INTERVIEW VI

DATE: October 24, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: Willard and Jeanne Deason

INTERVIEWER: Lewis Gould

PLACE: The LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

Tapes 1 and 2 of 2, Side 1

G: Let me start by asking both of you a question I know you have answered before, but I need to ask it for my purposes, and that's what you remember about the first time you met Mrs. Johnson, anything that either of you might recall. You met her at I guess a decade apart for the first time.

WD: I'll let Jeanne go first on that.

G: Would you, Mrs. Deason, go first there?

JD: Well, the first time I met her I went to a dinner party at their home in Washington, D.C. I was in the WAVES [Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service] at the time and he [Deason] was my escort. Of course, I was awed at the fact that I was even going to a congressman's home, so I--

G: Do you remember how many people were there or the time of year that it was or anything about the occasion that might--?

JD: It was in, I think, the summer of 1944 when Bill was being transferred out of the Naval Personnel Department.

WD: Burea u of Personnel.

JD: And he was going to New York to be shipped overseas.

G: How had you gotten into the WAVES? Say a little bit about your background. People reading this will want to know a little bit about you.

JD: Well, I was living in New Jersey, at my home in New Jersey, and of course had gone to college up there, was working in the fashion industry in New York City, and decided that I wanted to be part of the war effort and enlisted in the WAVES there.

G: Do you recall anything about the house or your impressions about what their life was like at the time that you first met them? Or what Mrs. Johnson was wearing or how she impressed you? Was it a casual, informal affair?

JD: Yes, it was informal and I just thought that she was a very charming lady and, other than that, I can't quite remember.

G: Do you remember your impressions of President Johnson the first time you met him? We'll talk mostly about Mrs. Johnson but it seems like a logical question to ask. Or any sense of him as a person in the initial stages when you knew him?

JD: Well, I had worked with people from his office before I met him and so I knew that he was a doer because we would get questions in our office. We were in the Congressional Liaison Office and their office would ask so for much more for their constituents than the other congressional offices. So I got to be pretty familiar with some of the people in his office at the time, and so I was quite glad to meet him.

G: Mr. Deason, do you have any recollections about the first time you met Mrs. Johnson?

WD: Yes, I met her shortly after they were married. I don't remember the year now. Your records will show that.

G: It would be November 1934 was when they were married.

WD: Yes, I was living in Houston at the time. The story is well documented about their courtship and marriage and honeymooning in Mexico, and when the honeymoon was over, they came back to Houston. I met her there. We got together, of course, and reminisced and talked and visited. His Uncle George Johnson lived there. We were out to dinner with Lyndon and Lady Bird and Uncle George and one or two other of our friends, and I got to know her that way. The interesting thing I thought was after they were married and had the honeymoon he had to go back to Washington, but she had to go back to Karnack to take care of some business there before she could join him in Washington. So we took her down and put her on the bus, and she went from Houston back to Karnack on the bus, and he went on back to Washington. I remember very well my first two visits with her was at the little dinner party and taking her to the bus.

G: Do you remember how she was addressed at that time? Was it . . .

WD: Yes. She was dressed rather casual. She was twenty-four or twenty-five years old and had just got out of the University [of Texas] with a Master's degree. She was dressed like a college girl when she got on that bus to go home.

G: There have been some biographers of the President who suggested that she was not as attractive as she became later. The pictures I have seen in the university yearbook suggest that she was quite a striking looking woman at that time. What would be your response or where would you come down on that side of the question?

WD: Well, at the dinner party I thought she was a rather striking looking woman. When she got on the bus to go back to Karnack, of course, she was dressed for travel and she looked like she thought she was still back in the university.

G: The question I think I was trying to ask, and I didn't phrase it well was, did people call her

by the name Lady Bird or Bird or did they call her Claudia at that point? There is again some question about how she liked to be called and what names were used. It would be interesting to see your--

WD: Ever since I've known her she's been Lady Bird or Bird. Interchangeable. Some people say Bird one time and Lady Bird the next sentence.

G: Is that how the President did that from the outside, as far as you know?

WD: Yes. If he ever called her Claudia, I don't know when it was.

G: I guess the next point your lives touched directly is in the NYA [National Youth Administration] period when they come back to Austin.

WD: Yes.

G: One of the questions that I have been trying to get--

WD: Before we get into that, I'm sure you've already got the story how she got the name Lady Bird.

G: Oh, yes.

WD: Okay. All right.

G: One question I wanted to ask you about the NYA that does touch on beautification is the origin of the roadside parks and the whole park aspect to it. In 1966 the President said in a speech that Mrs. Johnson had been an influence on him. There isn't much that seems to be left in the records that would comment one way or another. Do you have any sense of whose idea or ideas those parks were in the NYA period?

WD: Well, I've always been of the impression that--and I can't document this, but I've always been of the impression that it was an idea that sort of sprang up between Lyndon himself and the head of the Highway Department. I was trying to think this morning who it was. It

was Gib Gilchrist or the man who preceded him. You could check the records and find in 1935-1936 who was head of the Highway Department [Gilchrist]. But the NYA was looking for worthwhile projects, work projects, for young men between sixteen and twenty-four who were unemployed. There were a lot of them in those days. This was 1935. And I think that probably the Highway Department had had ideas for beautifying and for parks but it really never had any money for them. And here was a new federal agency, it had money for it and was looking for work to do, so it was an ideal combination. I would give credit basically to Lyndon and the head of the State Highway Department at that time.

G: Ronnie Dugger in his biography also mentions the wife of Professor [Robert] Montgomery. Would you think that she might have had any imput in that or--?

WD: Not to my knowledge.

G: It is one of those questions where it's just hard to figure out whose idea it was.

WD: I understand that.

G: Because it was an idea that was much around at the time.

WD: I might say this. There have been a number of folks over the last twenty or thirty years that came up with ideas where different folks have credit for it, but I was there when it was happening and I have given you my best judgment on it, that it was a sort of a combination or a melding of ideas between Lyndon Johnson and the head of the State Highway Department at that time.

G: So that if the President said that he and Mrs. Johnson had talked it over, there would be no reason to doubt it.

WD: He did. He talked over everything with her at night. He might have gone home and said,

"Lady Bird, what do you think about this?"

G: Yes, and so--

WD: "I've been talking to the head of the State Highway Department and here's what we're doing." And you know what her answer would be: "Great." Anything for the comfort of the traveler and the beautification of the highways.

G: Did you in the period ever travel with her by automobile anywhere where you got a sense of her response to the landscape, or as you drove along did she mention anything? She mentions that traveling across country as often as she did that this was one of the ways that she had watched the landscape, the billboards, the junkyards, cars on the road and other things. I didn't know if you had ever had a sense of [this], had occasion to be driving with her and noticed how she watched things.

WD: Yes. I think I recall one trip. Shortly after he was elected to Congress the first time, before he actually went to Washington they were going from Austin up to Karnack where her home was for some reason, and invited me to drive along with them. So we drove from Austin to Karnack, and that was one of my first times to make an extensive trip with her. And yes, I recall that she was always talking about the flowers and she could name nearly any field of flowers you'd see. She could tell us what they were; neither Lyndon nor I knew too much about. We could see the colors but she'd explain each one of them. And the trees of East Texas, she loved those pine trees, and always talked about the beauty of them. That was a large part of it. It was in the spring and the countryside was beautiful at the time that we did it.

G: People that I talked with all seemed to agree that she is a very observant woman. I remember Mayor Walter Washington saying that when they traveled around in Washington

that he knew that he better watch everything because she was going to miss nothing. I'm sure that's true, but I was just wondering if you can think of anything that you want to comment on.

WD: Yes, I'm sure that's true but I can't recall any specific instance at the moment. If I do later on, I'll interrupt you.

G: Let me know. Do you, Mrs. Deason, remember anything like that or have an occasion or an episode where her observant qualities might have been in evidence? Well, if you think of something.

JD: Oka y.

WD: Now, I do remember one, but this came much later--

G: Well, that's all right.

WD: --in the time period. After his presidency had concluded and we were visiting them at the Ranch, and she always wanted us to drive to the back parts of it to see the beautiful flowers over there. A lot of them are native, and some of them she had planted. They were just beautiful and just at sunset you could drive along there and see acres and acres and acres of gorgeous wildflowers, all indigenous to the area. Sometimes you see herds of deer loping across; it's the most beautiful sight you can imagine, and she was just in rapture when she'd take those drives late in the afternoon.

G: In 1937 Mr. Johnson runs for Congress. One of the questions that comes up is the degree to which Mrs. Johnson was part of his political life and when she becomes more and more a part of it. What part did she play, if anything, in 1937 and in 1941? Do [you?] remember any aspect of that that might be worth talking about?

WD: Well, I think I can tell you more about 1937 than 1941 because by 1941, they were well

enough known by then to organize a campaign, but in 1937 it was just a few friends around. She was stenographer, she was phone answerer, and she was errand runner. She was typist, and I think she made one or two trips out to talk--I'm not sure about this--where he couldn't go. He'd have two places he'd need to be on the same day and I think she made some appearances for him, but I cannot document those.

G: You said earlier there were some speech drafts in the Johnson papers that indicated in 1941 that, I guess, on one occasion when his health was--I guess during a campaign sometimes he would have a little bit of illness here. The appendicitis in 1937 and sometimes he would not be feeling as well as other times, and there was speech drafts that talked about how she might have to pinch-hit for him. You know, "My husband can't be here and I've come to talk to you." It's not clear whether those were delivered or not, but that there are some speech drafts. But your sense was that she was active in the campaign, maybe not speaking, but in an organizational way that she was playing a role in 1937.

WD: Very much so. And in 1941 for that matter. By that time they had moved to Dillman [Street], hadn't they, Jeanne? No, you weren't here until 1946; that was when he ran against Pappy [W. Lee] O'Daniel in 1941. It was the Pappy O'Daniel campaign, when he ran for Senate.

G: What was your impression of Governor O'Daniel as an opponent and as a political leader?

WD: Well, as an opponent he was formidable. He had the state of Texas charmed. He was challenged by two very strong young men, Lyndon Johnson and Jerry [Gerald] Mann. They went after him tooth and toenail and he was smart enough, or some of his people were smart enough, to maneuver them to start fighting one another toward the end. So they ended up second and third and Pappy ended up first.

G: It's somewhat off the point but I'm just curious, since you were there, why O'Daniel's charm suddenly went away or didn't last past 1942 or 1943. I mean when he goes to the Senate he is much less of a force, isn't he, in Texas politics?

WD: Well, I suppose that's right. There are things--I've thought about it a lot, and I'm not sure I can determine what it is. I'll give you a theory. His history is well known. He started out with a radio program in Fort Worth selling [Light Crust] flour, and he had a country hillbilly band playing for him and he was the MC. On WPAB, a big station, he was heard all over Texas and we had no television then so everybody in the state heard of Pappy O'Daniel. I don't know where he got the name of Pappy. W. Lee O'Daniel and the country folks said W. Lee "O'Dannal." That's as close as they got. If you ran into one of them and you said, "What do you think of the governor's race?" "O'Dannal. O'Dannal." Well, everybody who couldn't say O'Daniel, sure, they voted for O'Dannal. He was a charmer and just one of those things that caught on and stayed on. Then when he ran for the Senate, we talked about that a little bit. As I say, there were a bunch of them running against him for the Senate, but Lyndon and Jerry Mann were the two top contenders. Congressman from down near Beaumont, Martin Dies, was considered to be one of the outstanding ones. I think he came in fourth. Strong in his statement, didn't cut much mustard, otherwise.

G: But it is interesting that O'Daniel's lack of success as a senator is what really opens the door for Lyndon Johnson in 1948. I mean if O'Daniel had been successful and presumably reelected, there would not have been a senatorial vacancy for a while with [Tom] Connally in 1952. And I was just curious why O`Daniel has this period from 1937 to 1942 when he does everything right it seems, and then after 1942 it's not clear that he can't do anything right but his fortunes begin to deteriorate after 1942.

WD: I started to say I had a theory on that. He was a junior senator. He really was not wise in the ways and the operations and the nuances of the Senate of the United States. I think he found himself rather lost and largely ignored. He had never been ignored before. Everybody was for Governor O'Daniel, Senator O'Daniel, Pappy O'Dannal, but when he got up there he was just one of ninety-six and the low man on the totem pole. I think that after sitting there for six years I guess it was, four years is what was, it just didn't appeal to him. He just said, "It's not for me. I'm going back to Texas where people know who I am and care."

G: Well, it was fortunate for Lyndon Johnson that he had that decision.

WD: Oh, yes, sure.

G: Now we get to the Second World War when Mr. Johnson goes into the navy, and for Mrs. Johnson this opens up a chance or an occasion when her life takes a new turn, and it has to do with her running the Congressman's office while he is in the navy. Do you want to say a few words about that? And then we can talk about it in more detail as you comment.

WD: Yes. People were, you know, puzzled. He had been such a success as a congressman. Can Lady Bird carry on that office? Will it fall on its face? Will we miss him too much? But she pitched in there and what she may have lacked in his sense of direction, her determination and her good judgment and her willingness to work fifteen, eighteen hours every day, Saturday and Sunday, surprised the people of this district. She just really worked at it. She had trouble getting office help, enough people to help her answer all the mail she got and all the telephone calls, but she worked at it and she did a good job and it got to be kind of a joke around that Lyndon may better not stay too long in the navy; she just might take his job away from him.

G: She said in one letter that her schedule was what she called a "We're on Lyndon Johnson time" which is work until everything is done. Did he use that phrase?

WD: No, I suppose that was original with her, but it's a good one. I hadn't heard it, but his time was "never stop till you're finished. Start early and never stop till you finish."

G: And his principle in the congressional office seemed to be that every letter that came in had to be answered without fail.

WD: That's right. And answered that day. It was a rare exception that it wasn't answered. At some time where they had to contact a government agency and normally you can't get an answer in a day out of them, but you kept pushing them till you got the answer and when you got the answer then you gave it back to the constituent the day you got it.

G: One question that you and she dealt with in that period was, I gather, people were trying to get into the armed forces and they were asking her for letters of recommendation, and in your position you were advising her that there were ways to handle the many requests that came in for letters of recommendation in those days.

WD: Well, yes, that's right. In any undertaking in life if you work at it and think about it, you find paths which to follow. All I did was merely put some road signs up for her that if you want to do this, maybe you ought to go in that direction. I think maybe to that extent it was somewhat helpful to her.

G: Well, she was very receptive to that kind of advice and counsel.

WD: Oh, yes. I was in the navy and stationed in New Orleans and she, of course, was in Washington. New Orleans was headquarters of the 8th Naval District, which included Texas and the 10th Congressional District, so naturally anything that went up there got filtered back to the 8th Naval District. Sometimes they came to my desk and sometimes

they went to the others and sometimes they might have gotten short-circuited in event to get to mine, but I tried to be helpful when I could.

G: But it was useful for her to understand that with all the requests that were coming in, that she had to have some sort of system to try to be responsive to what the people wanted and yet not to give them false hopes about how much influence that she might have with the navy or in the appointment process.

WD: That's right. That's right, and also not to press too hard with any contacts she might have with the Navy Department.

G: Do you have a sense of what the experience of running the congressional office for those months meant to her as a person and as the wife of a congressman? What do you think it gave her?

WD: Yes, I've thought about that often in the past. I think that if every woman, every wife, could go down and take her husband's job, whether he's a banker or a schoolteacher or a farmer or something else, and run it for six or eight months, just let him just disappear altogether, she understands her husband better than the wife who never does that. I think she has more sympathy and more compassion for what is required of him. Now, maybe it'd work the other way if the husband had to stay home and do the housework, too, and take care of the things that the wife normally does. But I think it helped her to be a better wife for him all up and down the road after she had that experience. She understood why sometimes he couldn't come home till eight o'clock at night. He was going to bring guests and maybe going to have four people and she'd fix dinner for them at six o'clock. He'd show up at eight or nine with five. Somebody else came in from the district and he said, "Come on, come home with us and let's have dinner." And she'd have to reshuffle

her plates and set the dinner. She always made sure she had enough--two or three extra.

G: But it also I think--or would you say that it gave her a sense of her own abilities? I mean that--

WD: Oh, yes, very definitely. Lyndon had a philosophy and she's quoted somewhere as this, I read it not long ago, where she said, "he had a way of stretching people beyond their capacity." I think she learned to understand that and I think she was stretched not because he [did it]. He wasn't there, but she stretched herself beyond her normal capacity in doing that job. I think it made certainly a broader and a wiser woman out of her.

G: And this was a time when there weren't that kind of opportunities for women to demonstrate their executive or managerial capacity, so in a way it gave her a sense of her abilities that might not have come to her in the normal course of the life she was having.

WD: I would say she learned in six months what she would have learned in sixteen years probably of normal life.

G: Well, it's interesting. Do you think there is any connection between the experience of being in the congressional office and then shortly thereafter their desire to operate the radio station and her abilities in operating the radio station? Chronologically they come rather close together, I didn't know whether--that the experience of being in the congressional office may have given her the sense: "Well, I can do that kind of thing. Now is the time to go ahead and let's try," the business aspect of her life.

WD: Well, I suppose so. I hadn't thought about it in that light but I'm sure it did have some positive effect on her. But let's go back a little bit. She had a family and an innate sense of business. Her father was a businessman and a successful one. She had two brothers who were businessmen. Successful people. And back of that I don't know the grandfathers and

so on, but certainly she grew up in an atmosphere of taking care of your business. And I think that was bred into her as a baby and as a child, to be frugal and observant and careful and prudent, and a little bit forward if you have to be.

G: People always do talk about her frugality, let's say. Do you remember any examples in those years that might suggest or indicate a specific case that might remind you of something like that.

WD: I don't, maybe Jeanne does.

JD: Well, I remember one time President Johnson bought her a beautiful dress. They were going to a dinner party, and he had paid more for it than she had wanted to. This was when he was still in Congress. And she said, "What do you think? Do you think I should take it back?" It had a hat to go with it, of course, you know, ladies wore hats in those days. I said, "No, wear it." And I still remember it was one of the prettiest outfits I ever saw.

WD: But she was worried about it.

JD: She was worried about him spending too much on the outfit.

G: I want to talk about the radio station for a bit. One of the questions that often comes up is, who was more important, him or her, in the management of the radio station. But I'm curious as to your discussion of her influence and her importance and what it revealed about her as a businesswoman, her activities with the radio station in the early years in1943 and 1944, because I gather it took a little time to get it on a profit-making basis.

WD: Well, I was not around at that time. See, I was in the navy. In 1946 when I left the navy I came back here and they gave me a job as a salesman at the station. So from 1946--

G: We'll take it from there then.

WD: --until 1949, of course, I was working for her. She was the boss. She signed the paychecks

and she knew every detail of what was going on. She read the sales reports and she knew how much money we were spending for records and she knew every item, I think, about the operation of the station.

G: You worked for both of them at different times. How would you--?

WD: I never worked for Senator Johnson. Well, I did in NYA. Yes.

G: I was going to just ask if you've had any thoughts about their different styles of persuading people to do the things they wanted the people to do and if you have any sense as human beings how they operated in contrast to each other.

WD: Well, there is a contrast. He was a great persuader. He was the greatest one-on-one salesman I ever saw. If he was convinced that some point of view that he had or some course he wanted to follow was the right one, he could damn near convince any individuals he got on a one-to-one basis that was the right thing to do. Now, she didn't try to convince or persuade. It was all just logic with her. "Is this the right thing to do? What do you think?" But he persuaded. If she persuaded, she did it so adroitly that I didn't recognize it.

G: How difficult was it in those days to make money through the radio station? I mean, you suggested that it required a great deal of application and constant attention on her part to have the radio station make money. Is that a fair statement?

WD: Well, it certainly is a fair statement. It was tough going in those days. It was far different from what it is today because the average retailer just had not gotten adjusted to advertising on radio. We had no television then, but if they had been in the retailing business for ten years, twenty years, thirty years, the newspaper, that was advertising with them. This radio was just a newfangled thing that "we're not sure it's working. We'll let somebody else try it and see how it works." It was hard work selling radio advertising and sometimes it was

hard management to have enough in the till to pay the help at the end of the month.

G: What kind of programming do you recall that [the station had]? Was it network or did they do local music or local news or do you know what the radio station was playing?

WD: All right. I said I didn't go to work there until 1946 but I do know a little bit about the history of it. When they bought the station, it was a part-time daytime station. It was sharing a frequency with a station over at A&M College. One of them would come on for three or four hours, then they'd sign off, and then the other one would come on and stay on during the daylight hours. But [although] the station was a drag and losing money, he had great confidence in what was going to happen in the future and in his or her ability to handle it. They bought it against advice of some of their friends and I know, generally, that it lost money for several years.

G: There is a letter that he writes to you in 1943 where he says "that radio station is pulling me down for the third time and if I ever drown I may want you to go under with me." So that suggests that it took a while for it to really get on a secure profit-making basis.

WD: Yes, it did. It did. They did through his sales ability again to get full-time operation after they had it for a year or two and got permission--this was during the war now--to increase their power. But they couldn't get any equipment, new transmitter, new towers and so on, because steel was all frozen for the war effort. He had a permit to do it and a commitment to do it as soon as the war was over. Well, when the war was over and steel became available they put up the big higher tower and bought a 5000 watt generator, and it would reach out and cover half of Texas. With that, they got an affiliation with the CBS network. So their programming up until they got the CBS network was just music, local news, talk shows--well, there weren't many talk shows in those days--but whatever they could do to

attract listeners. Now, after they got the CBS network and more power and with all of the blooming new businesses after the end of World War II, they were on their way.

G: Let me ask Mrs. Deason, what was it like to have your husband working for the radio station in those days, or your sense of what the station was like as a place for him to work?

JD: Well, I was home taking care of children all the time, so I don't--

G: What was your impression of Austin? You had not--

JD: Well, I really wanted to go back up to the East Coast, if you really want to know. (Laughter) My first year in Austin was not the best.

G: What was the town like or what was your . . .

JD: Well, it was a small town and, of course, we got here in January and I think it rained the whole month of January after we got here in 1946. We were living in a one-room efficiency apartment so no, it wasn't the most pleasant, but--

G: 1946 was another interesting year because that was the race that the Congressman had against Hardy Hollers, and from the material in the Johnson papers it seems as though Mrs. Johnson and the radio station became something of an issue in that political campaign, or they made much of Congressman Johnson's finances as one of the ways that they were trying to campaign against him. Do either of you recall anything about that?

JD: I do. I worked on that campaign.

G: Go ahead and tell.

JD: Well, I just worked in the campaign and I remember that it was rather bitter but, other than that, you know, I was kind of--I had never been exposed to the inside workings of politics like that.

G: What was your reaction?

JD: My reaction was that all these people are being awfully nasty to each other.

G: What was it like to be a worker in a Lyndon Johnson campaign in 1946?

JD: Well, did you ever stuff envelopes?

G: No, I can't say that I have.

JD: Well, that's what it was like.

WD: Well, yes, for the lack of a better issue, that became an issue. There was nothing particularly wrong with his view as a congressman unless you were an extreme conservative. The conservatives were against him in those days; they later came around. But they were trying to find [an issue]. This is normal politics. I know Hardy Hollers and he is a good man, but he had to have an issue and so they tried to make that an issue.

Well, actually, I don't think I've ever told this before, but I could have told it in those days; didn't do it, wasn't any point in doing it. But they bought that station for seventeen thousand dollars was the contract price for it. He didn't have seventeen thousand dollars and she didn't have it readily available. She had some property over in Alabama that she had inherited and her father up in Karnack had some money, but he made his the hard way and he held onto it. But Lady Bird got from her Aunt Effie [Pattillo], an old maid aunt--I don't remember now, ten or twelve thousand dollars, something like that, and they borrowed from me two thousand dollars. I'd always been very frugal, and that letter you read me a minute ago where he said the radio station was about to take him down for the third time and he might be calling on me again, that's what he was referring to, but he didn't. And I might say he paid me back the money after they got the thing going. I got my money back; don't worry about that. I'm sure if Aunt Effie didn't get hers back, Lady Bird took care of her as long as she lived. She was a practically blind, old maid aunt that never

married, and was financially able to take care of herself but not physically. And she lived with Lady Bird during the early years of their marriage and until she died she took care of her. So she was paid back ten time over for her ten thousand dollars.

G: I gather also her Uncle Claude [Pattillo] had died about this time or a little time earlier and that helped--

WD: Yes, I forgot about that. Yes, she got some money from Uncle Claude's estate or something. So, with that money, that's how they got the station and got control of it.

Shoestringed it all during the war--did the best they could, and then when the war was over, as I was saying, they got the CBS network and 5000 watts of power. They were in business in a good way, and started making money from, I guess, 1946 on and made lots of money. And that radio station, and later they got the television station, is the basis of the Johnson so-called fortune. A lot of folks always raise eyebrows at that, but that's where it came from: that little old part-time radio station.

G: In the Hollers campaign, there is one draft speech where she was to have commented on the radio about in answering their charges. I suspect the speech was not given, but do you recall anything about her responding to the charges that were made or the issues that were raised about her money and her father's money?

WD: No, I really don't recall. I know it was an issue and I would guess that she would more or less say that story that I just related to you.

G: Well, I was thinking more about trying to pin down whether she actually spoke on the radio rather than what she said.

WD: I don't know.

JD: I don't remember.

G: [There is] the question of the degree to which she was rather shy about public speaking and then later on becomes very adept at public speaking, so I'm trying to pin down when she spoke and when she didn't. So that's why these speech drafts are interesting, just as suggestions that they wanted her to speak somewhat earlier than we've thought before. Again, some of the President's biographers suggest that she was a very shy and retiring woman and I'm not sure I agree with that, but I won't put words in your mouth, and just ask what your feeling is about those kinds of statements and whether they are accurate or not.

WD: Well, you know, those terms are relative. I'll put it this way: she was not an aggressive woman that rushed to the forefront in everything, and she would speak her mind when she thought it was important to speak but she wasn't the first one to speak out. She had the good judgment if there was a discussion, to listen a while and sort of sift the thing down and then she'd speak out and say what she thought. Usually she came out with a good judgment, but she was not one of these rushing to the forefront. I don't think she would ever have been the typical politician if she ran for office in her own name.

G: One other thing that I have been impressed with is the amount of reading that she did. I gather he didn't read many books or any books and she read quite a great deal. Did she ever talk about the book she was reading or material that impressed her over the years, or do you have a sense of her reading habits at all or her reading interests?

WD: Not in particular, but I know she did read a lot and she had a habit of reading in bed at night. She nearly always took a book to bed with her.

G: In some of the letters that you exchanged you send her clippings of things that you wanted her to read and she talks about, I guess it's [Alexander] De Seversky's *Victory through Airpower* and I found references all the time to "I read this" and "you ought to read this"

and that kind of thing, that suggests with friends she talked about the books she was reading a good deal. I just didn't know whether it had any--I know she does read in the evenings and she reads a lot.

WD: Yes. I don't recall. You sent me a copy of the letter that I wrote her back there in 1942 or 1943, whenever it was, and I just could not remember the facts she was talking about.

G: It is a few years ago.

WD: That's a few years ago.

G: Well, we're getting down toward the end of the tape. Are there any other things that you remember about--we've pretty much concentrated on the thirties and forties and I'm not going to try and go into the fifties and sixties. This has helped me a great deal, but are there things about the time when he was president and they were in the presidency, or general things about beautification or anything else you would like to close with?

WD: Yes. I'll tell you one story that has some bearing on beautification. During the time that they were in the White House, you may have heard that I had given him the beagles, Him and Her, and the beagles became quite a hobby with him, and Him and Her grew into four or five. So he and I decided they needed proper dog kennels. Maybe there is room for one or two around the White House, but if you're going to have four or five beagles, you ought to have some kennels. So we moved out on the South Lawn and got to talking about how we would build a chain link fence here, and the doghouse there, and so on and so on. Lady Bird was walking along saying nothing and finally said to me, "Now, wait a minute, Bill, don't get too expansive. You remember we're only temporary tenants here. The next folks may not want it that way." Well, anyhow, in a few days we went ahead and had the kennels built and beautiful chain link fences shining in the sunshine, and you could see

Lady Bird was a little unhappy about that. And I was back down there the next week after we finished the fences and looked out there--

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

--and I couldn't see the fences. I said to the President, "What happened to our fences?" He said, "Look a little harder." Well, Lady Bird and the National Park Service had not disturbed our fences, but they took shrubbery and planted it all around the outside where the average viewer never got a view of the kennels. Well, of course, she was right. Those chain link fences didn't quite go in with the rest of the decor of the South Lawn and she knew it, and she just let us go ahead till we got through it and then she fenced it in with shrubbery.

(Interruption)

G: You were saying something about your wedding reception.

JD: Yes. Well, we were married in April 1945, in Washington, D.C., and of course, President Johnson at that time, he asked Lady Bird about it and they decided to have the reception at their house. Well, we were married in a chapel on Fort Meyer.

WD: See, we were both in the service.

JD: And then she had our reception at their home. And of course invited friends and family.

G: How many people were there at the--?

WD: Thirty or forty.

JD: Yes, it wasn't a large--

WD: Basically, her relatives and some of my friends from Washington.

G: This was the house in Washington?

JD: In Washington that they lived in.

WD: On--

JD: On 30th Place.

G: I'll come back to the beautification in just a [minute].

But she mentioned that in that house she had a quite extensive--not extensive in the sense of large, but she had a nice garden and worked on the house outside and all.

WD: Yes, I helped her a little with that. As a matter of fact, I put in a tomato garden for her. I was stationed in Washington for part of my tour of duty and I'd go out there on Sunday to visit with them. She had a back yard there with fine soil in it, grass on it. I said, "Lady Bird, let's just have a garden back here." Oh, that just suited her fine. "What will we plant?" I said, "I like tomatoes better than anything." We planted tomatoes and maybe some cucumbers and a few other things, but I recall that we did have a great tomato crop. At that time she had rhododendrons and other things growing all around the place. Flowers I didn't even know the name of; I've never been much on flowers. But she had the place beautifully landscaped with flowers.

G: How did she work in the garden or when you were putting in the tomatoes? It must have been hard work.

WD: Sure, she got out there with a spade and a trowel and her gloves on to keep from getting too much dirt under her fingernails and dug and planted and . . .

G: She says in letters that she enjoyed getting out into the garden.

WD: She did. She did.

G: And that it was a nice activity--I won't say break, I'll just say activity--for her on a Sunday afternoon that she would go out and work in the garden.

WD: Well, that's right. She was out there; she and I largely put in that tomato crop.

JD: She still does it up on the Ranch.

G: I was doing to ask you, Mrs. Deason, any other comments you might have about your sense of her as a woman and as a friend you've know over the years. There is often we get the male perspective about her, but I didn't know whether there was a sense of her abilities from a woman's perspective that might be [inaudible].

JD: Well, the one thing that has always struck me is that I have never heard her ever say anything nasty about anybody. Regardless--

G: That is a rare human trait.

JD: That is. Never.

WD: I could say that, but a woman to a woman sometimes does spill over.

JD: Because, you know, she might say [something] to another woman, but I have never heard her ever make a nasty comment about anybody or say anything nasty about anybody.

G: What do you think, aside from innate goodness of character which would be one explanation, but what sense of why she chose that kind of approach or why it suits her so well to be that way?

JD: Well, maybe it was because she was brought up in an adult world as a youngster.

G: Did she ever mention her mother or father in the course of your conversations or--?

JD: No. Of course, I knew Aunt Effie.

G: You've talked about Aunt Effie.

JD: Her father, yes.

G: You've talked about Aunt Effie in your other interviews; I wondered if--I won't say you shouldn't here. Do you want to say something again or do you want to talk, Mrs. Deason, about Aunt Effie as well, who's somewhat--a figure that's hard to get a hold of.

WD: To follow up on what Jeanne's thinking, Aunt Effie came nearer to being an angel than any woman I ever knew. She had no jealous bones about her. She had no mean bones. She was just a frail, little lady, just always around, always pleasant, and always loved everybody. I think maybe Lady Bird inherited some of that from being with her and being brought up by her. Probably Aunt Effie taught her some of that.

G: Did you meet Mrs. Johnson's father or have a sense of him as a person?

WD: Oh, yes. I visited with him in his country store at Karnack. He was just a hardheaded businessman that made a modest fortune there selling groceries. There was no bank in the town; he had a big safe in the back and he'd bank for anyone who wanted to leave things with him. He bought pulpwood, pine poles, and shipped them to the lumber mills. He was in that kind of a business and he was buying land. He was just a good businessman. He accumulated a good portion of the north end of Harrison County during his lifetime.

G: One would get a sense of that from the county records that I've looked at up in Marshall. For sheer number of transactions, he is probably number one and other people are way behind.

You keep bringing things to mind, but what would you want to say about Mr. and Mrs. Johnson as parents--you must have known them when the children were fairly young--as parental style, that might illuminate the differences in their approaches to being parents?

JD: Well, I can tell you one thing. Lynda Bird when she was a baby had a habit of biting people. Of course, I didn't have any children at the time and I said to Lady Bird one time, "You know, I would either bite her back or I'd spank her butt." And she just looked at me and she just kind of shook her head a little bit and didn't say a word. And, you know what,

I said to her several years later, "I've got to eat my words because Diann is doing the same thing." (Laughter)

G: And you didn't bite her or spank her?

JD: No. I had somebody else bite her. (Laughter)

WD: That was the case of the woman that didn't have children knowing just how to raise them.

JD: Just how to do it.

(Laughter)

G: Was there any other sense of how they were with the children as parents or a sense of what difference having the children [made], because the children came along later in their marriage and it had been, I gather, difficult for them.

WD: I don't remember too much. Of course, there is a difference in their style between Lady Bird and her husband. She was very evenhanded and calm about whatever she did in life, handling of the children. She'd reason with them, and the President would love them to death and sometimes he would yell at them a little bit. But mostly he was overwhelming with love to try to control them, but her love was on a different level. Well, on a different volume let's say. And she tried to control them with calmness and reasoning and things like that. By and large, I guess, it was more successful maybe than his approach. I don't know. I've raised two and I still don't know anything about raising children.

G: One factual question I'm curious about. I know the President was a heavy smoker until the heart attack. Did Mrs. Johnson smoke at all?

JD: I don't remember.

WD: I don't recall that she ever did.

JD: I don't remember her--

G: I didn't think she did but there was something--

WD: I wouldn't say positively that she didn't but I don't recall.

JD: I wouldn't either.

G: Well, there was one letter, I can't even think of it, where it was a little ambiguous and nobody had ever asked, so I was just curious.

JD: I don't ever recall seeing her smoking so . . .

G: I guess I'll finish up just by asking you--you've mentioned this again in your other interviews--the impact of his heart attack on her life and his life in the 1950s. Did it change his approach toward life and her approach toward his life after it happened?

WD: Well, I can't answer about her, but I think it had a very, very significant influence on his outlook on life. I think the heart attack and the recovery period--he spent days and weeks in bed, frequently, people tell me, hours alone with himself; he didn't want to talk to anybody. I think he had a profound change in his approach to life. He had been a young fellow driving like hell, let's get it done, it's got to be done, you know, whatever the cost is. We'll talk about the cost later, but the thing is to get it done. Let's get it done. Let's get it done. And climb the ladder. I think he had a change of life during that time, and almost to the point of getting an inner religion. He never espoused religion a lot, didn't talk about religion. But I think he really made peace with himself during those weeks of recovery, and his dedication to bringing about good legislation and pushing other things back on the back burner showed through after his heart attack.

G: Did either of you, when you were over there, notice any changes in the diet and the food that they were eating after the heart attack as before?

JD: Oh, yes.

WD: Yes. He used to gulp his food. He'd sit down and like he did everything else, he was in a hurry. Take a plateful and if he liked it, he'd gulp it down and take another plateful and gulp that down. But he learned during his heart attack or after that he could get by without gulping so fast, like he learned about a lot of other things. You'd see him stop eating when you knew he was hungry. He had the self-discipline to do it. He knew that to live he had to do it. He could do anything he made up his mind to do and he had made up his mind that he was going to stop some of these gulping habits and other things in order that he might live a useful life. I think he was dedicated. From that day forward, I think, some of what you would call a selfish interest was put very much in the background. "What can I do from this day forward that would be for the good of my country?" I saw it after he became president. He worked as hard as he could to get the programs that he believed in implemented.

G: Well, I'm almost done. I guess that one question I would like to ask both of you is what do you think that the biographies and the people who have worked on Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have least understood about them, or you would want to offer as a note of caution about trying to understand these two people? I know people interview you a great deal and no doubt you have read what people have written about them, but is there something that is missing in the biographies or a sense of these two people who have escaped the efforts of individuals to understand them?

WD: Yes. I just got through alluding to his change of course and his change of philosophy after his heart attack when all of the things that meant a lot to him, social progress, social justice and things like that, came to the forefront and were pursued more diligently. And I think so many people read a few stories about him or talk to some folks who knew him early in life

and say he was flamboyant and self-centered and things like that, that never really got down to know the man. I don't think that this point has been brought out too much in his--most folks who are writing are writing a book to sell and it won't sell unless you say something derogatory about the person you're writing about.

G: I guess to put not too fine a point on it to see his life as a relentless drive for power misses in your view some part of him and the people around him, Mrs. Johnson most especially. But that is not all of Lyndon Johnson.

JD: I think that most of them miss the warmth that he had. He was an extremely warm person, and he just--he didn't--

WD: You had to see him and be around him to see that. You'd just meet him on occasion and you didn't get that impression. He was busy getting something done and sometimes he would give short shrift on somebody who wanted to move in on him. And they'd say, "Oh, he's callous and arrogant." But they didn't know the man. They didn't know him.

G: Are there any examples of what you're talking about on the warmth about either one of them that occurred to you or just that--?

JD: There are a lot of examples on his part. You know, he just--well, if you ever interviewed any of the people that worked for him, he might yell at them now, but he always felt of them as a family and if he was buying something for one, he'd buy for the whole bunch. I can remember years ago when he'd come into town and we were, of course, living here in Austin and he'd go out and he'd buy for everybody he knew. He'd buy something for everybody he knew, and it wasn't because he wanted--but he wanted to give them something. And he himself was a very warm person when you were around him.

G: This isn't the word that has been used much, but I was just curious. Was there parts of it

that were fun? I mean the--

WD: Lord, yes.

JD: (Laughter) Yes.

G: One gets a sense of a very dour and grim, I mean [inaudible], through the biographies.

WD: He was fun through it all. And the people who took most of the pressure under the hard-driving work grew to love him because they saw the other side of him. They saw the real warmth of him, and the generosity of him. And the people who have talked about the drive for power would picture him as a man who's driving for power for power's sake, but only with power can you accomplish the good things in life that you want to accomplish. If you don't have power you can't accomplish them. He used to explain that to us in small groups that if you don't have any power you don't have any oomph and if you don't have any oomph you can't accomplish anything worthwhile.

G: He and his wife worked on the radio station, on the television station, they were into the media very early into their adult lives. Do you have theories about why he wasn't as successful on television as he was in a one-on-one or in small groups from your perspective, having been in the business? Is there any thoughts that have occurred to you about that?

WD: No. I've been asked that question a lot of times and it's a hard one to answer. His whole style though of selling a person on an idea was to look them right in the eye and get up pretty close to them sometimes. He'd get nose to nose almost when he wanted to emphasize something. Well, television is an entirely different thing. Now, President Reagan is the epitome of how you can sell on television. He's a great (inaudible). President Johnson had none of that.

G: He's a cooler, I guess, in the trade, but Johnson was a hot personality.

WD: On one-on-one, though, Johnson was a great salesman.

G: Well, thank you both. You've been very kind to go on at this length and you've answered and helped me on a lot of questions.

WD: Well, I hope we have.

End Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI

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WILLARD AND JEANNE DEASON

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