

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 26, 1982
INTERVIEWEE: MACK H. HANNAH, JR.
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Mr. Hannah's office, Houston, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

H: I first met him, it was in Austin. I think he was in the Congress then. He worked with some type of youth administration. He and Miss Mary McLeod Bethune were great friends.

G: The NYA I think it was.

H: NYA. He had met Downs, Karl Downs, who was the late president of Huston-Tillotson College and he knew several other black college presidents. He had visited in the homes of Dr. [W. R.] Banks, Prairie View [A & M], R. W. E. Jones, Grambling, and Felton Clark, [Texas] Southern University. These were in the days when naturally it wouldn't have done the President any good to announce that he'd been the house guest, the dinner guest, of these certain people, but he had. He knew them and he knew them real well. The President did some growing. I just knew him casually, and Dr. [Everett] Givens of Austin, who was a dentist, was really real close to President Johnson.

When the President decided to run for the Senate, Miss Juanita Roberts was a secretary of his and the daughter of J. J. Duggan, who

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was collector of customs at Port Arthur. Under the Roosevelt Administration in 1940, I had been appointed consul by Roosevelt for Liberia, still am. Chief of Police Goldsmith, a man that I had had named chief of police, was a good friend of mine. We came up together, shot marbles together. The President flew down in the helicopter to Jefferson County, and was talking to Sheriff Richardson, and Goldsmith. So they told him, "Nobody can really win the election without the support of Mack Hannah in south Jefferson County. He finances his own machinery." So it was arranged at Mr. Goldsmith's home that we meet.

Ordinarily, I would have been for Mr. Stevenson. Coke Stevenson and I had a deal cut. You know the CIO and the AF of L was your labor group at Port Arthur, and I always worked with the labor boys. Long before the CIO got to be strong, I always told them, "I'll work with you for the things that you need to strengthen you with labor, but we're going to run the county. You work with us." So I had the strength of labor and in those days, labor was getting strong but wasn't as strong as the vote, the total vote. So we could always carry the boxes of south Jefferson County. Giles, Jake Giles, who was known as a pretty bad fellow up in Beaumont, he ran policy wheels. If you know anything about voting, people who ran gambling houses and who had a numbers racket had to carry a portion of the load, in those days, for the strength of voting. Because these people have to have friends. They couldn't operate--

G: They'd get shut down.

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H: --without friends and without big friends. Then certain characters like that, they couldn't even get to big people. You just have to know how to get the numbers right. I always was shrewd enough, if we needed the vote, to get the numbers and put the combinations together, and when the President won by that eighty-seven votes in Jim Wells County, he got a hell of a majority in Jefferson County with the Mack Hannah strength.

G: Well, let me ask you, what was the basis of your organization? You mentioned labor, but that--

H: We were fighting for existence like my father before me. You know, they had fought a battle with whites for labor to organize the AF of L in Port Arthur. Previously, black stevedores could only work at Sabine Pass, with the docks in Port Arthur under 100 per cent control of whites. They had gone down to the cotton docks. This is bad stuff that you don't even talk [about] now, and they did do battle.

G: Is that right?

H: In fact, several people were killed. But the battle was won. Negroes won through compromise. Eventually the charter for blacks in Sabine Pass was moved to Port Arthur. They got half of the labor concessions for the work at Port Arthur. They didn't get it being namby-pamby. That was done during my father's time.

G: Sure. Did you have any control over the Houston votes in that 1948 election?

H: Yes. I worked very close with Henry, the late Henry. Mr. Henry of the Fifth Ward was a friend of mine, and he handled whatever I had for Houston--I'm trying to think of his first name, F. T. Henry,

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I think--I had Henry, and in Galveston I used John McGaffey.

I'd sit right at Port Arthur and I trusted them and [I'd] get on the telephone or have them to come over and bring me their budget and I'd put out my money. I did it for [Allan] Shivers and his . . . and settled up after the election.

G: How did you spend your money? Did you use it through the churches? How did you spend your campaign money?

H: Well, what you wanted was votes, and we knew pretty well how to get those. We got those in those days through taxi drivers and taverns.

G: How about churches? Did you work through the ministers at all?

H: Certain ones, but not as much as. . . . They weren't as dependable in those days as another group that was better organized.

G: Which one? The taxi drivers?

H: Well, because you could dictate a little more to their group. It was your "Old Boss" system of voting. You can't dictate to churches.

G: What about Hobart Taylor? Was he active in that?

H: Well, he was a taxi driver, and he owned taxis. Hobart and I were very close.

G: Did he help LBJ in that 1948 race?

H: Yes, he did.

G: How about barbers? Did you work at all through barbers?

H: For Congress?

G: Well, when LBJ ran for the Senate in 1948.

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H: Oh yes, yes. See, old barbers they talked to lots of people, and my friend who lived at Tyler, he had a barber chain.

G: That was Morgan, H. M. Morgan.

H: Yes. Yes. I encouraged him to organize the barbers. I encouraged Morgan to get them all in there.

G: Now, this was in 1948 and the earlier time he ran for the Senate was in 1941 when he ran against Pappy [W. Lee] O'Daniel, and he lost that race.

H: I remember that.

G: Did you play any role in that at all?

H: No, no.

G: Okay.

H: Not much. I was with Orange Casket Company then. Of course I was traveling Texas, Louisiana, portions of Arkansas and Mississippi, and I didn't devote too much of my time.

G: Did LBJ help you at all in business, say, the rubber plants or anything like that?

H: No, he didn't have to. As a boy, I lost this index finger when I was a youngster, Peking Cooperage Company. That's a subsidiary of Gulf. I think Ethel Kennedy's folk own that. I started to chipping coke at Gulf Refinery when I was thirteen. I'll be seventy-nine my next birthday, so you can guess how long that's been. And I knew all of the Mellons. If you go up to the top of the stairwell, you'll see some pictures of me and Will Mellon, former chairman of the board of Mellon National and of which the Gulf was just a small part. And

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of course Andrew W. was the boss man and of course, old man T. Mellon started it all. I knew the whole Mellon family.

I used to run the service station at the Gulf for the refinery workers and I'd buy script, loan money, two bits on the dollar. I'd discount that script, buy a ten-dollar book for seven-fifty. Then I would spend that script in the company commissary buying Carnation milk, sugar wholesale--three hundred and sixty bags of sugar make a carload--and I'd sell that sugar to the candy kitchens and the soda water plants when I was a young man before I was twenty years old.

When Gulf, Texaco, Amoco and all those refineries got shelved there together to form Neches Butane Rubber Company, I read it in the papers, and I knew I was going to be grounded as a salesman for oil and gas. I phoned Homer T. Arbuckle, who was a big man with Gulf at Pittsburgh. I saw where he was coming down to be secretary-treasurer, and I knew him. As a boy I carried his bags from the station. I was delivery boy for Owl Drugstore, and I remember Mr. Arbuckle. So I rang him and wrote him, and he wrote me back saying I didn't need to refresh his memory about me, how in the hell could he ever forget me. Teasing me, told me when he would be in Port Arthur. And when he came down, he told Lynn Williams, the man over the housing for the rubber plant, "Whatever Mack wants, I want him to have it." This is how I got the concession, handling and feeding the laborers for the rubber plant. I got that privilege, I got this through people I knew back there when I was a boy working for the Gulf. You see, I worked for the Gulf from the time I was twelve

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or thirteen until I finished college. So that's how I got that.

But I'm sure I could have called on the President; he would have helped me. A funny thing happened. The President invited me to a dinner. Jake Jacobsen can tell you about this. You see Jake, he'll tell you. It was labeled, "One hundred executives," so he had me there, and A. G. Gaston of Birmingham. So on my table he had Del Webb--the late Del Webb; the Vice President, Hubert Humphrey; and Sandoval, this Mexican fellow out of El Paso, and he had the president of the garment industries at the table where I sat.

G: Dave Dubinsky?

H: I think that was he. But whatever, we had had a briefing on what the government was doing with its money with these hundred individuals. We'd gone to the East Room and the President announced that five people you draw would speak. So when Vice President Humphrey gave me the draw--and you know how Hubert was, full of fun--he said, "Oh, you're to speak." I said, "I've been tricked." So in other words, I was one of the five to speak. That was to let them know how you had enjoyed the meeting and what you thought about this, that or the other about the meeting.

A little before I spoke, the fellow who was president, chairman of the board, of the Automatic Canteen Company of Chicago, Patrick L. O'Mally, spoke. He said he was a Johnson Republican. And he'd given the President hell for the way that he was spending the money on his programs and this, that and the other. I thought he was very

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critical, and I imagine I had had two or three highballs. So it got to me; I was the last speaker. I said, "I want to address the gentleman, the president of the Automatic Canteen Company of Chicago."

I said, "I know what a Georgia buggy is, Mr. [George] Meany, who's seated over there with the President, he knows what I'm talking about. You young labor people don't know what a Georgia buggy is. Hell, I used to push a Georgia buggy. For all you industrialists who don't only control the business of America, you control all the business in the world, let me tell you what a Georgia buggy is. The Georgia buggy holds five times more concrete than a wheelbarrow, and by God, you push it with your back, with the strength and the muscles of your back. You push it up around. In my day, you didn't have all these hydraulics, and we had to build these buildings and things, construction had to go on and you did it from your muscles." I said, "So I was born across the track, and I know what goes on. I think what the President's trying to say to you people, he wants your constructive criticism. Since you're smart enough to run all the business in America and run all the business in the world, why not get with him and tell him how to get a program out. All of these smart people that we've got, these people out of work, these minorities with degrees, [tell him] how to put them to work constructively for this country. That's what he's asking you to do."

That's when that picture was snapped. That's what he was thanking me for. And Jake hugged me just two or three minutes before

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that picture was snapped. Jake Jacobsen, who's there in Austin, walked over and he said, "I sure appreciate what you've done."

To know President Johnson, he had many moods. He'd get on the telephone--I got a thing in there with every phone number he ever had when I wanted to get him or when he wanted to get me. Because when I'd come in and he'd called, he'd give me the numbers so I could call back and get him. I remember well in 1948 after he got in the Senate he insisted that I come. I went up.

G: You went to Washington?

H: Yes. I never did go much. Not nearly as much as he'd have liked for me to have come. And he was asking me if I knew Jones, who was president of the NAACP.

G: John J.

H: John J. Jones of Texarkana was a distant cousin of mine. He showed me his telegram. John J. told him that he didn't support such-and-such a bill.

G: It was, I think, that cloture vote on the anti-lynching. Wasn't that it?

H: That's right. [He said] that he would be a one-time senator. He said, "Well, I want to tell John J. he might have gotten me here, their vote might have gotten me here, but it won't get me away from the outsiders. I will be here."

What he did, some time after then, I happened to go when the Prime Minister--I forget who it was--was visiting. And then the

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President, didn't he introduce a bill, the first bill on this anti-lynching? What bill was that?

G: Well, he of course supported a compromise version of the 1957 Civil Rights Act later.

H: Yes. He introduced a bill.

G: Well, when he was president, of course, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

H: I'm talking about when he was in the Senate.

G: Yes. I'm not familiar with [any bill of that nature]. An anti-lynching bill?

H: Yes.

G: Well, let me ask you something. Were people like Carter Wesley also disappointed with him after they had supported him heavily too?

H: No. You know, they know if he wanted to stay there he just couldn't be one way. You know, Carter was a man that was straight down the middle. He never would have won dogcatcher. I liked Carter, Carter was a great guy, but hard-liners can't beat a politician. You know that. And so you have to be versatile.

G: Sure. Well, did LBJ ask you to explain his vote to the people like John Jones and Carter Wesley?

H: No. No. He--well, yes. He was explaining to me what his stand was, and he knew that--oh, yes. And I did. They liked him. It took them a long time before they found out he was a great man, possibly the greatest friend the Negroes had in the White House.

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G: That meeting that you talked about during the election. Was that at Goldsmith's house?

H: Yes. That's when I switched from [Stevenson] to support him for the Senate.

G: What arguments did he use? Why was he able to persuade you to support him over Coke Stevenson?

H: Well, Mrs. Roberts had something to do with it. Duggan and I were friends, J. J. Duggan, the collector of customs. And she was there in his office, Juanita Roberts. And that had a whole lot to do with it.

G: Did the Stevenson people try to get you to support them, also?

H: No, not necessarily. You know, I've been just a kind of a hard-liner myself in a way. I never did want to be too liberal, and I never wanted to be too much the other way. I've always kind of been a middle-of-the-roader.

G: Well, is there anything else about that meeting that night that you remember in terms of the conversation?

H: I can remember that I agreed to--let's see, there was G. P. Logan, Mr. Goldsmith--I'm trying to wonder if he was even present. I don't remember.

G: Whether LBJ was even present?

H: Yes. Or I'm trying to think. He wouldn't have necessarily had to be present.

G: But Goldsmith was there.

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- H: Oh, yes. Goldsmith was my friend. Because all my going over, Goldsmith and Mrs. Roberts had all to do with it, I don't mind telling you. They were my friends, and Givens got in to play. Givens and I were friends. Givens thought that--well, there's just nothing he didn't think LBJ couldn't do. He knew him longer than me.
- G: Do you think he was at all prejudiced, Lyndon Johnson? Did he have prejudices?
- H: I don't think so, because I think this. I think the thing that moved him was whatever he wanted to do, whatever it took to do it. I think he moved mountains.
- G: There was an indication that you were having some problems with one of the regulatory agencies or the savings and loan board, or something in regard to a permit and that you called him and he helped out on it. Do you recall that?
- H: I used his name plenty. I remember I went up to get my insurance. I had gotten my state charter, state charter association, and I went up to get my insurance and they were these feds out of Little Rock. Now, you talk about the prejudice that was coming out of Little Rock, and, goddamn it, they just didn't understand how Mr. Faulkner-- Faulkner gave me the charter, old man Faulkner. You know, he and my daddy were whiskey-drinking partners. He gave me my charter. So Little Rock was vacillating. I went up to meet Dr. William H. Husbands, who was the head of the insurance corporation, and they were vacillating on giving me my charter.
- (Interruption)

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[They] gave me one excuse after another. I said this, "Now, look. You just as well go ahead and give me my insurance. I'm fixing to leave you, and I'll tell you where I'm fixing to go. I'm going straight over to the White House. When I leave you, I'm going straight over to the White House to see the President and I'm going to tell him every word that was said. And he's going to want to know why. I will be getting along." And I did go over there and tell the President. You know how he was, I'm sure that he might have asked them how everything was getting along. You know how he'd do it. And I'm sure of that. I got it, and you know I had to have help. I didn't worry about it no more. He was a true kind of friend. He was the kind of man that you could depend on.

I don't think the President had any prejudices. I know this, what he used to tell me, "Mack, you understand, but you've got to make your people understand that they have to put people forward who can help them, who can't always state what they want to say but who can help them get in." That was his--and that's the way it was. Because your friends--things are so much better now, but if you can put forward people of good will in high places, then you have bettered the pathway for progress for people. That's always been my philosophy. And that was the way the President was.

G: Let me ask you about his support of Barbara Jordan when she ran for Congress. How did that happen, do you recall?

H: He heard Barbara speaking somewhere and you know he was analytical and had great appreciation for ability. He visualized that if

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Barbara got in Congress--she didn't do nothing that he didn't visualize--he knew what she'd do. He knew she had an unusual ability to use the king's English and this flair of oratory, and he knew that if she got the opportunity and with the right backing and the right guidance that she would go places. And that she did. He was so happy to see me working in her behalf, and I was happy to work in her behalf. I said to Barbara about a year and a half before she left Congress, "Barbara, I don't do much phoning to anybody, it's one of my weaknesses. But you've got my number. Whatever it is, whenever it is, that I can do anything for you, carry your water, carry your bags, do anything, get anything for you, you let me know, I'll be too glad to do it. But now I ain't much on calling." And she knows that.

I know that she doesn't like to be asked much about her health. Bless her heart, I've had problems, too, and I've got them. Of course, I don't mind it, but they tell me, you get to talking to her about health. . . . But I imagine she does have problems, but I pray for her. I haven't seen or heard from Barbara in two or three years. Do you get to see her?

G: I see her every now and then, yes, sir.

H: How is she doing?

(Interruption)

G: Well, I heard that you also did some recruiting for the University of Texas with LBJ, football recruiting.

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H: Well, the President called me one day and asked me to come down to the Ranch. When I got down there, he sent me out Coach [Darrell Royal]. But he had told me, "You know, Bird's on the board [U.T. Board of Regents] down there." I said, "Yes, I heard." And he said, "Well, you know, Darrell's from Oklahoma, and we're good friends." He said, "Darrell says he's not prejudiced, but they just don't have no black players. And they need some. I'm telling him they need some."

(Laughter)

I've got a book right there if you'll pick it up you want to see it. [It's] red, The Vantage Point. It's the one that--red back. That's right. I wanted you to see that.

G: Beautiful inscription.

H: He said, "Now, I want you to--there's a couple of boys I want. One in particular." "Who's that, Mr. President?" "There's a boy down there at Port Arthur named Joe Washington."

(Laughter)

"Oh, my. Mr. President, you know I'm on the board of Bishop College, I'm on the board of the University of Houston, I'm past chairman of the board of TSU, now you're talking about putting me on the hot plate, you've got me on the hot plate." "Well," he said, "I want you to go down there and somehow I want you to do it for me." I went on and gave it my best shot, but Oklahoma had us.

(Laughter)

G: What happened, do you know?

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H: I don't know. I don't know, but the boy selected Oklahoma. Joe went to Oklahoma. But I certainly gave it a shot for the University of Texas. Now, I did that.

G: Who else did he want? Did he say? Any other players?

H: Well, that one was in particular. I forget the name of the other boy. I think Oklahoma got both of those boys. He had two boys, and the University of Texas made a good effort. They made a good effort. But I think that started Darrell to getting on out of that harness, trying to get him. . . . I think Mrs. Johnson being on that board, and the President, you know, with his insistent drumming, put it into Mr. Royal's head, Darrell's head, to get you a good black player. And I think they came up with Earl Campbell. Next they got [inaudible]. But I sure tried to get, I did, I'm guilty, I tried to get Joe. But I couldn't get him.

(Laughter)

G: Did you talk to his father?

H: Yes, I did. I took my wife. I handled it careful. I had to. I don't know how you got that information, but I and my wife went down and spent a day. I owed that to the President. He knew if he asked me, I would. I don't know of anybody else I would have done that for other than him.

G: Is there anything else about your association with President Johnson that we haven't talked about? Any other occasions that you all were together?

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H: Well, I was with him on a number of occasions. Once he called me and told me he wanted me to come down here, where they had this fellow, was it Nassar, that Sadat succeeded?

G: Yes.

H: He had me to come down for that. I remember once I went to California; he wanted me to come to California. He was vice president then; he was going to Los Angeles and he wanted me there. And I went.

G: What for?

H: He just wanted me. He thought I should be there. And I did. He wanted me to talk to Leslie Shaw. He'd appointed that fellow postmaster, a black fellow.

I've been to the Ranch to see him on many occasions, just personal, things you wouldn't be interested in. But he was great. In my books, he's one of the greatest.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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