was a poor area, so I'm sure not everybody came.

Back home in Texas it was awfully dry and hot. I know when we finally got

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 16

home, we found the ground just parched, with big cracks in it. The Ranch looked sad.

Lyndon had appealed to Eisenhower to make this part of Texas, and indeed a good chunk of the Southwest, a disaster area because of the drought.

G: He also, I think, met with Walter Prescott Webb, who was doing some research and writing on this.

J: Yes. He worked for us on a water report, a sort of an inventory of available sources of water in Texas and how you ought to manage it, parcel it out, add to it. It was always one of Lyndon's major interests. I do not remember the report itself. Is it available anywhere? Or do you think it had any--

G: Yes, it is. I believe it is, yes.

J: --did it have any clout?

G: I don't know. Were there any ideas in particular that LBJ supported for alleviating the problem?

J: Not that I know. It was just that he recognized that it was a problem early on and at a time when it was a rather pioneering thing to be talking about water. My gosh, water is free; the Lord sends that. There's an inexhaustible supply of it. Well, the last part of that's not true, and Lyndon early began to think that. Of course, in our own tiny little sphere, the first thing we had done at the Ranch was to dam up the river, and he used to liken it to putting a tub in the back yard to catch the rainfall. Whatever you could get, you kept.

Our 81st Club was still functioning, although it had shrunk since 1949. Lou Engel and Muriel Humphrey and Eloise Thornberry and B. A. Bentsen and Mrs. [Hazel] Steed

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 17

of Oklahoma, Mrs. [Barbara] Bolling, and Mrs. [Emily] Douglas, and Betty Ford, that were staunch members. There were about twenty-one of us. We'd get together two or three times during a session for lunch. If we went to New York for something, like for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, my favorite way to go was, once more, on the train. You could get on at ten-thirty, get right into your Pullman berth, and arrive the next morning. They'd sidetrack the car and you didn't have to get off until a reasonable hour.

During the fifties about this time, we would go out every spring to George Vournas' annual Greek party. He was a neighbor of Drew Pearson, had a lovely farm out right close to Drew's, used to have a roast lamb and those marvelous little pastries that were so thin and had honey cooked into them.

Luci was still Lucy, L-U-C-Y. She was just beginning to take field trips. Lynda at some point--I was trying to get them both interested first in Brownies, then in Girl Scouts. Lynda did it to some degree, not with the greatest enthusiasm. Actually this school that they went to, Ben Murch, was in a part of Washington that was almost totally Jewish, and they used to tell me, but mostly they speak of it in retrospect, as they were the minority, and nearly everybody in the class would be Jewish except a tiny sprinkling of foreigners from the embassies, somewhere in the diplomatic corps. Alas, they did not make many friends, certainly no desire of theirs, because Lynda Bird particularly needed friends.

Tape 2 of 2

J: I spent a lot of time chauffeuring Lynda to visit a few friends, one, the daughter of

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 18

Dorothy Nichols, out in Alexandria, just because she needed companionship and alas, she didn't find much of it at Ben Murch School.

G: Do you think the fact that they were spending part of the year in Texas and part of it [in Washington]--?

J: Absolutely. That had a lot to do with it. You know, they were always the late comers, and all the little cliques and organizations and groups had gotten together. But we were outsiders.

G: At one point you got a governess for Luci, didn't you?

J: Well, at one point Lyndon was determined that I should, and in fact he had the very lady in mind. He imported her while I sort of stood back. I'm afraid I didn't give it a very good chance, thinking that it would never work.

G: Luci didn't give it much of a chance either.

J: No.

G: Tell me about that. When did it--?

J: I don't remember exactly what year it was, but it was probably right about here. This lady needed a job. She was the mother of a starlet who had helped us out in our campaign of 1948, darling young girl with whom we kept in touch through the years. [Nancy Gates?] And she and her husband have been good to the Library. Nothing at all the matter with the lady, except you have to let people think they're doing it for themselves. If you do something for them and just outline it to them, it doesn't always work.

G: How long did that experiment go?

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 19

J: I think not more than two or three months, and I'm afraid Zephyr [Wright] and Helen [Williams] and all of us all had our share of blame for it.

The tidelands bill was finally passed and, I think, for the last time that spring.

G: In April of that year he came out endorsing legislation that would allow tax deductions for working mothers to pay for maids and childcare.

J: Yes. He was always interested in such things as daycare centers, careers for women, rather early on before they became grist for everybody's mill. He really had a lot of respect for the working abilities of women, and, later on, a lot of frustration when he needed to hire them in White House days. In spite of all the big talk, you could offer and offer and search and search before you could get one that would take it, that is, a qualified one that would take the job.

G: Was the principal reason family?

J: Yes, and the husband not wanting to move. That was it.

Lyndon was a very heavy smoker all during this period. I am sure that it was the pressure of being minority leader and facing up to the formidable presence of Taft. It was about this time that it became evident that Taft was going downhill. I remember passing him in the hall and wanting just terribly to ask him for his autograph for the constituent that I had in tow that day, somebody with small children, and they were just looking at him big-eyed, but I just didn't have the heart because he looked too tired and ill.

It was a time when men wore the double-breasted suits and the wide shoulders and narrow ties, but the Texans still came to town in their Stetsons and their boots. They

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 20

all had the close-cut hair. And Lyndon was always, in spite of his increasing weight, buoyant, fast moving, just a dynamo. Opposite him the Republicans chose, when Taft did get out, [William] Knowland, senator from California, very nice man but sort of ponderous and not an agile mover in legislative maneuvering.

G: Someone once suggested that Knowland thinks like he walks, and he walks like he thinks, just straight ahead.

J: We saw a lot of Senator Theodore Francis Green, a sort of elfin character with a very patrician background in his home state of Rhode Island I think it is, in those days. And of course of Russell Long, and of all the southern senators with whom Lyndon did have a base, a sort of an understanding, and very especially with Senators Kerr, and [Clinton] Anderson, and Clements, and [George] Smathers, and Symington, to some extent of Senator [Thomas] Hennings and [Albert] Gore and [Styles] Bridges on the other side. In fact the Bridges, I think I may have mentioned this before, came down to the Ranch to visit us. They were one of our earliest visitors, either this year or in 1952.

(Interruption)

G: I wanted to ask you about the Texas State Society in June of that year when Gene Autry boosted LBJ for president.

J: You know, it's funny, I remember that Texas State Society barbecue in great detail, but I don't know that I actually remember him boosting him for president, because that would have rolled right off like water off a duck's back as just a nice compliment. But the big achievement was getting Gene Autry to come to entertain, because he was still a big figure and he was truly our old friend and a very nice man. It was a huge barbecue.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 21

Everybody had on ridiculous western costumes. All the Texas folks turned out *en masse*.

Gene Autry arrived with his big hat and big smile and lots of joking about the time that he had exhausted himself trying to get Lyndon elected and sang "Back in the Saddle Again." We had red-checked tablecloths and long receiving lines and about a thousand guests. Lyndon was president of the Texas State Society, and we had, I remember, a silly--what do you call it?--cheesecake picture of about five of us women, Scooter Miller and I, and Jean Daniel--imagine!--were three of them, sort of holding up our legs in a dance. We had on stockings, given to us by some firm, that had the map of Texas, a little velvet map of Texas with the capital marked with a tiny rhinestone. The aura of the thing was just a--it was great.

(Interruption)

--I went to the British Embassy for a celebration of the coronation of Elizabeth II, and picked up Hubert Humphrey and Muriel, always glad to be able to have somebody to go with because Lyndon just didn't put things like that at the top of his list of duties, or fun things either. It was great fun, I thought. It took place in a beautiful garden out behind the embassy itself. We always had strawberries as large as a baby's fist and marvelous Devon cream that had been flown over especially for the occasion. You saw everybody you knew. It was very festive and elegant, and, of course, for the coronation, this one was done up in fine order.

President Truman came back to town, to visit, and Senator [Scott] Lucas had a stag dinner for him, and I got to go to a luncheon given for Bess and was mightily impressed at getting invited, just loved it.

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 22

G: Did you form any impressions of post-presidency then from seeing President Truman at that or Mrs. Truman?

J: Just sort of a satisfied feeling that he had weathered it well. He entered it with a sort of nationwide "oh, my God" feeling, if not denigration, at least uncertainty. And then he was very unpopular in Texas for a sizeable span of time, and then he made his way into the hearts of the folks, and we all remember how he got elected in 1948, wasn't it, the same year we did, to the Senate. So one had to feel that he had survived all of this in fine shape. Mrs. Truman, of course, was utterly unaffected by it.

Lyndon was on the Texas State Network on which he made a talk. I think it was weekly; it certainly was every now and then. He talked about increased interest rates with Congressman Wright Patman, who had been embattled against the bankers from the year one, and who was my congressman from my East Texas raising. An absolute marvelous man with that sort of twinkling eye, putting fingers together like this, a face [that] just looked like it never had anything on it except good will and sort of a country bumpkin kindness, which hid one of the sharpest minds in the Congress. He could really master the knowledge of banking and finances, and a whole lot of people lived in terror of him. He was always our very dear friend. A most remarkable series of contrasts, and I think it's marvelous that a district like deep East Texas could have had him for so long working for them. He was sort of the best of us, that is, of us very plain people.

G: He had served with the President's father in the--

J: In the House of Representatives in Texas, yes.

G: Had they been allies?

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 23

J: They had been very good friends.

I'd like to go back and see what they said in that talk about the interest rate.

Lyndon was, like Wright, but not quite so belligerent, always against high interest rates.

I don't know how he would have gotten through the last few years, if he were alive today.

And I wonder what the interest was then. I dare say it wasn't very high at all

A lot of visitors came to town. Mayor Reese Lockett from Brenham. You know, he was the cowboy mayor, worked at both of them, did both of them real well. And Mrs. Ed Cape and Max Starcke of the electric co-ops. Our canasta games with supper continued with the Thornberrys and Jenkins, Mary Rather taking over sometime. Clark Clifford had some wonderful dinners in his backyard, one of them honoring Frank Pace and another one for Chief Justice [Fred] Vinson, at which we were told quietly that President Truman might be present. And as a change in our life, we would sometimes go to the Mexican Embassy. I'm trying to remember whether [Antonio] Carrillo Flores was ambassador at that time, or maybe it was later. At any rate, it was the Mexican Embassy which was the first one that Lyndon expressed any willingness to go.

Every time Sid Richardson came to town, we would try to have him out for dinner. I remember one time at that old, and very ordinary, house of ours on 30th Place Northwest, we had the big screened back porch that looked right down onto the garden, to the backyard it was. It actually had a vegetable garden left over from the war and some pretty nice flowers. Right down from that there was a small terrace with a wrought iron railing and a big round table, and on summer nights I would spread the cloth there and we would have things like black-eyed peas and turnip greens from our own garden,

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 24

and cornbread. The Speaker always liked that menu better than any. Sid Richardson would seem to enjoy it.

Lyndon often had to stop by several places before he would get home. There were all kinds of conventions and gatherings would come to town and try to get their congressman, and, of course, the congressional leaders. Lyndon had a marvelous way of dropping into them, working the crowd, so to speak, from front to back, howdying and shaking and getting the good will of the group for having gone. Possibly before he'd get home he would have attended two of these, or even more. And I had many chances to get to talk to some mighty interesting guests before he would get there. I must say, he and the guests would take over after that, and they were heavily slanted toward men, because there were a lot of men who would come to town on important business and not bring their wives. So we often sat down to a group where I was the only woman or maybe eight and just two women, or three.

Kay Graham had a party honoring Oveta Hobby. Kay and Phil were always-- Lyndon cared about them and enjoyed them, and in spite of the things that--oh, I'm sure it must have been later, though, because I don't know that he was all that important yet. But whatever the [Washington] *Post* may have said about him, it did not keep him from having an affectionate feeling toward them, and toward Kay, later on when Phil was gone. I think actually the press was beginning to notice Lyndon quite a bit. Was there a cover of *Time* during this period?

G: That's right. I think it was in May or June.

J: Can you think of anything else you want to ask me? I think I have about exhausted my

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 25

memories of that spring.

G: I have some questions--well, most of mine pertain to the summer. There is one question, and that is there was a lot of speculation that Allan Shivers was going to run against LBJ.

J: Yes, indeed there was, and a lot of sort of effort to pit us against each other and to get us into a fight, which Lyndon was reluctant to do because he liked Allan. Although, later on we did come to juggernauts head on, but I think that was after 1954, wasn't it?

G: 1956.

J: 1956.

G: But did he think that Shivers was going to run against him in 1954?

J: I don't think he did. And I think he was also--as I recall he spent a sizeable part of the summer, but it must have been after June, covering Texas in preparation for the race of 1954, to try to head off there being much of a race. And of course that was--Taft announced that he was stepping down. When was that? Was that May or June?

G: I believe it was June that he announced he was stepping down. Yes, June the ninth.

J: Yes. Occasionally Lyndon would be asked to a small meeting with [John Foster] Dulles, and sometimes I would sit by him at a White House dinner. I remember thinking he looked--goodness, the years all drift together. I remember, certainly at one period of that time, I thought he looked like a very ill man.

The Secretary of Agriculture was Ezra Taft Benson, wasn't he?

G: Yes.

J: I remember sitting next to him a time or two at the White House on such occasions. I gather that he was no more of a partygoer than we were, so it didn't often happen. He

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 26

would always decline anything alcoholic. Even when it came to coffee, no. He'd make it very clear to the waiters that they were not to offer him those things anymore. (Laughter)

The Rosenbergs were executed round about then. It dominated the papers for quite some while. Weren't there some other spy trials going on, too? I remember driving by one of the buildings where a trial was being held, and there was an atmosphere, sort of an aura, of excitement and the pack in motion that was somehow unpleasant.

Oh, among our visitors of course we always had a bunch of REA [Rural Electrification Administration] folks, Babe Smith and Martin Hylltin and A. W. Moursund. They'd come up to town at least once every spring. John Connally was in and out quite a lot. We'd see something of Eliot Janeway, and Liz and Les [Carpenter], a dinner at our house or at theirs. I remember RCA gave a luncheon at the Wardman Park to view color TV. That was a big excitement.

G: Was that the first time you saw it?

J: I think that's the first time I had seen color TV. Of course, actually, I had first seen TV, that I can remember, on a trip to New York in August of 1941. But it took us, with the interruption of the war, till Thanksgiving of 1952 to get on the air with our TV station, although we had very early on applied for a license, and got the license. But we couldn't get the material.

I think this was one of the many periods of Sam Houston's life that was troubled. I believe he was in the Phipps Clinic in Baltimore, and it was my family obligation to go over there. I think I took him, and I think I brought him home, and I know I went to visit him. It was always hard, and I was aware that it was hard for him, although we, the

Johnson -- XXXIII -- 27

general public and members of families of people that have problems with alcoholism, have surely come a long way in our education, and it's been good for us, and it's been good for the patients, because we're more understanding now than I think we were in general then. Mostly, we were baffled, and hurt, and thinking every time, "Well, this is going to fix it; this is going to make it all right." And then he would be for a while, and [then] the good days would be over. But you always knew Mrs. Johnson would get you back. She would have you back helping, doing everything you could.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview XXXIII]

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