

INTERVIEW I

DATE: April 10, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: HENRIETTE WYETH HURD  
INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH KADERLI  
PLACE: Sentinel Ranch, San Patricio, New Mexico

Tape 1 of 1

K: I am at Sentinel Ranch with Mrs. Hurd, who is going to tell me some more about the incident itself as she was with Mr. Hurd the day it happened at the LBJ Ranch. Mr. Hurd has already given me a great deal of the background that led up to it [the portrait painting], about how it came to be commissioned, by whom, something to do with the fact that he had very few sittings, in fact only one with President Johnson. I would like for Mrs. Hurd now to tell me about the day itself. She was just telling me that it was a disturbing day in many ways, and I will let her say why.

H: Well, the disturbing day started the night before actually. We flew in from Washington, where poor, dear Mrs. Bill Moyers, and her four children and Petey and I had to wait for about two and a half hours for Luci to arrive with her young man. I imagine the young man was reluctant to interview the great Mr. President, because Luci was young, only seventeen. Anyhow, finally she did come with her bag and we took off. We talked to Luci on the plane. Mrs. Moyers was quiet and attractive, and [had] wonderfully behaved children. That impressed me very

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much. And who was the writer? Was it White? A journalist of some distinction.

K: Yes, there is one.

H: Yes. White was with us. And Luci became most chatty and communicative and talked about the White House. How it had seemed very cold and almost repellent to her at first, and finally they all loved it, and loved the paintings and the pictures and the furniture. Very, very chatty, and she was a very pretty girl, beautiful skin, very paintable I thought. And once, you know, I was supposed to do the two daughters and Mrs. Johnson also. So I was looking for Luci with rather very appraising eyes, actually. Her young man, Pat, didn't say a word, behaved terribly nicely, and was probably awfully scared inside. Finally, the plane put down in Fort Worth, and Mrs. Moyers got off with the four children.

Then on we went to the Ranch, and we were awfully late. It was something like eight-fifteen and the President likes to have supper, as he calls it at the Ranch, at six. Well, I thought nothing of it, and we all got off. [There was] a great blare of light on the plane as we came off. There was the President in the jeep or kind of a golf mobile. What are those things called that you drive around a [golf course]?

K: Oh, a golf cart?

H: A golf cart. Sort of curious flat top thing. I, of course, I recalled him with great pleasure, because he was interesting, a man

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of tremendous force, and extremely sensitive and extremely insensitive. I've never known such a character in my life. Well, to my amazement, I crawled in front with him in this funny little jeep we were in. We had been on very friendly terms, and all he did was sort of (growls) like this, and grunted at everyone. Mrs. Johnson, very alert and bright and intelligent and trying to take care of things as usual, took me into her bathroom near the downstairs bedroom right away and said, "Don't be--just give it just a few minutes, because the President isn't feeling well, and it's very late."

So we pulled ourselves together, everyone did, and I did. We met at a long, full, sort of boarding house table in the dining room with everyone very quiet and rather wary and looking at one another. Right across from me sat Mrs. Johnson and my husband. We were being served catfish, very beautifully cooked Texas catfish, and hominy grits, tremendous big dinner. And Pat, absolutely everyone, very silent, because believe me at the Great Man's table you were not supposed to speak unless he sort of commanded you, you know, this way. That was the feeling. I was talking to someone, a friend of Johnson's that didn't interest me very much, but I was really awfully hungry. All of a sudden I looked up, and across the table was Petey looking extremely pale and rather agitated and very severe, looking at Mrs. Johnson, who was talking to him. You felt everyone's ears growing out toward this, you see. Just this way, rays of listening. I immediately thought, "Awful! Something's wrong, very wrong when my husband looks like that." Then I completely lost my appetite.

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We worked our way through dinner and went to a room next door to the dining room where we just looked at the President make a telephone call or two while he leaned back in his Barcalounger, waving his feet in the air without any shoes on. He loved to flaunt a certain cozy lack of manners, I suppose, really. He could be charming, but sometimes just raised hell. Well, Pat and Luci disappeared. Lynda was there, looking very beautiful. I think Mrs. Johnson was catching a cold, and everyone looked at us as if, "Well, you're the marked ones, you know." I had gathered things were very bad about the President having seen the portrait, which was rather strange, because Petey did not want them to look at it before he himself took it out of the box, put it in a decent light--it was only half finished--and explained what he was going to do. So very shortly we all said, "Good night." That I suppose was about ten o'clock. As usual we were given a driver, one of the nice, handsome, tall young men, Intelligence, who drove us to the ranch where we stayed. Did Petey remember the name of the ranch?

K: No, he didn't mention this part of it.

H: Well, we always stayed at a ranch house about twelve miles away. And Petey's told me exactly what she said, "Peter, there's been static." You know that accent of hers.

K: You were not together then in this plane going down? He met you at the Ranch?

H: He was at the Ranch.

K: I see. And you were meeting him there?

H: Oh, yes. We were meeting him there. And Mrs. Johnson was there.

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We simply flew down with Luci and her young man.

K: Yes.

H: Petey was in really a cold rage about the whole thing. We discussed it, and we were annoyed. We thought that he had been unconscionably rude to both of us, and we were very puzzled. We were angry, and we were annoyed. We discussed it, as I said. Then Petey said, "We probably shouldn't have talked this way. This entire place may be bugged for all I know!" I said, "Well, we haven't said anything I wouldn't say to them, anyhow." So the next morning came, and we found that, most unusual, there was nothing in the icebox except saltines, a great deal of wine, some orange juice, a can of fresh coffee cream; no coffee, no cereal, no nothing. There were some figs growing on the tree outside, and we had remembered the fig tree. So we had that and hoped to get some coffee when--we'd been left a car, so we drove ourselves to the Ranch.

That morning was most uncomfortable. We were taken on a drive in a new white Lincoln Continental, with Mrs. Johnson and myself in the back and Petey and the President in the front. He wanted to see how certain tree burnings, trash burnings, had been handled by the foreman, and he was extremely brisk and annoyed and surly and sulky. I thought he looked perfectly healthy and splendid, and I told him so. He grunted again. We got through with the drive.

Mrs. Johnson and I had a nice talk about wonderful Texas wild-flowers and bluebonnets and certain buttercups and various things

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that are simply heavenly that have never been well painted, I don't think. I said, "You know, I've always wanted to do a little girl or a young woman sitting on a grassy, wildflower strewn meadow or under one of the trees, the live oaks; a portrait looking down at them, you know, either a small figure or life-size." She said, "Oh, yes, that's exactly what I want." Well, I knew that she had discussed my painting herself and the two daughters at Portraits Incorporated. I saw that she thought, "That's the way I'll have Luci done," or Lynda, or something of that sort. That was one little pleasant interlude.

We were brought back just before lunch, and everyone assembled for lunch, except that we'd noticed that Pat never appeared again. Luci was sort of crying, sort of Kleenex to her nose and dark glasses, and Lynda wore dark glasses. They all sat down, and everyone [was] very dreary indeed. The President ordered Lynda to take off her glasses. He couldn't see her eyes and said, "Luci, why don't you eat your lunch?" And she said, "You know I just can't eat this food. I have an allergy of this kind. I can't eat it. But Dad . . . ." "Up dear." Everyone was called down, and we were sort of coldly avoided. Nobody looked at us.

In the meantime we had been told that we would look at the portrait and confer about it in the office after lunch. So we were palpitating, terribly uncomfortable. The whole atmosphere was simply dreadful. The same guests as there were the night before,

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all of them just eating, just making sidelong glances, and the President just making biblical statements and running lives. And no Pat. I pictured him hung up like Bluebeard's wives on a hook in the bathroom. I really did! I never saw him again during that whole time that weekend. Let's see before lunch, we'd talked to Lynda, and Lynda said, "You know, I'm on Luci's side. Pat is such a nice guy. I know that she's young, but I think it's all right." So Lynda was also in the dog house. She wasn't approved of. Father roaring at her, "Do this. Do that. Take off the glasses, I can't stand it," and all that.

In the meantime the President had asked the colored butler, two of the gardeners who had just been employed, because Mrs. Johnson had been discussing two men she had just gotten in to cut the grass and trim around the flower beds and so forth, [to see the painting]. Let me think. There were about nine people, and Mrs. Johnson hauled in poor little Luci who said, "I just can't really look at anything." "I want you to look at the portrait." Lynda was hauled in, no Pat, a charming woman, a sculptress who lived in Washington who was doing a head of the President, Jimilu Mason, White the journalist, a very pleasant, intelligent man and a strong character. He also had very white hair. I've never seen him since. And who else? Oh, perhaps some of the guests who weren't very distinguished. They all filed into the office.

And here was the portrait, leaning against this old butterscotch

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colored wall surrounding the fireplace, sort of leaning crookedly to one side, fluorescent lighting on in spite of the fact that it was a bright day. That kills any color in a portrait. It kills color anyhow. The poor portrait looked absolutely pathetic. The two secretaries, very pretty, tall, nice looking young women, were sitting at their desks. But they got up sort of at attention. The President lumbered in and began talking about how he didn't like the portrait. He went on and on. The White House was too big, and it was too bright. The sky was stormy. It [the sky] wasn't at all. "What was it?" [wondered the President]. It didn't even look like him. What was he going to hold in his hand?

Peter would occasionally get in a very dignified explanation, very cool and very controlled. Only when the President said, "Now I like this one," pointing to a reproduction of a painting by Norman Rockwell, done from a photograph, with red cheeks, when he [Johnson] was about thirty-three, I think, or maybe younger, Peter said, "Well, why don't you get Norman Rockwell to do it?" At this Mr. White said, "Now, now, Peter." White said, "It's a great portrait, and I'm sure that you're going to like it." That was the gist of his statement. And the sculptress also did.

Mrs. Johnson didn't care for it at all and said so, very, very forcefully, but pleasantly. She's a marvelous person. She doesn't become nastily emotional and vindictive. At least I've never seen her, and she certainly had an awfully good opportunity to that day. Because I was making my statements and answers



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whenever I could get anybody's attention, and Petey certainly was. By the way, the colored butler was asked how he felt. No one would have a really honest opinion to give because they knew they ought to say, "Mr. President, I don't think it looks like you a'tall." You know, that kind of thing. Just nothing. But naturally, they wouldn't have.

K: Did either of the girls have anything to say?

H: Oh, they didn't like it. Luci said, "Well, if you look at it sideways it looks like him," and things like that, you know, utterly insane, just idiotic. The two gardeners and people were sort of leaning out of the door and saying, "Come on in here, will you, and look at this picture. What do you think of it?" Nobody liked it, of course, because they'd take one look at the President, who was in the corner of the room, sort of opposite the fireplace like this, in front of his desk, slouched in front, you know. At one point I began striding up and down angrily, and Petey was sitting very cool and very dignified and absolutely staunch. I was getting madder and madder and madder.

Finally I went over to the desk that the President was sitting near, and I said, (slaps hand on table) "Mr. President, you no more know anything about a portrait or anything about painting! You simply don't! If you keep this portrait, you're going to like it. Why don't you trust us? Whether you take it or not isn't going to change our vote for you, because we'll vote for you. We think you're a strong president." This was in the days when we did think he was

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a strong president. He looked up at me with this rather sickly smile, you know, like this, and it was after that I walked over to Petey and glared back. I don't know how I got away with it. He likes women. He thinks they have their place in the world and aren't too important. So it doesn't really matter, I guess, what you say.

Then of course he made the famous lumbering rise from the chair and walked over to the portrait and said, "That's the ugliest thing I ever saw." Just like that, with his hand about an inch from the portrait. Then we got a little hysterical and began laughing. We couldn't help laughing, which I suppose made him even crosser. And finally everybody got up in rather a relieved way and began to file out. People looked a little pitying. But we were laughing. Lady Bird said to both of us, she took my hand and Petey's, "Thank you for being so nice about it." Well, we really hadn't been at all. She went out, and Luci went out, and Lynda went out. We were left with the secretaries, and we instantly requested a commercial flight home, wanted to get out of there as soon as possible and [we] arranged about the shipping.

K: Did you bring it back with you?

H: No, we had it sent back. It was enormous, you know. It had to be.

K: Mr. Hurd told me that there was some confusion about the C.O.D. business, that there was a little bit of--

H: Well, it couldn't even get into the--what kind of a jet did he have? It was impossible. It had to be shipped commercially from

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Washington. We thought it was going to be put on the plane. Well, it couldn't be put on the plane, couldn't get quite around the corner from the entrance of the plane into the corridor and the seats.

K: I believe he said he directed that it be sent to you here C.O.D. since the charges--

H: No, it was sent C.O.D. to the Ranch, you see. They had to pay it, which we found out really annoyed the stuffing out of the President.

K: Well, I think he said that's the reason he decided to have it sent here C.O.D., because he didn't want any more of anybody feeling like they had to pay for the [freight].

H: Oh, perfectly awful!

K: Isn't it? So that it came to you here, I suppose, C.O.D. I think he said he paid the charges on it.

H: Probably, yes. Probably. You see, everyone was afraid of fits of temper and troubles with the President.

K: You told me that you had gotten along pretty well with the President until this [day].

H: Oh, we got along beautifully. I thought he was very interesting. You see, Petey actually had a great deal more respect for the President in his office. Now I respect the office, but I take the people as individuals. I'm afraid that perhaps I'm a little more realistic, and if, for instance, I had been given the job of doing the President's portrait I would have cleared very definitely whether he was to sit so many hours a day. I would have said, "Absolutely

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not unless you do sit for me, and no nonsense." But Petey kept saying, "I know you're a terribly busy man." Of course, I would know that too, but I would also know that I could not work from photographs. I would not do it. Petey did an incredible job in working from a photograph. It's a fine and noble head, I think. And he's simply . . . . The President has no . . . . Read Hugh Sidey's account of the comparison between the candy box portrait of Madame Shoumatoff, who has made a great career, [and Petey's]. It has paid her very well, making candy box [portraits].

K: Is that the one who just did the latest portrait?

H: Yes. Oh, she's always done cool, commercial, society portraits all her life. So that suited him. It's perfectly absurd.

K: As you began in the beginning, you seemed to think that the mood the President was in may very well have had something to do with his reaction to the portrait.

H: Everything was ganging up on him. The public, press wasn't good; his public relations were lousy. He had had this operation which was causing him more pain and trouble. He had Luci demanding to be married, and he couldn't really object because Pat Nugent was so nice. Everything he gazed at with a jaundiced eye, and I mean jaundiced.

K: Under other circumstances it is possible that he might have reacted differently?

H: Well, I think that he had a totally different concept of himself. I think Petey should have actually thought of he himself as a painter

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more than trying to consider the President all the time. He really let him get away with murder. I never would have done it. And actually I think that the President didn't like the fact that he behaved like such a gentleman. He couldn't stand it. I'll never forget. I think really Petey brought this on himself. When he said, "This is the ugliest thing I have ever seen," Petey said, "That's very interesting, Mr. President." That's all he said. This made the President's eyes blaze with annoyance! He couldn't really make him [Petey] really mad. He had made me mad, but he hadn't made Petey mad.

K: He hadn't really anyone to actually argue with him, as far as the artist himself was concerned?

H: No, not at all. At one point Peter said, "Why did you ask me to paint the portrait? I do not do a diffused, sentimental portrait. Mrs. Johnson wants a White House that is misty. I don't do misty houses. I'm a painter of lens-clear landscape. This is nonsense. Why ask me?"

K: The painting that he had liked that Norman Rockwell had done, I didn't realize was of the President in his younger days. I thought it was just one that he had admired. But it was of the President, wasn't it?

H: Oh, it was of the President.

K: I see.

H: From a photograph.

K: Yes.

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H: And, "No," said the President, "I posed for him seventeen minutes." Peter said, "Mr. President, Norman Rockwell could no more have done that entire drawing, a head and shoulders, in seventeen minutes, unless perhaps he had about forty-five arms and hands! That was taken from a photograph. I know how he works." They argued about that for a little while. "I do not paint from photographs as Mr. [Rockwell] does]. I don't do it generally. I can't. It's very hard work for me."

K: Mr. Hurd said that in the course of painting the portrait you were very helpful to him, because of course you have done many, many portraits.

H: Well, the first Time cover, I really had more to do with that. You know, the first time we were in Washington, when Peter was commissioned to do the cover for the Man of the Year. We stayed at--was it the Carleton Hotel? He worked for about two and a half days. I helped him with that and somewhat with this one. But he really painted that head in the tempera portrait, the big portrait, in one fevered day. He redid the whole thing, and I was amazed. It wasn't entirely from a photograph. He still thought of him as a rather remarkable man. And we still really think so.

K: Yes, I was going to ask. This opinion was in the past, and yet you do think of him as a complex and--

H: Very complex, very complex and really, to me, very appealing man. I wish I had known him better, really, seen him more.

K: I expect that you were as pleased as Mr. Hurd was when he was given

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the commission to do this?

H: No, I wasn't. You mean when Petey was given the commission?

K: Yes.

H: He avoided it for two years.

K: Well, I meant in the end. He said to me, yes, he did avoid it, and in fact he didn't even answer a letter.

H: He knew he was going to have a dreadful time!

K: I see.

H: Because he knew he would have to do it from photographs. He had met the President before, you see, two or three times, and knew something of the man's character. I made a remark in Washington during our first visit to Washington when Petey did the Time cover. The portrait was being discussed, and John Walker talked to him about it. John Walker is the head of the National Gallery. And Petey said, "John, take it to someone else. I can't, I really can't do it. For instance, my wife could paint him." And I said, "Oh, heavens, don't!" Though I must say that I have painted a number of two year olds, and I'm used to people moving around. That got around Washington, that I would paint the President because I was used to painting two year olds. Well, he does! He's constantly fighting his chair, getting up and walking up and down, looking out of a window, coming back, fighting the chair, sliding down. And oh! Gods! He's a constant moving picture.

K: He actually didn't seem to care very much whether it was painted.

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It seems to me he was taking it all as a--

H: I think he thought it was done like a photograph. You know: snap, snap.

K: Yes.

H: No concept, and he didn't want to have a concept. Perhaps he thought it was absurd that a great deal of time should have to be taken.

K: I asked Mr. Hurd how he usually felt about criticism of his work. In other words, how he usually responded to criticism. And his comment was, it was the manner in which the painting was criticized.

H: Oh, it was boorish. It was stupid! The President realized he'd made a great boner after he had behaved this way. Certainly Mrs. Johnson was unhappy.

K: And you have had, I think, two letters from her since that have been very friendly.

H: Oh, yes, perfectly charming. And of course he turned around and got the painting of mine from the collection in the Lubbock Museum.

K: Got it for the White House or for the Ranch?

H: I don't quite know how he got it out of the permanent collection, but he did, and presented it to Lady Bird. Lady Bird had been loaned it for a couple of years and loved it. Now she owns it and adores it. I know she loves it.

K: Is it flowers? I'm just interested.

H: No, it's a little Mexican baby. The son of a cook of mine,



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Arturito. Little Arturito with great enormous dark eyes, most appealing face in the world. I hung paper doves behind this little nodding head and a mass of wild flowers in the front. I felt that it was a little like one of the Mexican ranchero songs, pathos and beauty and a kind of curious charm. [There is] a wonderful quality about the child, and he's still a handsome little boy.

K: It's probably at the Ranch then?

H: Oh, it's at the Ranch. That was her [wish]. Oh, yes.

K: Oh, I see.

H: She said the Arturito was being packed, and "I know that I shall love it even more at the Ranch and will all my life." But in the meantime, the business of the portraits I absolutely squashed. I called Portraits, Inc., and said, "I don't want any commissions from the Johnson family, because the President is going to tell me how to paint them, what they must wear, and I won't have this. I have too much to do anyway. I can't face this." Helen Appleton Read said, "Henriette, they should be taught not to do this sort of thing." I said, "You just try to teach the President to keep quiet!" So that was that! Too bad!

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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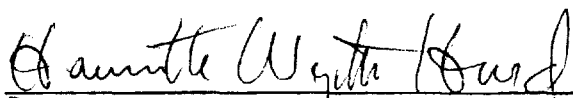
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