

INTERVIEW XXXIV covering 1953

DATE: February 23, 1991

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: LBJ Ranch, Stonewall, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: You were talking about--

J: Taft. June of 1953 was ushered in by Senator [Robert] Taft, majority leader, announcing that he was going to give up the post because of serious illness. We had known for some time that he had cancer, and he was extremely strong and tough to have persevered as long as he had. He stepped out; Bill Knowland of California took over. Lyndon, opposite him, of course, was minority leader or, as he preferred to call it, a Democratic leader.

The main thing from a Texas senator's viewpoint on Lyndon's docket that summer was the drought. The whole southwest had been [under] severe drought condition for a year or two and would continue on for several more years, the longest and the worst I've ever witnessed. [It was] so dry at the Ranch there were cracks in the ground that were practically as wide as your finger, and you hear some people talk about little bitty new quails falling into those cracks. Lyndon was introducing, along with other senators, a request for emergency aid to the cattlemen. [Dwight] Eisenhower had already declared the area a drought disaster area.

G: LBJ worked with Walter Prescott Webb on this report on the water shortage.

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J: Yes. Lyndon was an early convert to the fact that water was the then and forever major problem of the Southwest, indeed of the whole country. And he got Walter Prescott Webb to do a long-term report on it.

G: Tell me, while you're talking about it, did he have much of an association with Webb through the years?

J: Not as much as I would have liked, although Webb's second wife was a good friend of mine and someone I just loved and laughed with. She was Terrell Merrick, the wife of the one-time mayor of San Antonio, congressman from San Antonio--

G: Maury Maverick.

J: Maury Maverick. The name of course, Maverick, which means that you're different from other people and you step over all the rules and lines of conduct. That came from Maury and from his family. Senator Kerr was very active in the legislation for drought control.

Then, in July, Senator Taft died. Lyndon gave a tribute for him on the Senate floor. Congress adjourned early in August, and Lyndon took out running to cover as much of the state as he could, looking forward to the next summer of 1954 when he would be up for re-election. And he wanted to try to reinforce his position from Amarillo to Brownsville and Texarkana to El Paso just as firmly as he could so he wouldn't have to campaign so much in 1954.

He got Jake Pickle to go over his schedule, and all of his cohorts were making dates for him for things as varied as the American Legion and the G.I. Forum, and the State Convention of Sheriffs, and Old Settlers Reunion, and the Texas Farm Bureau, and the Texas State Teacher's Association. Golly, it seems there's an association for every profession and every sentimental sort of a thing. I didn't go with him a great deal.

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I remember one time I went with him that summer, which was a fantastic view of Texas. We flew out to Snyder. We were staying at the West Ranch. I don't know whether Wesley lent us his plane--but anyhow, we flew out to Snyder, where Mr. C. T. McLaughlin from the Diamond M Ranch gave a big luncheon for us, and then, in the afternoon, there was a party at the Snyder Country Club. Mrs. McLaughlin hosted that evening for me another big chamber of commerce affair that night.

Well, C. T. McLaughlin is an unusual figure in our lives: oil man, wealthy man, business man, highly respected, very successful, very pro-Johnson, good friend from beginning to end. Our life wasn't exactly filled with rich oil men who loved us. We landed at Snyder--my memory is that there was an oil well in the front yard practically. And a very colorful part of the world.

C. T. has given us some choice reminders that speak of their friendship. The tureen that sits on the dining room table all the time, when I don't have fresh flowers--it looks like a piece of German work with cows and crops and scenes of agriculture on it. One of my favorite pieces forever.

G: What was the party like? Was it a lot of the local--

J: All of the local honchos and elected officials and big ranchers and everybody who was in charge of this and that.

And then, I remember, in November of that year, *I*, actually *I*, I got up and made a speech to the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs at their 56th annual convention in Austin. I was invited by Mrs. Ben Powell, who is [from] the firm of Powell, [Alvin] Wirtz, Rauhut, and Gideon. Great friends and standbys. Senator Wirtz, head man in that [firm] until his death, in October, but the elderly statesman in that was Judge Ben Powell. Mrs. Powell

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was my idea of a duchess: tall, imposing, wonderful carriage, wonderful self-assurance, so knowledgeable, and yet she took notice of me, and she was very kind to me. I was duly respectful and regarded with considerable trepidation speaking to that group, but I lived through it and somewhere in the next two or three years, I reached a decision that I had to cope with public speaking, and I think, perhaps, it was a year or two later before Scooter Miller--who else?--got me into Hester Bell's programs and speaking class, which actually turned out to be one of the pluses of my life.

G: Did the President encourage you to develop public speaking skills?

J: Yes. He just thought--he was always telling me I didn't sell for what I was worth, which I think is a very good phrase, but he meant mostly in terms of, "You should dress up more and put your best foot forward in grooming and clothes." But he was also sure that I could, if I'd make the effort, speak with assurance, if I worked hard enough on it.

I remember he often said, "You let your sentence drop at the end. You must have a lift at the end, and you must change pace, and you must give people time in between. Don't hurry to take in what you've said." Liz Carpenter used to always tell me, "Look at that audience out there. Remember a lot of them came from Dime Box or"--what was the name? Two small towns in our district, which she often used as a picture of rural Texas, which our constituency still was, pretty much, rural and agricultural, although in the fifteen or so years Lyndon had been in Congress, it's makeup had done a lot of changing, due, I guess, very much to the war.

There are some events that go on and on through our life, and one is we had a dinner for major KTBC clients--a barbecue--at the Ranch and so we did in November of this year, and I had a party for the ladies of Stonewall. I remember it came as a surprise to me that if

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you invited ladies that the children that they had at home, that they couldn't leave at home, all came, too. (Laughter)

There was one lady I could always depend on to play the piano, and they would get the singing started. It's a wonderful community. I soon grew to respect it mightily and enjoy it very much. But that was a fall when we did not see very much of Lyndon around the Ranch because of this constant covering of the state.

Let me see if I can find anything else that triggers my memory.

(Interruption)

J: Where are we now? Is this at the end of what I've said?

G: Right.

J: I'm wallowing in papers. Yes, this was the end. Ready?

G: Yes. What do you remember about the Korean Armistice?

J: Actually, nothing personal and intense. Later on when Syngman Rhee comes as the guest of Eisenhower to a White House dinner, I do feel an intense understanding, but I'm going to wait until that happens, and I think it was the next year. But I wind up 1953, I do want to, it wouldn't full unless I tried to paint the picture of just what a hard-working year it was for Lyndon, and some pictures that stay with me in my album and my memory--one of Lyndon in the Senate chamber, and he is the only fella in there, and he is busy cleaning out his desk. It's sort of symbolic and sort of pathetic, because it was the essence of life right there--that he did work terribly hard.

Another one was in that campaigning blitz from September to December of 1953, when he made about 200 speeches all over Texas. But this one, it's night, he's finally back to the hotel. He's got his shoes off and his feet propped up and his eyes closed. That just

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shows what it feels like after you've made about eight speeches in a day and tried to shift the gears of your mind that many times.

Those were high, racy years of forming friendships and you're settled in when you are really a member of that club, so to speak. Make an indelible impression for the rest of your life--that was one I loved, of him sitting in his office and grouped around him were Senator [Stuart] Symington, and Dick Russell, and Earl Clements of Kentucky, and Albert Gore of Tennessee, son now in the Senate, and [George] Smathers of Florida, [Thomas] Hennings of Missouri--gosh, no handsomer couple anywhere than Symington and Smathers. You would have found just about that same group participating a lot of times at the end of the day, plotting what was going on.

There's another thing about that year that I remember so warmly. My own family came to spend Thanksgiving with us at the Ranch. Daddy and his wife, Ruth, my brother, Tommy, and Sarah, his wife. Tony, the one with whom I felt the closet affinity of all and Matiana. There were our children, sort of sitting down crossed-legged, on the grounds in front of us, in the front yard of the Ranch. I'm a little bit too plump, which doesn't speak well for me.

In fact, I get a lot of black marks as I look back upon those years. I should have put those children on a diet, and been a more determined mother, or else I should have gone to every last one of those towns and speeches that showed the map of Texas. Instead, I just sort of tried to do both things, straddling between going with Lyndon and staying with the children, and not doing a very good job of either, which is sort of intensified as I look in a picture album and notice that the living room--the main, big family living room, with a huge fireplace where Aunt Frank used to cook over an iron pot sometimes--still had make-shift

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furniture in it, some Chinese peel furniture, that had been sort of, supposed to sit out on the front porch somewhere. Gee, I don't how long it took me to get that room properly furnished nor how Lyndon managed to be patient that long, because patience was not his long-suit.

At any rate, there's a warmth in looking back and seeing Tommy's and Tony's faces, even if it is the occasion of a great big deer hunt and they have their kill propped up in front of them. And in seeing Daddy, with his three children, by the fireplace. I'm glad they shared this old house with us some.

The year ended with politicking pretty much over with some time in December, and then going back to Washington. Right after--Lyndon at least--right after Christmas, and I'm sure we must have already been into the routine of him flying and me driving, which I would have done with the children a little bit later and probably one of his secretaries to share the driving with me.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXXIV

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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 Fawcett 5-10-2011
Archivist of the United States Date

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Appendix A

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

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

**Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries**

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

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