

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 3, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: VIRGINIA (JERRY) WILKE ENGLISH
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Mrs. English's residence, Lake Travis, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mrs. English, let's start with this 1945 trip. First of all, I want to ask you where you were stationed and how you happened to be in Europe at the time of LBJ's trip in May 1945.

E: I was stationed at that time at the Rainbow Corner in Paris, and I had been there since about February of 1945. I had been in correspondence with the Johnsons, both Bird and Lyndon, from time to time all during the war. I had left from their house and they knew of my Red Cross work. I am sure they're the ones who told John Connally, for instance, where I was. We had kept up. We're old, good friends.

G: Did you have any idea that LBJ was coming to Paris before he got there? Did he give you any warning?

E: Yes, I think that I had a letter. I didn't save it, so I can't be sure, but I feel very confident that there was a letter from the Congressman's office telling us what times he would be in there and that he hoped to see us at that time.

G: How did you first hear from him when you--?

E: I feel sure that he called on the phone and said that he was there maybe for one day. This is a little bit hazy in my mind. I saw him on I think two or three occasions when they were there. I can say one

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time I saw him because I had written my mother and daddy and told them that it was good to see Lyndon and he was just like having a relative from home and that he carted me around in a--he had a fine fat navy car and that was pretty impressive for gals who rode around in the back of a 6 x 6 most of the time or a jeep.

G: Yes. That was from a letter to your parents?

E: Yes.

G: What was the date of that?

E: May 28, 1945.

G: Do you recall meeting the other members of the committee, where you might have met them?

E: Yes, it was at a luncheon or a dinner party. Maybe it was a dinner party. And they were all very, very nice. They were quite interested in what I had been doing, too, and several of them--I'm sure I told Mr. [F. Edward] Hebert, "Oh, your New Orleans boys, I know them. I've met quite a number of them." And that Paris reminded a lot of the boys of New Orleans; we often talked about that. My favorite of those gentlemen was Mr. Mike Bradley. He was about my height, and he was a real sweet, funny little man. They were all very nice.

G: Did they get along well together?

E: They seemed to be very compatible.

G: Was there a natural leader in the group?

E: Yes. Lyndon was their leader. Of course, these things when I saw them were all social, mostly social. There was never anything like they would even say anything that would be in conflict. Now, maybe

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they had different conflicts on how much navy property should be rescued and that sort of thing, but as far as when we were all together, it seemed very. . . .

G: Did they talk much about their investigation while they were there?

E: I think they were more interested in just the war and seeing and knowing--like I was in France, so they were more interested in the French people and what kind of suffering we [saw]. This just came to me. I remember how interested they were when we told them about the reaction of Roosevelt's death. That was a very interesting day in Paris. The Parisians were as grieved as we were. There was a general mourning. We closed the club. It was very strange. I remember how I think Mr. [Sterling] Cole maybe was so interested in that kind of reaction from the people. Now they didn't, as I remember, talk much about--I think after they got back from Scotland and maybe from the Italian--how much property had been left and was apparently still serviceable, but that's just my impression.

G: Did LBJ mingle with the European people as he did when he was in his own district?

E: Not where I ever was with him, no. In fact, we went one night to the Folies-Bergere and he didn't like it. I think it was Sam Plyler and I that were with him. The whole group was there; we all went as a group. But I think that the three of us left, and maybe John Nash, too, or Tom Miller, Jr. I'm not sure. I think he said, "I'm going. Any of you want to stay, can," or something like that. But I'd been

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to the Folies and I would rather have been with LBJ and talk about home.

G: Why did he want to leave, do you know?

E: I just don't think he liked it. It's all in French. Of course there are many beautiful women. It's burlesque, and if you don't understand the language, of which I'm not too familiar either, it's kind of dull. If you're not interested in naked women.

G: I gather he was interested in finding Texas servicemen and women over there and getting together with them.

E: Yes. As I said, I think he sent out a letter to as many of the Tenth District people that he knew were within probably a radius of fifty miles of Paris. He may have done this in Germany, he may have done it in Italy, I just don't know about that. But he had these boys in, and I was the only Texas girl from the Tenth District. We had lots of Texas gals over there, but I was the only Tenth District gal that he called in anyway. There may have been WACs and WAVEs--there weren't any WAVEs where we were, but there were WACs.

G: What was on his mind? What was he talking about and thinking about when you were with him, do you recall?

E: I think doing the job. I think he was really interested in seeing the property, the navy property, but I think they all were very impressed with their visit up to Eisenhower. Yes, we talked a lot about that.

G: What did he say about Eisenhower?

E: Well, he liked him. I think he liked him, thought he was strong.

G: Do you recall what he said?

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- E: No, I can't. I have this feeling more than--I think Hébert was very impressed with Eisenhower. Maybe I'm hearing Hébert. It's the sort of thing if you're sitting at a table and the one on your right talks more than the one on your left, that you wouldn't remember.
- G: The accounts here of this meeting with Eisenhower indicate that they found Ike more jovial than he projected.
- E: I would think that any time you had a congressional committee visit you, no matter what your position was, that you would do your best to be pleasant. As a Red Cross girl we heard stories about how mad Eisenhower would get at different things. Of course, Eisenhower was always on my team as far as Red Cross was concerned, because he always had his under officers make a provision for the Red Cross to have a billet and a place for a club. We always were very happy with General Eisenhower because he took care of the Red Cross.
- G: The committee did a lot of touring on this trip. Was he interested in seeing Paris, LBJ, or do you recall?
- E: I think he enjoyed driving around the city, but I don't think that he went to Napoleon's Tomb, for instance. I don't know now. I don't remember that. I didn't go in touring with him.
- G: When you went in the big navy car, where did you go?
- E: Maybe he came to the Red Cross and got me and took me to the hotel and then we rode back to the Red Cross. Maybe we rode down the Champs Élysées. I'm sure that I made him drive me down the Champs Élysées. I probably gave the queen's wave as I was going down, too, to the peasants that I was in a big, beautiful black car, because one time I

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rode up the Champs Élysées on V-E Day in a horse-drawn carriage giving the queen's wave. So I feel sure that I would have insisted that he drive me, if at all possible.

We visited--no, that's very hazy. You have to remember, I didn't know you were going to come back into my life this far. How long is this now, twenty-five, thirty-five years? No--

G: You weren't taking notes.

E: I wasn't taking notes.

G: How about the American ambassador? They met with him. Do you recall that?

E: No, I don't. No, not anything. No.

G: He of course was in Paris twice, I guess. Maybe even three times actually.

E: I think just twice.

G: Twice?

E: Let's see.

G: They flew to Germany.

E: On a Tuesday.

G: And then they flew back to Paris.

E: And then they came back to Paris and then they did come back again.

G: When did you first get an inkling that you were going to get a ride back and how did this matter come up?

E: It must have been on the second trip when he was there. By then I had decided that there might be room. I'm sure I said I wanted to go home. I'm sure I mentioned that many times, because all of us were

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pretty much interested in how we were going to get home. So I feel sure that we went to lunch, and I know he said, "Now, it's all right with me, but you'll have to convince the other gentlemen on the committee, because they will have to be sure that it's all right." So I remember talking to each one of them and saying that "Lyndon says I can go if it's all right with you." I guess that's the way I put it. So they were all very gracious and they said, why, they'd be very happy to have me come along. So that's about the time I knew it because I finally had written my parents on the twenty-eighth [of May] and told them I thought I was coming.

G: How did Nancy Gatch get together with you?

E: That didn't happen until we got to England. When we were in London, the Admiral [Thomas Gatch] called. I think he was in Washington at the time, as I remember, and he called. They were very cute to me again. They said that the Admiral's daughter would like to come home with them, Nancy Gatch, and they said would it be all right with me. It happened that Nancy and I went over in the same group to Africa, so I hadn't seen her since Africa but I was very happy to have Nancy come and join us. Since it was not my plane, I thought that was just real nice of them to let me decide these things.

G: The committee went to Germany and I guess looked at one of the concentration camps. Do you recall that, LBJ's reaction to the [camps]?

E: No. I don't [recall].

G: He didn't talk about that?

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- E: They may have, but it wasn't the sort of thing that it made an impression on me. We didn't sit and discuss it.
- G: What was his mood during all this, do you recall?
- E: Busy.
- G: Really?
- E: Yes.
- G: You indicated before we were taping that Donald Cook did a lot of the work, too. What was he doing?
- E: Taking notes mostly, I think. Now, he'd be the one who could tell you what his reaction [was], because Don was with him the whole time. When we were together it was usually for a social hour and a meal. I would think that my impression of Lyndon was that he was busy and businesslike, but not depressed.
- G: So then they came back after traveling I guess to North Africa.
- E: Munich.
- G: Munich, Naples, places like that.
- E: I think I must have questioned him a great deal about Naples because I had been there eleven months before. So I'm sure I asked him where like did they stay, what did they see, did they go to the Garden of the Hodonjade [?], the Orange Club. What their answers were, I don't remember. I think they probably said [it was] dirty.
- G: In the reports they seemed to have been very impressed by the poverty in Europe at this time and just--
- E: Oh, it was so bad.
- G: Lack of food and nutrition and that sort of thing.

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E: So bad.

G: Did he talk to you about that?

E: I'm sure we discussed it, and I feel sure I would have told him about this German archaeologist who was married to an Italian Jewess, and he was our outdoor doorman. Here was this tall, very different looking German man about seventyish, and the only job that the Red Cross could find for him to do was to be the doorman. But his wife--they lived in Positano, and so my roommate and I went to Positano for leave. And this man rode this horrible train back and forth to Positano and slept in their potato patch with a gun, that kind of poverty. So I'm sure that I told him about that. When they were telling me about what they saw, I would have told them how sad it was.

G: Another thing, he seems to have felt that everything was very ripe for a communist revolution in these various places.

E: I think that everybody was worried about the Russians. I don't know if you've read Hébert's book on that, but if you'll remember, everyone told them to watch out for the Russians. This is just a personal political--but I think the people who were telling them were right. I think we gave too much to the Russians. Now, I never had any dealing with the Russians. I mean, I didn't get that far into Germany at all.

G: But I was wondering if this was something that entered into LBJ's thinking during this trip. Did he talk about this with you?

E: I bet that we did talk about that. I can't recall just [when], but I'll bet some of the guys from the Tenth District when he was over there in Germany talked to him about it. As I have to keep reminding

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you, I was twenty-five and ready to get home. I wasn't thinking about the world problems then.

G: Now, who else did he meet while he was over there? You mentioned Sam Plyler.

E: Yes. I remember especially Sam Plyler and John Nash and Curley Doyle and Tom Miller, Jr. And it seems to me that there were one or two others that I can't recall their names.

G: Then I gather the group left and flew from Paris to Southampton with you.

E: Yes, I was--

G: Okay, do you want to pick it up there and recount what happened?

E: Well, I remember that I was packed and ready to go, so we flew and had bad weather. Now I remember that. We had bad weather, and we were in a smaller plane. We weren't in the plane that we came home in. It was one of these navy commanders that lent us the plane, a commodore or a captain or somebody. It was just bad weather. So instead of flying on into London we stopped in Southampton and went by car first to Plymouth and a naval station, and they did leave me--I remember this now, when I'm drinking that milk--they did leave and go on a small tour of the Plymouth installation. And then we got in cars and went on to London. Then the next day they left London to fly up to Scotland and Ireland, I guess. I know I was there on my birthday by myself, and I had a good time because I had some old buddies that I got in touch [with].

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So then they came back. It seems like that they, too, were impressed with Scotland and Ireland. Did they go to Ireland? It seems like. . . .

G: I think they did.

E: Well, I'm not sure, but they were impressed by the orderliness of England and Scotland. Really, after you've been to Italy, it's really--and they'd been to Africa, those little narrow streets that they talk about, the casbah and that sort of thing. They were really impressed with their trip up there. I think they were. As I remember I think there was a great deal of property up there, surplus navy property. As I say, you'll have to ask Donald Cook.

G: I saw a note somewhere that they ended up with a case of Scotch from one of those places in Scotland.

E: Ah, yes. It was on board the plane coming home. Now, we did go to a party at a flat in London. You have down here Lieutenant George Sprowse, and I'm sure that's who it was, but that name doesn't--but it was a nice flat. Now see, I had not been in many flats or apartments in England. I'd only had a week's leave over there and we at that time were having the V-2s and V-1s and I stuck pretty close around the hotel. But this was very nice. We went out into the city and went to this nice apartment. And I think there were some other Tenth District people. I feel sure that that party was quite--it seemed like there were twenty-five or thirty people there. Our little group wasn't that [large], and I'm not sure that all the other congressmen were with us

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either, because I think that was more or less a very Texasey party. I think that was a Texas party.

Then Monday we flew in the prettiest plane. You can't believe what Red Cross girls fly in, the kind of planes that we fly in, those kind with the metal seats along the side. This had tables so you could sit and have your food and play cards. Donald Cook worked at one of these tables all the time. And they had berths like in a Pullman car, and Nancy and I were right together. I remember hitting her on the bottom or she hit me on the bottom, one or the other, and we said, "Do you smell that? Do you smell that? It's bacon!" We hadn't smelled bacon frying in two and a half years, twenty-eight months, whatever it was. So we had a nice breakfast. And then we were enjoying some of that Scotch that was put aboard on our way before we landed at Reykjavik. Then we made a tour of Reykjavik, which is flat, has no rocks, no trees, very flat, very desolate. But we did tour Reykjavik and were taken to a large kind of hall and met with some of the civic leaders there. Nancy and I just stood at the side and they were. . . . But that was very nice and then we got back in the airplane and had a nice dinner served by these nice--the crew were very good. I think it was something fresh. You could eat fresh food in England and we could eat fresh food in France where I stayed, but I hadn't had much fresh food.

G: Did LBJ give any speeches while he was over there?

E: No, not to my knowledge. I'm sure that he would get up and talk-- well, at this place in Reykjavik, as I remember it I'm sure he said,

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"I speak for the group when I say we're glad that you've been helping us."

G: What manifestation was there that he was the head of the group? How did he seem to take charge?

E: Just like Lyndon always took charge.

G: Can you give me some specifics on that?

E: Yes, like in the hotel lobby, "Okay, we'll go now. We'll go in this first car." You never did know him, I feel sure. Did you?

G: Not very well.

E: Well, it always seemed to me that whenever you were with Lyndon, he was leading and I was trotting just as fast as my little short legs would take me. But he always was the leader it seemed like in any situation. I'm sure Bird would say probably the same thing.

G: So you flew back. Did you fly to Washington?

E: Yes, we sat down at St. Johns to refuel. I remember looking out in the night and it was just about, you know, drizzle, drizzle. No one got off the plane, but I remember we did land there and refuel, and then we got to Washington, it says here, at nine-thirty in the morning. I remember I got out of that plane and I kissed the ground, I was so glad to be home.

G: Was the committee tired?

E: Oh, yes. Well, we'd slept on the plane, but yes, they were tired. I think everybody was tired. They'd been going at a pretty good clip. They were luckier than most that they were always, I'm sure, taken around in cars, they didn't have to walk.

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G: So what happened after the return to Washington?

E: I was trying to think. I kind of think that Bird met us. I feel like they broke up there with the families meeting the different [congressmen], or aides or something. I feel sure that we came back with just either--maybe Dottie Plyler met us, I don't know. But we came back to the house and I went to the Johnson's house--it was 30th Street, wasn't it?

G: 30th Place.

E: I stayed there and was going to stay one or two days just to see Dorothy Plyler and a few people and see how I could get back to Texas, and Bird, that's the time she got so sick with a fallopian pregnancy. She was so darling and so brave. I couldn't believe that anybody could be that sick and tell you how much postage to put on a piece of mail going out.

G: There was a dinner party you mentioned earlier.

E: Yes. That night--

G: This was the same day you got back or--

E: Well no, we arrived on the twelfth. It was the next day. We got back the twelfth and I remember she was at the house when we got there. She said she didn't feel well, but there was a dinner party going to be [held the next night]. Mr. Sam [Rayburn] was coming that night and Willard I think was living there then, wasn't he?

G: Yes.

E: He was back from the war and he was living at the house.

G: This is Bill Deason?

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- E: Yes. But Bird said, "Jerry, Zephyr's [Wright] got everything planned and I want you to act as hostess to these people. There's no use to cancel it because Lyndon has to eat anyway, and they're all invited." Man, I couldn't believe that. So Lyndon stayed at the hospital with her until just right at dinnertime I think, and then Mr. Sam came and Bill Deason and there was another gentleman whom I don't remember who he was. I think he was a southern congressman, but I'm not positive. Maybe he was in on a federal office of some kind. I'm not sure he was a congressman.
- G: When did they discover that it was necessary to take Mrs. Johnson to the hospital?
- E: That morning, the morning of the thirteenth. I think about ten or eleven she started hemorrhaging just very, very badly, and so there was an ambulance. They took her. I remember the ambulance. It was when the boys were taking her out on the cot that she was giving me all these instructions.
- G: What was she saying?
- E: Oh, that in the top drawer of her desk there was a manila envelope that was addressed to Jesse Kellam, or I think maybe just to KTBC--no, it was to Jesse. I think she said to Jesse Kellam. And it took thirty-four cents worth of postage and I was to put that on and to mail it that day. It had to go out that day; it was some kind of report. I kept saying, "Bird, we'll take care of everything. Don't you worry," because I know how diligent the staff was and I knew that they could figure out all these things. But no, she told me that and

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she told me that Lynda would be all right. She felt sure that Zephyr and I could take care of Lynda at that time, who was two. Two? So then I stayed on at the house three or four days maybe. Maybe even five or six. If my momma and daddy were here they could probably tell me the day I got back to Austin, but I really can't tell you just how long I stayed.

G: You went ahead and had the dinner party, I take it?

E: Yes.

G: Was the trip discussed in some detail?

E: Yes, I think it was. I'm sure that it was, and I'm sure that Sam Rayburn would have been interested. I'm sure he'd worked with these admirals and these people that he'd seen on the trip and I imagine that that was discussed. I think I was just scared to death that I wouldn't pass the peas right. Being a hostess to a congressman and Sam Rayburn when you've been a Texas girl all your life, it was kind of exciting, really. So I think I was more interested in whether I was going to see that the meat was served and that Zephyr and I would get the table cleared right and that sort of thing.

G: Anything else on your stay there in Washington?

E: Well, Lynda was a doll. She was a cute little girl. But boy, when she wanted to go up the steps or down the steps you'd better be ready to go up or down the steps with her. Of course Zephyr was just wonderful always. I'll bet you've had a lot about Zephyr. Don't most people talk about Zephyr?

G: She's mentioned, certainly.

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E: She was a great help to me then, because I didn't know how the household was run, but she knew what time to have breakfast for the Congressman and she knew what time he would be home and when to have everything ready, so. . . .

G: Lynda would have been just a little over a year old because she was born in 1944.

E: She was running, I mean toddling, and getting in and out of things very rapidly. And of course stairs are just the thing that children like the best and she wanted to go up or down the steps, whichever it was. She wanted to do that.

But while I was there I did not stay in the house all day. I did go down to his office. I knew--wasn't there a man named Green? Yes. Henry Green [?]? Somebody Green who worked in Lyndon's office there in Washington for so long. I had known these people before I left, and of course I was a returning heroine, so they were very sweet and I got to see them. I looked up some Red Cross people who had returned and were working in the Red Cross headquarters. So I had my own life. But I was really interested in getting home.

G: Did you stay until Mrs. Johnson got out of the hospital, do you recall?

E: I'm not positive. I went to see her in the hospital, I remember that, but I can't remember whether she was really at home. I knew she was doing very well after they got the bleeding stopped.

G: She had an unusual blood type I gather and had to get transfusions from people who had the [same type].

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- E: Yes. I was not asked. I'm sure I would have tried, but I wasn't asked.
- G: Was it Irving Goldberg I think that--?
- E: Yes, and John Lyle it says here. I don't know either one of them that I know of. But I have a feeling I came home before [she did]. I know that Lyndon's office found me a ride home. Herman Jones and I came back on a plane to Austin, came right to Austin, I think. We may have landed in Houston and had to drive. These are the keen little things I can't remember.
- G: Anything else on the European trip that you feel is important or noteworthy?
- E: All of it was to me, because with my Red Cross priorities I had a feeling I'd be there for another six months or eight years, I didn't know. So to me it was very important that the Congressman came and there was a place for me to come with them. But they were very nice men and they seemed like they were trying to do their job, that they were very interested in the navy. And of course LBJ loved the navy. He really loved the navy.
- G: What sort of indication do you have of that?
- E: That he always wore that little navy service [pin], even in his picture, the one in the White House.
- G: Oh, the Silver Star.
- E: Yes. That he got through his navy [service]. No, he always was very, very fond of the navy, I thought.
- G: Anything else on that trip?

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E: The milk and the bacon are the big things. No, other than that--

G: Did he talk about it in later years?

E: Oh, when we talked when we saw him in the White House in 1967 he was up to his eyebrows in so many problems that--I mean, the things of the day. I may have said, "I'll never forget that you brought me home from Europe." Yes, I did tell him I think that I was going to go see Mr. Hébert, and I think we talked a little bit about that I'd known him since coming home on the trip or something like that. But no, that's another story about our stay in the White House with him. I won't get it in on this 1945, because it was twenty years later. More than that, I guess.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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