Oral History Interview

with

VIRGINIA FOSTER DURR

October 17, 1967
The National Archives

By Mary Walton Livingston
Larry Hackman also present

For the Lyndon B. Johnson Library

LIVINGSTON: This interview is for the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and is given by Mrs. Clifford J. Durr of Montgomery, Alabama. Mrs. Durr has come to the National Archives today, October 17, 1967, to record her impressions of the Johnsons as newcomers to Washington in the early days of the New Deal. Mrs. Durr, would you like to tell us how you first met the Johnsons?

DURR: Well, I would be delighted to tell you how I first met the Johnsons, but I think I would have to tell you a little of the background first of the New Deal period, how we all came

here. You remember the New Deal was the period when the country was flat on its face. I mean the beginning of the New Deal; the whole economic system had fallen flat on its face. People were starving and there was a great deal of unemployment and there was a great deal of stir and unrest in the country. A great many people flocked to Washington because they thought this was an opportunity to put the country back together again and really make it over, make it a better and new country. So the New Dealers that flocked to Washington were, so many of them, young people who had great hopes and who had great ambitions that the country was going to be made over in a new image, particularly the young Southerners because as poor as the United States was, and as much unemployment as there was, it was much worse in the South. The South had always been poor since the Civil War period, and of course it was really poor before the Civil War period, and the Depression

just flattened it out. It is just impossible for you young people to imagine how poor the South was. I came from Birmingham, Alabama, where, in a county of three hundred thousand people over two hundred thousand were on direct relief, which meant that they were getting two dollars and a half a week for a family of five to live on, which meant they were living on grits and oatmeal and cornmeal, and the cheapest and roughest sort of food. I think the first time my social conscience was stirred was when I was working through Junior League. I was Vice President of the Junior League and we worked with the Red Cross and we would go out and visit these families because they couldn't be certified for relief until they were seen by a Red Cross worker. The thing that impressed me the most was the dreadful situation the children were in. So many of them had rickets, and I doubt if you all have ever seen children with rickets, but it's the most dreadful sight in the world. You know, they shake like they have palsy. This was due to the fact that

they didn't have any protein. At the same time, milk was being poured into the gutters every day because they couldn't sell the milk at any decent price so the dairymen were just pouring the milk into the gutters. This was the situation. It wasn't a depression of not having enough, it was really the depression in which there was too much. The people were suffering because the prices had gone so low, and so people were destroying food when people were starving. This made a dreadful paradox and everybody knew something was wrong, something was terribly wrong. Of course, there were millions of different ways of how you solve this dreadful problem of the paradox of plenty and poverty at the same time. So when we came to Washington--my husband came up here with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to save the busted banks because the banks had closed and they were being reorganized, and he was asked to come up here by Stanley Reed, and he began to work in the RFC and try to reconstruct these

busted banks. The young New Dealers became very friendly with a great deal of interchange between the various departments. There was a great deal of mutual discovery of each other. We came up in 1933, and we actually met the Johnsons about 1936. The way we met them was Lyndon Johnson had been up here as secretary to [Richard] Kleberg, and then we had gone back to Texas and had become the regional director for the National Youth Administration and he did an extremely good job in that. He was a great friend of a lawyer in Austin named Alvin Wirtz, W-I-R-T-Z, who became the Under Secretary of the Interior. And he and Alvin Wirtz wanted to start a TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and since they had a mighty little river there, they started it on the lower Colorado River. It was to be called the Lower Colorado River Authority, and the Pedernales River was a part of this river system. Lyndon Johnson and Alvin Wirtz and Sam Rayburn, I suppose--I don't know who all the other people were who

were concerned--got a bill through the Texas legislature authorizing the setting up of the Lower Colorado River Authority. Then they had to come up here to the Department of the Interior and try to get the money from [Harold L.] Ickes' Public Works outfit. The first time Lyndon came to the Public Works outfit [Michael W.] Mike Straus was at that time the press agent for Ickes and also head of the Reclamation Department, so he came to see Michael Straus; he was the first one he saw. He presented his idea of the Lower Colorado River Authority, and both Mike Straus and Mr. Ickes were perfectly delighted with it, and so they took him over to the Public Power Division which at that time was headed by a great friend of mine named Clark Foreman from Atlanta. His mother was a Howell and the Howells owned the Atlanta Constitution; that was the family background. He had come up here originally as an authority on the race issue and to give Negroes equal opportunity in the Public Works programs. He had been

very much interested in that problem a long time and had worked with Will Alexander in Georgia on the various race relations programs, but then he'd been switched over to the Public Power Division and [Robert C.] Bob Weaver took his place, who's now in the Cabinet, of course. Well, [Arthur E.] Tex Goldschmidt was also in the Public Power Division and so was Abe Fortas. Abe Fortas, of course, is now on the Supreme Court, and Tex Goldschmidt is Ambassador to the United Nations in charge of social and economic things I believe. Clark Foreman had been working for years in both the fields of civil rights and civil liberties. So these three young men, Abe Fortas and Tex Goldschmidt and Clark Foreman were also very good friends, and they became great friends of ours, at least the Goldschmidts and the Foremans did: we never knew the Fortases as well. We became very devoted friends, and I met the Johnsons after the Colorado River Authority had been approved and had gotten ninety million dollars

and Lyndon had been elected to Congress. He and Bird [Claudia Taylor Johnson] came up here as a young Congressman and his wife from Texas, and we were invited to the Goldschmidts to meet them along with Abe Fortas and Clark and Mairi Foreman and Kitty Mae and Alvin Wirtz and ourselves and the Goldschmidts. Well, the first thing that impressed me about the Johnsons when I met them was that they were so extremely young--they're no more than ten years younger than we are, but they looked so extremely young. Lyndon was very tall and very thin and he was a good looking fellow, but he looked so young. He had a very boyish look. Bird was a sweet looking, dark haired, dark eyed girl who seemed to adore her husband and let him have the floor. She talked very little and let him do all the talking. She just looked at him, you know, with worshipping eyes and let him hold the floor, and he did hold the floor and he held it very well. But Lyndon was just absolutely full of the idea of abolishing poverty.

His family had been poor and he had been poor and he just hated to see people poor. So his great ambition at that point was to get electricity into the river areas of Texas so that people could have electric lights and pumps and irrigation systems. The doctrine of public power was a passion with him and he did succeed, as you know if you've ever been to Texas, he did succeed in turning a lot of that dry area of Texas into more or less a beautiful section through the Lower Colorado River Authority and the dam they built on the river. Well, that was the first time I met them, and I was taken with both of them very much indeed. Lady Bird's family had come from Alabama. Her mother and father both came from a little village up in Autauga County called Billingsley. My husband had had some knowledge of her family, the Patillos and Taylors, and she had spent every summer in Alabama with her relatives in Billingsley because, you know, her mother died when she was just a baby. And the reason she was called Lady Bird

was because her old Negro nurse said that after her mother died she looked like a little pitiful bird left in the nest; she was so thin and so pale and big-eyed. So that's the way she got called Lady Bird was because the Negro nurse was so sorry for her being left without her mother. This has been really Bird's great sorrow in her life was that her mother did die when she was very young. She was brought up by her father and her brothers and female relatives. She's always been a very self-contained person. She's always been a person who never gave way to her emotions at all. If she did she did it strictly in private because she was brought up in a rather spartan way by the brothers and the father I think. In all my long friendship with her I've never seen her give way to emotion. I'm sure she feels it; she has very deep loyalties and devotions and emotions, but she's a very, very self-controlled and self-contained person. I've always felt it was because she really felt that nobody in her childhood would listen to her, there was just nobody that really

was close enough to listen to her so she had to be on her own. We got to be very good friends, and we used to see a great deal of each other at various luncheons and parties. When she began to keep house--the first place I remember them living was the Wardman Park Hotel at that time, and she would give luncheons and little teas and she was a marvelous cook. Really, she was absolutely superb. Now, that was before I think she had Mrs. Wright, but she really was a marvelous cook. Then they lived over in northwest somewhere in a brick house, I forget the address. At that time she began having this cook, Mrs. Wright, whom she was so devoted to, and Bird's luncheons were just famous because the food was so marvelous. People just loved to go there because everybody would say, "Oh, have you ever tasted anything so delicious in your life?" She really had a genius and a talent, and not only did she have a genius and a talent for having delicious food, but having it on very short notice, because

Lyndon was constantly bringing home Texas constituents and people he'd met downtown, and she never knew whether she was going to have five people or fifteen for dinner. There again she adapted totally to his wishes in this matter. By this time she had two small children, but the household was totally adapted to Lyndon's life and Lyndon's needs and Lyndon's political career. Bird would always put that first. One of the luncheons I remember at her house was given in honor of Mrs. Maury Maverick when he retired from Congress. Maybe he got beat; I can't remember whether he got beat or retired but he went back to Texas. So she had this luncheon for Mrs. Maury Maverick and she had Aubrey Williams' wife and myself there. Aubrey Williams, you see, had been head of NYA [National Youth Administration] and so he and Lyndon were close friends at that time. There was Mrs. Maverick and Bird's mother-in-law was out from Texas, Lyndon's mother. She was an extremely beautiful woman; she had a very aristocratic, if you want

to call it that, a very beautiful bone structure. She was an extremely, really, beautiful woman with a beautiful face. I sat by her at the luncheon table, and she had rather large, swollen and very red hands. As she began to eat lunch, she said to me in sort of a whisper, "You know, I'm always so embarrassed and ashamed about my hands. Where we lived at down in the country when I was young, I had to do so much hard work and my hands never recovered. Even as a little boy Lyndon used to say to me, 'Oh, Mama, when I get big I'm going to see that you don't have to do any of this hard work so you can have pretty white hands.'" She remembered that even as a little boy, you know, he was worried about it. I really think this is one of the reasons that Lyndon had this passion against poverty and this passion for electricity. He did remember his mother doing all this hard heavy work and it did hurt him, and he did want to see her life made easier and he wanted to see the life of women like her made easier.

She absolutely adored him. She thought he was perfection itself and she would speak of him in the most devoted and loving way. In fact, she saw nothing ever wrong with Lyndon at all. I think Lyndon was accustomed to two adoring women all his life, his mother and his wife.

Well, in any case the friendship began, you know, we saw each other a great deal and then Lyndon . . . He and I had some differences of opinion because I was very active in the fight against the poll tax. I felt that the South, you see, at that time was saddled with it--they'd gotten rid of the white primary through the court action--but it was still saddled with the poll tax and the difficulty with registration. But mainly it was the poll tax we were fighting against, to get away from this tax on the vote because the vote in the South since the poll tax had been put on in the early 1900's had gone down just tremendously. In Virginia only 12 per cent of the voting population ever voted, and in Alabama I think

it was 19 per cent. Texas had a slightly higher percentage. Actually, not only were the Negroes disenfranchised, but the poor whites were disenfranchised too, and practically all of the women. My great interest in the beginning was on account of the women not being allowed to vote or not voting. As a bill would come up in the House and a bill would come up in the Senate, Lyndon was always on the other side. I would write him very indignant letters, and then when I saw him, I would be even more indignant and . . .

LIVINGSTON: Excuse me, Mrs. Durr, but this is a bill that would have abolished the poll tax that you're speaking of?

DURR: Federal.

LIVINGSTON: A federal bill to abolish the poll tax.

DURR: By federal action. You see, this was backed by [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt, and it was a bill that in federal elections would abolish the poll tax; not in state elections but in federal elections. Lyndon would always

say to me, and I'm absolutely sure he meant it, he'd say, "Why, Honey, you know I'm for you, I'm with you, but you just ain't got the votes." Now this is the essence of Lyndon's political philosophy. He's not going to be for you until you've got the votes because he thinks that just wasting your breath and your energy and your time in a hopeless cause doesn't do very much good. He's a very practical politician. But after he did get the votes he did abolish so many of the discriminations against Negroes in the South and became a great champion of civil rights. I've lived in the South now for the last sixteen years, and it really is a different place with the federal legislation that has been enacted. I would say that the two things that Lyndon believes in the most are, one, he hates poverty--he wants to get rid of poverty--and the thing he loves the most is the legislative process. He has a passion for politics. He had a passion for persuasion. I think as a political leader when he was in the Senate, he was splendid. I think that what

he's done on the civil rights issue has been splendid. Now . . .

LIVINGSTON: Thank you so much Mrs. Durr for your recollections.

DURR: Is there anything else you'd like me to tell you? I think that pretty well covers . . .

LIVINGSTON: I think if there is anything else you want to bring up later, you can add it. You can either do another tape or add it in writing.

DURR: Well, can you think of any other instances that I could bring up that would bring any illumination to that period?

LIVINGSTON: You might mention some of the others whom you used to see during the New Deal days whom the Johnsons knew. You've mentioned the ones who were interested in public power.

DURR: Well, we occasionally went to parties at [Thomas G.] Tom Corcoran's. Lyndon became a great friend of Corcoran's and [William O.] Bill Douglas's. We saw them there and then we saw them at the Hugo Black's occasionally, and we saw them so many places it's hard to remember. The Wirtzes entertained a great deal,

and we saw them there a great deal. But the thing about the New Deal in those days was that official Washington was so much smaller than it is now. There was a great deal of cross fraternization. We used to have them out to dinner at our house with a number of younger people, you know. One of them was our neighbor, Tom Elliot, who came down from Massachusetts, but I don't remember that he and Lyndon ever had any close association other than just a social one at the time. The thing was that we were a very close knit group; we knew each other not only through the government, but personally. There was a great intertwining of both personal and governmental relationships. Now Washington has gotten so enormous and there are so many people up here it's very difficult to realize that this small group that was here knew each other so well. And then, of course, we were all united in this really passionate admiration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt was the one I knew much better than the President himself.

She was the most perfect epitome of a great lady, if you know what I mean. She was kind and gentle and wise and tolerant and she was brave, and anything that we wanted to do she would encourage us in. On the poll tax issue, of course, she would have us over to the White House and would advise us. It was really due to her that we got rid of the poll tax first in federal elections. In the armed services--you see it was the time of the war, of the Second World War--and they did get rid of the poll tax for soldiers and military personnel, and she was really behind that. She was one of the people that encouraged it and I have some letters from her on the subject. She got, I believe, [Edward F.] Ed Prichard to write the bill up and [Benjamin V.] Ben Cohen. She would do anything to help the cause that she thought of as human freedom.

LIVINGSTON: Was Mrs. Johnson interested in any of the causes of the New Deal?

DURR: Well, she was in this way: she was very, very extremely personal. She led a very personal life. As I've said before, she subordinated herself entirely to Lyndon and to Lyndon's life and Lyndon's career, but we never doubted for a minute that Bird was with us. She had absolutely no race prejudice that I know of. She was a southern woman who had grown up with Negroes and intimately lived with them, and as I said, this old Negro nurse had raised her. I never thought Bird had any racial prejudice at all. I think that she was a person who lent her influence in a personal way to the people who were fighting on these issues. The very fact that she was a great friend of mine and a great friend of Maury Maverick's and Aubrey Williams' showed that she did feel this very strongly since we were all battling day and night on this issue. Referring back to the Roosevelts, why don't you just ask a few questions.

HACKMAN: Okay, I thought maybe . . .

DURR: Well, you asked me about his feeling toward

Roosevelt. Lyndon, as far as I know, and I'm sure I'm correct in this, absolutely adored the President and was a tremendous admirer of his. He thought he was a genius politically. Then, of course, he also had this tremendous admiration for Sam Rayburn and there was almost a father-son relationship there, they were so close. Then Alvin Wirtz, who was Under Secretary of the Interior, was a great friend of his, he was also a very keen politician. They were devoted friends and great colleagues, you know; they worked together on many things. Lyndon, you see, came up in a period in Texas there where they had a very diffcult struggle against the extreme right wing. There were not many Republicans in Texas at that time, but the Democratic Party was divided very bitterly into the anti-Roosevelt fraction and the pro-Roosevelt fraction and there was quite a tightrope he had to walk to get elected at all. Lyndon is the kind of politician that believes the first thing you've got to do is get elected. He has

always said that a politician is no good if he's dead or if he's out of office, so he always held to the principle that your first duty is to get elected if you're going to do anything at all, and to get elected in a place like Texas means you have to please a great many dissimilar groups of people. I really think that Lyndon's expression to me about, "Well, Honey, I'm for you, but you haven't got the votes," expresses his political philosophy as well as anything else, but he does believe that you have to get the votes before you can do anything. Ending up with his wife, his wife is the kind of southern woman that is almost the epitome of the ideal "southern lady" in that she subordinates herself entirely to her husband, to her family, she is self-sacrificing, she's selfless, she's devoted, and she's loyal. She's been extremely loyal to her friends through the years: even when they've been under severe attack, she's been loyal to them. She has had those qualities, which we think are the best southern qualities, of loyalty

and devotion, and she expressed this on a purely personal level because she never took any part in politics or any crusades or any movements at all except as Lyndon's wife. She has been the epitome of the southern tradition of the devoted wife and mother and lady.

I think she's had great influence through her personal relations because I think that she's been a tower of strength to him, and I think she's been a source of strength to him in that she has made so many friends and admirers on her own behalf. Well, I think that just about . . . I've had later relationships with her. Do you think I ought to tell about the campaigns, of her coming through Alabama, because that illustrates so well her quality, and I thought that might be very interesting.

LIVINGSTON: Well, what would you like to say about the 1960 campaign when you saw Mrs. Johnson?

DURR: Well, she came--in 1960 when he was running for Vice President, the LBJ Special, as you know, went through the South trying to arouse

support of the South because it looked like the South was going Republican. We got word that the LBJ Special was coming through Montgomery, Alabama, and I went down to see the train come in and try to wave to Bird and let her know that I was with her. It was a very dark and extremely cold and miserable day and the group at the station was very small, and many of them were Republicans with signs derogatory to the President saying, "The Yellow Rose of Texas," etc. There was a very bad, small and dreadful little high school band that was all out of tune, and the whole atmosphere was one of just real tension and no enthusiasm and no warmth and no kind of feeling at all. So when the train pulled in there was only a very small scattering of applause. Mrs. Hale Boggs had come up ahead of time trying to organize reception committees and passing out the hats and streamers, but it was a very cold reception and a very cold day. All the politicians that came out, like the mayor and the governor and the senators and the

congressmen, you could see they were scared to death because they thought Alabama was probably going Republican and by being publicly on record for Johnson-Kennedy they might be cutting their own political throats, so their speeches were not very enthusiastic either. Then Lyndon came out. By that time he was a pretty tired man, and I'm sure he did the best he could, but he didn't draw out the crowd. So then he introduced Lady Bird, and she came out in a very bright red suit and she began to speak in that very soft, you know, southern Alabama accent about how she came up every summer to Alabama, came up from Texas, and how she loved Alabama, how she loved to go in the creek and eat blackberries and watermelon and go to barbecues. And then all of a sudden she looked into the crowd, and she saw an old woman and called, "Oh, Cousin Elaine." And the woman came up, and she said, "Come up here." Then she hugged and kissed her and stood her by her. Then she looked over and saw another cousin and called, "Cousin Effie and Cousin Carolyn! Come here." Finally, I think she had six or eight

on the platform with her, and it got to be a regular family reunion. Well, this stirred the crowd into the first enthusiasm they had because, you see, this was being true to your kin, being true to your family, being true to your state. The crowd really went wild with enthusiasm at that point and Bird saved the day. So when the train drew out, there was a great deal of enthusiasm and a great deal of real genuine warmth and admiration. I would say on that particular occasion she saved the day. I don't know, I can't remember, I'm afraid Alabama went Republican that year, but at least we did get Democratic votes. Then in 1964, when she came down on the Lady-Bird Special, my husband and I drove down to Mobile to see the train come in. As she got off the train, the streets were pretty well crowded with people, and a great many Negroes, but the politicians were totally absent. There was, you know, quite a bit of enthusiasm for her, but when she got to the place where she was going to speak and I looked on the platform,

there was only one Alabama politician that I recognized which was Senator [John J.] Sparkman. When she got up to speak, I'm sure that these little boys had been paid to heckle her and to interrupt her because every other breath they would interrupt her and say something nasty or just yell, "Down with Johnson."

LIVINGSTON: Yes.

DURR: "Down with Johnson." Bird stopped in the middle of her talk and looked out at them, and she said in this very sweet way, "Now look, I believe as firmly as you do in the right of free speech, and I think you have a perfect right to express your opinion to me. But I think you should give me a chance to express my opinion, and then you can say what you want to." Well, just because she was so ladylike about it and so sweet and gentle, they did hush up a little while so she could finish her speech. When it was over and she got quite a lot of applause then too, and the crowd was quite enthusiastic. Luci [Johnson Nugent] was with her, and she got a big

hand from all of the young people. I remember Senator Sparkman--I don't know whether I'll have to cut this out or not--I saw him afterward and I said, "John, you really deserve a gold cross for having courage enough to stand on that platform by Lady Bird when all the other politicians had disappeared." He said, "Well, I hope it's going to be a gold cross. I'm afraid it's going to be an iron cross." But he did stand by her. Then the Special pulled out, and she had surrounded herself with a lot of southern women that came from Alabama, like [S. Douglass, Jr.] Doug Cater's wife and a number of other southern women who worked in Washington and had connections here. That was a very brave thing for her to do because in 1964 the South was so strongly against the civil rights bill and they were so angry about it and the [Barry M.] Goldwater sentiment was so strong. To come back into the South with a lot of women and face those hostile crowds and travel all through the deepest part of the South and subject herself to this kind of . . .

LIVINGSTON: Heckling.

DURR: . . . heckling and hooting and howling was an extremely brave thing. I think that she showed at that point another quality that we Southerners admire so much, which was courage, real moral courage. So I have a great deal of affection and admiration for her, and I think that she's been a remarkably good wife to Lyndon.

LIVINGSTON: Thank you.

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Gift of Personal Statement

By VIRGINIA FOSTER DURR

to the

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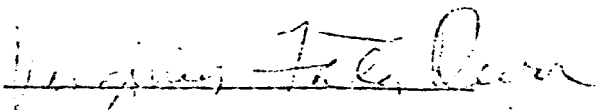
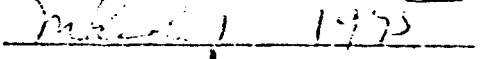
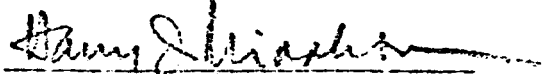
Signed 

Date 

Accepted 

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Date March 5, 1975