

INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 18, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JESSE CURRY

INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB

PLACE: His office at One Main Place, Room 650, in Dallas, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: First of all, I'd like to know something about your background.

Where were you born, when?

C: I was born in Hamilton, Texas, which is in the southwest part of the state. I remained there until I was about six months old or so, and then I was moved to Dallas; that was 1913. So I consider myself a native Dallasite. I attended schools here in Dallas, grade schools and high schools. I didn't get a formal college education; however, as I relate through here, you will see that I spent quite a bit of time in different schools.

I went to work in the police department May 1, 1936. I worked as a patrolman first.

M: Let me ask this: did you work before then, too?

C: Yes, I had a cleaning and pressing business, and prior to that time I worked in a battery manufacturing plant.

M: Of course, that was in the Depression, too, and things were pretty tough.

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C: Yes. Right. After I went to work in the police department, my first promotion was in 1944 after I'd been there eight years. During that time I'd had some time out for military service. When I returned to the department--

M: Were you in the Army?

C: Yes, Air Force--a pilot trainee in the Air Force is what I [was].

M: Did you serve overseas?

C: No, I didn't. In fact I was released when the program that I was working under--it didn't fold, but they were training older pilots and they caught up with the training on young pilots and gave us an opportunity either to get out or take a chance on staying in on a non-flying status, so I got out.

M: So you came back to the police force.

C: Yes. I was promoted to a detective in 1944 and then a sergeant in 1945. In 1945 I was able to win a Kemper Fellowship in the national competition to attend the Northwestern Traffic Institute at Northwestern University. This is a nine-months course in police traffic and administration. When I returned from there, I was promoted to a lieutenant in command of the motorcycle division of the police department. Then in 1948 I was promoted to captain in command of the traffic division. All of these promotions were by civil service competition. In 1950 I was assigned as an assistant departmental instructor in the police training school, and then I was sent to the FBI National Police Academy in 1951. After graduation from the FBI Academy, I was promoted to inspector of police in charge of personnel training and research.

M: Is that also competitive examination?

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C: Yes. Competitive exam. That was the highest grade that you competed for--inspector. Above that was appointive.

M: Is that an administrative job, incidentally?

C: No. It's not a line assignment, as you would gather--you know, training, I developed training programs and taught in the recruit schools and the in-service training schools, and in the personnel I did all the investigation or directed all the investigation of police applicants. Then I handled all police complaints. Our section would investigate those and report to the chief on our findings. I was promoted to assistant chief of police in October of 1953, and then on January 29, 1960, I was appointed chief of police.

M: That's a political appointment by the mayor?

C: It's by the city manager. Dallas has never had many politics mixed up with the police department. The tenure of office was good in it. I mean it wasn't just the whim usually of the city council. They didn't interfere with you any; they gave us a free hand.

Now I've instructed in numerous police schools throughout the nation. I was also chairman of the planning committee for the Law Enforcement Institute of the Southwest Legal Foundation, which is conducted at SMU, and I've taught in the Southern Police Academy. I've been active in the IACP for several years, not quite so active now as I was when I was chief, but I am still a member. I'm also active in the Texas Police Association and the Texas Police Chiefs Association, which is two different organizations. I've studied various law subjects and evidence, laws of arrest, searches and seizure and case preparation, criminal procedure, accident investigation and all types of criminal law, and I have taught some of these subjects

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in police schools from time to time. That's about [it].

M: Let me ask you just to satisfy a curiosity. The chief of police--is that purely administration over the whole department?

C: Yes.

M: And you supervise personnel recruitment and everything else?

C: Everything.

M: What do you have under you? Do you have captains reporting to you or what?

C: There has been a reorganization recently that has changed the structure of the Dallas police department. At that time I had one assistant chief, then I had four deputy chiefs, and these deputy chiefs each had a field of operations.

M: I see.

C: I had a patrol division, detective division, traffic division and records or service, they all reported directly to me.

M: And then you reported to the city manager?

C: Yes.

M: And he reported to the mayor and council?

C: Council.

M: To the council?

C: Yes.

M: I see. When did you first meet Lyndon Johnson?

C: So far as I can definitely recall--I might have met him on other occasions because the years that I was on the traffic division we handled a lot of notables and celebrities and important persons using [cars]--

I know I can remember when he was campaigning in 1960 he had a parade

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here after Nixon had had one. One of the reasons I remember this is because he asked me--I was walking along side the car with him-- "Chief, what do you think about the crowd?" I said, "Oh, it's a big crowd all right." And he said, "It's bigger than you had for Nixon, isn't it?" I said, "I believe so." He said, "Well, it better be." (Laughter) I mean in this vein, you know. I believe that's the first time that I ever had any occasion to speak to him at all.

M: In that parade, how do you make arrangements for that? Does an advance man for Johnson come down and they contact you and you work out the parade route?

C: Yes. Of course, after he was president, why then the Secret Service were responsible for all the security, and we would just cooperate with them and give them what they ask for and make helpful suggestions. If they were not familiar with the local area sometimes we were able to assist them by making suggestions on certain security measures.

M: In 1960 when he first came through, would the security measures amount to crowd control primarily?

C: Yes.

M: Then you weren't worried about people coming up and throwing things at him.

C: No. I believe that shortly before that he and Mrs. Johnson, if I remember correctly, had been rather, well, not assaulted, but had had a very unhappy experience in the lobby of the Baker Hotel or Adolphus Hotel.

M: There was a big crowd there, wasn't there, and they had trouble getting through the crowd?

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- C: Yes, that, and they were pulling at him. I think they were saying some pretty ugly things, and I believe someone tried to spit on him or something at the time. But I wasn't here at that time. I don't know where I was; I might have been out of town or somewhere, but I do know that he had had this bad experience here. But this particular parade we didn't have a bit of trouble. There were huge crowds out, and he and Kennedy were in the parade; they were the main dignitaries.
- M: When did you see him next time?
- C: I can't be sure just when it was I saw him again.
- M: Did you see him between that 1960 parade and the time that Kennedy came through at the time of the assassination?
- C: I don't believe I did. I can't recall specifically. Now, I know that Kennedy came in to visit Sam Rayburn when he was here, and I handled that security there on pretty short notice on that particular time. We just had a couple hours notice on that and had to set up the security on that for him. But it wasn't an advertised visit, so we were able to set up our security pretty quickly.
- M: I suppose that would be easier than an actual advertised visit.
- C: Yes. There was no publicity at all on that. We were just notified he'd be coming in to see Rayburn, and so we didn't have very much trouble. We had a pretty good crowd at the hospital, but that's all.
- M: So all you had to do was dispatch officers to help control the crowd?
- C: Right, and set up escorts and so forth and security at Love Field. But I think the visit that he made with Kennedy then was the next time that I saw him.

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M: In 1963?

C: Yes.

M: Do you remember when you first saw him in 1963 after the assassination?

C: Yes, the day of the assassination when he got off the plane at Love Field.

M: You met them. This was prior to the parade?

C: Yes. I was at the Love Field and had a number of men assigned out there, of course. All the security had been set up, and I was to be the lead car.

M: I see, and the Secret Service had already worked out arrangements?

C: Yes. We'd already worked with them over a period of a couple of weeks or so, and we'd worked out all the arrangements. But I was in the lead car and [Forrest V.] Sorrels, who was the agent in charge of Secret Service in this area at that time, was in the car with me and Bill Decker, who's sheriff of Dallas County, and Win [Winston G.] Lawson, who was a Secret Service man out of Washington. We led the parade that day.

M: Now, I would assume that you've given testimony about your actions at this parade.

C: Yes.

M: What, before the Warren Commission?

C: Yes, before the Warren Commission.

M: Is that testimony, to your knowledge, complete as you would wish it to be?

C: So far as I know it is.

M: Do you have anything you want to add to it?

C: No, not that I know of.

M: Well, I want to read this into the tape so that any historians

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using this in the future could refer to that other testimony.

C: Yes.

M: Let me ask you specifically then about Lyndon Johnson and what he did. After the shots, my understanding is that the Kennedy car went on to the hospital.

C: Right, I led them out to the hospital.

M: You were leading the car out to the hospital?

C: Yes.

M: I assume you realized that there was difficulty.

C: Oh, yes.

M: Was there radio contact between the cars?

C: Not between his car and our car. The Secret Service man had a radio but it didn't seem to be working too well at the time. He had been talking to some of the agents in the cars behind him, but it was a little portable machine. When I heard the shots and looked back in the rear view mirror I could see commotion in the President's car. About that time a motorcycle also pulled over, and I asked him what had happened, if someone had been hurt, and he said yes.

I told him, "Take us to Parkland Hospital."

M: So you were in the lead car then to Parkland?

C: Yes.

M: And the vice presidential car also went out there, with Lyndon Johnson in it.

C: Yes.

M: Then at the hospital, did you talk with Lyndon Johnson at all?

C: No, not any particular conversation. I might have had a word or two with



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him, but there was just a mass of confusion there. They hustled him off into a room and isolated him. I was in and out of the hospital, inside and outside, but I didn't say any more to him.

M: I assume you were filled with all sorts of duties with organizing your department and getting the security arranged, answering reporters questions and everything else all at the same time.

C: Trying to, and then [J.D.] Tippit was killed shortly after that--a police officer--and then I was getting reports on this over the radio at the time, too. Then one of the Secret Service men came out and said, "We're going to take Mr. Johnson to the airport," and asked me to get my car ready to stand by and an inspector of police named Henry Putnam. We were to use his car also. In my car was Johnson and his Secret Service men, and there was one seemed to me like a congressman, but I don't recall who it was. Then in Mr. Putnam's car there were some other congressmen, I believe, and some White House aides or something.

M: What kind of cars were these?

C: Fords.

M: What were they, Ford Fairlanes?

C: Well, they're not a Fairlane, they're sort of a special-built.

M: V-8 engine.

C: V-8, yes, but it's not the extra high-powered chase cars. They're just about like a--what is the next one to a Fairlane?

M: I'm trying to think.

C: In fact, it might have been a Fairlane with a little heavier motor in it or something.

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M: A standard Ford. Four door or two door?

C: Yes, four door.

M: And the color was what?

C: Light, about the color of this wall, about eggshell or off-white.

M: Did it have the police insignia on it?

C: No.

M: Just a plain car?

C: Yes.

M: Then the people got in your car, and I've read that Johnson for security measures sat on the floor. Is that right?

C: Well, I don't know whether he was on the floor or whether he was just laying down in the seat, but he was low, as low as he could get in the car, on the instructions of his bodyguards.

M: Is it true that the extent of the assassination plot was not known at that time?

C: No, we didn't know what it might be.

M: I mean you didn't know whether there was going to be another sniper or not.

C: No. That's the reason we were concerned for him. We didn't know whether this was an organized conspiracy, [whether] there'd be others that they would attempt to assassinate, or just what the situation was.

M: So then you drove to Love Field. Was that drive at high speed or low speed?

C: It was at fairly high speed.

M: Did you have sirens going?

C: When we started we did, but we cut them out.

M: This may sound silly, but I'm curious; did you stop at traffic lights

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or did you go through those?

C: When we had our sirens on we went on through, and, if I recall correctly, on the others if we'd come up to a red light and traffic was clear we'd move on through.

M: So you very expeditiously moved to Love Field?

C: Right.

M: Did you pull up right next to Air Force One, or where did you park?

C: Probably within thirty or fifty feet of it, but right up to it.

M: Then Johnson and his party got out and, what, immediately went to the plane?

C: Went into the plane, yes.

M: Then what did you do?

C: I stood around in the area, and I talked back and forth on my radio to my dispatcher downtown to see how things were progressing in the investigation. Shortly after that Judge Sarah Hughes arrived at Love Field, and I escorted her on the plane. I stood by on the plane while President Johnson took his oath of office, and then I escorted Judge Hughes off the plane. She got in her car and drove away, and I went over and talked to Mayor [Earle] Cabell and his wife. Cabell was the mayor of Dallas.

M: There's a famous theft at that swearing-in ceremony, incidentally.

C: Yes, that Bible. (Laughter) It's always been a mystery to me where it went.

M: You have no idea where it went to?

C: No, I don't.

M: How soon after that did you leave the plane?

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C: After the swearing-in?

M: Yes. Did you stay out there?

C: Almost immediately. I left the plane because they were anxious to get out of town. It seemed to me like it was about one-thirty or two o'clock, somewhere around there, when I got away from Love Field, maybe one-thirty.

M: And then you came back to the--

C: I returned to the city hall then to my office.

M: And things must have been--

C: Oh, they were in great turmoil, they surely were. The city hall was overrun with newspaper reporters and radio and TV men and cables running down the halls and through the offices.

M: Did you have any contact with Lyndon Johnson after that?

C: No, I never did.

M: Did he ever write you a letter?

C: No.

M: So after that point when he flew back to Washington, you never saw him again?

C: Let's see, I saw him again. He's been down here since this, but I didn't have any personal contact with him.

M: Yes. Well, that's what I want to know. Let me give you an open-ended question. You've been asked countless questions by reporters and by journalists and by legal people all about this event. Is there anything that you wish to add or wish to comment, especially about Lyndon Johnson and his action during this period?

C: No, I can't think of anything. I think all the evidence was given to the Warren Commission, and all that I knew about it I told them.

M: Fine. I wish to thank you for the interview.

C: You're quite welcome. It's a pleasure.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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