

INTERVIEW II

DATE: March 18, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: VIRGINIA (JERRY) WILKE ENGLISH
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

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G: We're on.

E: Okay, 1941. I was in the reception office in the sunroom of the mezzanine of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel, and Gene Lasseter and Rose Delmar Groce [?] and I were the receptionists. We sat out in the front in a little pre-office sort of thing, and we were to screen the people. If they wanted to see John Connally or Jake Pickle or--what was that--?

G: Jim Blundell.

E: Jim Blundell--we would talk to them and then we would say, "Well, we'll see if they're in." Our little people that just walked in there had a time getting up there; they had to be pretty high on the list. But we had the drop-in people that just wanted to talk and wanted to take some literature and we'd give them literature. It was a fun job, and we worked hard. I mean, we seemed to be awful busy up there with these drop-in people.

G: Did you work at all with the press?

E: Very little. We were pretty low on the totem pole, if you want to know. And it used to just drive us wild, we'd have somebody that we thought had a real good handle on a town or something, and they'd

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come in there, they didn't know how to go upstairs and find these people on their own. We'd try to call up there and say, "Oh, Mr. So-and-So is here from Smithville, and he is, oh--" And they'd say, "Oh, tell him we're not in," and we used to just die, because we thought that it was all so important.

G: Yes.

E: These people apparently knew the ins and outs. But they were nice; a lot of times they'd say, "Well, send him up."

G: What was the campaign organization structure? Who was at the top?

E: I guess John and--

G: Jim Blundell.

E: Jim Blundell was up there. Now, these were the working type. I'm sure that Ed Clark and some of these other people didn't work there every day. But for the people who--and I guess they had it divided up. I really don't know how it was divided up there, whether John saw just a certain group and Jake took care of the mayors, you know, [if] they had it divided that way.

G: Did Senator [Alvin] Wirtz play an active role?

E: If he did, he didn't have to come through our office.

G: Yes.

E: And a lot of people didn't have to come through our office. Lyndon was not in Austin very much; he was out nearly all the time. He'd come in on Fridays, I think, and spend the weekend in town, that sort of thing. But mostly we went through John or Jake or Jim Blundell.

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G: Well, when the candidate was in town, where was he more likely to get together with his workers?

E: Up there. But he nearly always tried to come through and say hello to all of us. There were lots of people typing envelopes there and volunteers who came and went.

G: Was he good with remembering their names?

E: Oh, yes, very good. And he shook their hands and loved the girls and made you feel like you were really going a great job. He was very nice about coming through. If he were in town, it always was easier to send upstairs and find out where he was or something like that. I think he was more accessible than John or Jake. Don't tell John or Jake I said this, but they wouldn't remember probably.

G: What was your perception of W. Lee O'Daniel's support?

E: We couldn't believe it! Well, when it was all over, my mother and father and I were going to Padre [Island] for the weekend, and I remember in the car we listened to the radio and we were winning, just winning. [We were] just so happy, we celebrated, ha-ha. Then we checked into, [I'm] sure, at that time, [one of] those funny little cottages that didn't have any radio or anything. And we didn't even know it till we got back to Austin Sunday night, that we had lost. And that was just--where I was I didn't even know [we'd lost]. Well, when you're in the other campaign, you never hear what the other group's doing.

G: Well, who supported O'Daniel in Austin, say?

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E: I don't know, I never did. You just couldn't find anyone later who had voted for him either.

G: There were four candidates in the race, I guess.

E: Who all were they?

G: Well, there was O'Daniel, Gerry Mann, Martin Dies, and Lyndon Johnson. Did the Johnson campaign have any particular strategy for getting a plurality?

E: You'll have to talk to those people up on the sixth or seventh floor because they did the strategy. Ours was just to greet.

G: Did you feel like Gerald Mann's candidacy was cutting into your base of support?

E: I really was too far down and I wasn't that politically involved at that time. I don't think I could even vote.

But as I say, all I remember is it was a fun job for us down there, just greeting the people and, oh, we typed some of the letters. Oh, there was a sweet little man who was--now that's who ran our office, the postmaster from San Marcos, little sweet man--Lee?

G: Ray Lee?

E: No, Ray was up somewhere. I don't think Ray had an office with these--no, what is that man's name? You know, he worked for Lyndon; he and Lyndon went to San Marcos together, and he turned out to be the postmaster of San Marcos. Oh, you should have it, you know his name. You even mentioned it, I think, the other day.

(Interruption)

G: You're on again.

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E: These people wouldn't even know that we were down there.

G: But the manager of your operation was--

E: Was Wilton Woods, and he was very nice. He had a little office in the back somewhere. Would he have been an accountant? Would he have kept the books maybe, or something?

G: I guess he could have.

E: I don't know, but he seemed to be--he knew all that was going on, but he stayed down there with us. He was more or less the office manager, I think.

G: He was from Seguin, I think, wasn't he?

E: Really? But I think he ended up in--

G: San Marcos?

E: San Marcos. But he was nice. But Gene and Rose and I greeted the people and answered the little phone out in our place. We weren't the telephone operators.

G: Did you see much of Mrs. Johnson during that campaign?

E: Very little. I think she was working with the women's group. She'd come in once in a while, but not on a regular eight-to-five basis.

G: During this campaign, Lyndon Johnson was really identified with Franklin Roosevelt.

E: Yes.

G: Was this a help or a hindrance in 1941?

E: Well, I certainly thought--we all hoped it was a help. I think we were proud of the connection, these people that worked there, of course.

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G: But could you tell if this was having a positive impact on the voters or the people who came in to see you?

E: I think most of the people who came in to see us were real Democrats, the straight ticket, and I think they liked it. Very seldom did we get anyone who was against us, or would talk against Lyndon.

G: Did you see any indications of support from the White House, announcements or other support from--?

E: Not down where I was, not that I was conscious of. You keep wondering why I was there when you start talking about it, don't you?

(Laughter)

G: Do you recall that rally in Wooldridge Park in 1941?

E: I feel sure that we closed the office and we all went as a group. We just marched up to Wooldridge Park, which was two or three blocks. I think we clapped loud and were very happy to be there and see.

G: How would you characterize LBJ's speaking style in that campaign?

E: Homey. I think he always felt so at home in Austin that he probably made a little different speech here than he did other places.

G: Was he a good stump speaker, or was he--?

E: Some people liked him and some didn't.

G: Really?

E: Yes. I had had a course in public speaking at the University [of Texas], but I don't think I was an authority on that either. I know that the people that were there were enthusiastic. But that, too, is [because] you nearly always draw people who are your friends.

G: Did the candidate's mother play a role in that campaign at all?

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E: I think she was probably on the speakers' stand at that rally, was introduced. I think she'd been ill. Hadn't she been ill sometime?

G: Yes.

E: So I imagine she and Bird sat with their hats and their gloves on like the picture down there, because we all had hats and gloves at that time.

G: How about Charlie Marsh? Was he involved at all in the campaign?

E: Charlie Marsh?

G: Publisher of the Marsh-Fentress chain.

E: The name is familiar, but again he could have gone right to the sixth floor and knocked on the door and he would have been admitted. We felt like we were below the stairs, we really did. We would get so upset because we thought we were pretty important down there in the sunroom, but they were the kings.

G: Anything else on this campaign that you recall?

E: Oh, the disappointment of losing when we thought we had won. We were pretty confident. I think the whole staff was pretty confident right at election time. It seemed like it had swung, you know, this feeling that we were going to do real well and do it.

G: Did he ever consider challenging the returns or asking for a recount?

E: I remember the day after we came back. I remember that was a dismal day, Monday after the weekend. I think there was talk that he should, I mean down there where we were, let's do it. We were mad and upset. But I don't know who was doing the advising.

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G: Did you see him after the election? Did he come down and thank the staff?

E: I think he came down--yes, he did, he came down and thanked us and told us that we would try again. We were all for him and just disappointed.

G: Well, was it a speech there or did he just talk to each one individually, or how did he--?

E: I think we just kind of all gathered in the big room where they had the typewriters and everything and he just said "I thank all of you." It wasn't a speech, but he didn't come around to each one of us individually.

G: Yes.

E: It was just a sad, sad occasion.

G: Anything else on that campaign?

E: I can't think of anything, other than that I made good friends. It was a very close group that I worked with down there. We remained friends for a long time. And I'll bet you that it gave Lyndon a lot bigger, broader support over the state after that. I think he had made some good friends along the path that helped him the next time.

G: In 1948. Is there anyone in particular that you can think of?

E: No, I just remember--oh, we got letters, we got to see some of the letters before we sent them up there that people wrote in and said that they were for Lyndon and how glad they were that he was [running], you know, that sort of thing. It seemed like it was--but now names I don't remember.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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