INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 19, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: ELIZABETH JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mrs. Johnson's residence, Cotulla, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: All right, Mrs. Johnson, you were saying that you were a beginning teacher here when Lyndon Johnson came to town.

J: Yes. I had been here one year and we had a lady principal of the school, and then, when he came, she retired, and he was given the job of principal. He was the only man in the school. He was real young and energetic and very likeable young man. In fact, three of us were real young, and then we had an elderly lady who had been in the school system for many years, but the rest of us were really young.

He was a person that had a desire to do for the Mexican people more than anybody we've ever had in our town. That school of children had always just--it was all Mexican children, and it went through eight grades, and there were five teachers, but we had as many as ninety children enrolled per room, but you never did have over thirty in attendance because they stayed home so much, and they visited. There was no requirement that they stay in school all the time.

We had a good music department started by the young teacher from San Antonio who was quite talented with the piano and voice, and we had with that, and he wanted us to

have more and more programs in which they got up to speak parts in English, and the children were required to speak English in the halls and restrooms. He was a diligent overseer. He was up and down that hall. He was not lazy; he did not sit in his office very much.

He also did organize baseball teams and volleyball teams, and we didn't have funds for those things. [We had] very little money at that time because we were a common school district, and the local taxes were very poor. So he did spend his money and bought some of the equipment for the athletic department. All we had had the previous year were just balls and bats and kickball, and the children jumped rope, and that's about all they did and swinging, and we had swings. The teams that he organized--we did go, too--because I was the girls' coach of the girls' team, and we went to Los Angeles and Millett and Artesia Wells. At that time, they all had their own schools. All of those schools are gone now, and they all attend Cotulla schools and are bussed.

But he had a cousin who was teaching at Los Angeles, Margaret Johnson, and so we got started going because she wanted to play her team from out there. Now her team was white children, ranchers' and farmers' children, and all of ours, of course, were Mexican children. But they enjoyed it, and he was great on having a treat for them when they got back. We used to tell him that he was bribing them to play good because they knew they were going to get something to eat when they got back.

He was also interested in debate, and that was not a subject you could have in our school, so he was asked to coach and teach debating in the high school here, and he did. He had some winning teams. This was for the UIL [University Interscholastic League], and

that was one of the contests at that time. He took his team all around to these larger towns where we entered the contests. His high school team--and, by the way, at that time, it was all boys. There were no girls in the debating team; it wasn't considered suitable. We had a teachers' volleyball team, and it was comprised of the teachers, and he was one of the most enthusiastic players on our volleyball team, or he seemed to have more fun than some of the older men and women that were on the team, and he was very well-liked.

He boarded in a home while he was here, and the first, I guess it was about six months, he rode to school every day with me. I picked him up. He came across the railroad tracks. He stayed with some people that lived on the other side of the tracks, and I took the young lady from San Antonio, Jessie Ann Fisher--I picked her up on the way, and then he met us down by the side of the road and rode over to the Welhausen School. It's not so far, but it, at that time, was on a very bad dirt road, and it wasn't very easy walking.

G: Could I ask you, did he not have a car when--?

J: No, he had nothing when he came, but he did buy a car before he left.

G: I see.

J: He got a car, I guess, two months before he--no, he did not have a car [at first]. He rode, and we attended extension classes, quite a few of us did, and he always rode with the others of us who were rotating our cars, but he did not have a car up until just before he left. He was planning to leave, and he was getting the car, and he was going back to summer school. I saw him at summer school because I went back to San Marcos myself the following summer, and I knew his brother, Sam Houston, too. They called him Sam Houston Johnson; I guess you've heard about him. But he was at school at that time, too. Lyndon

was certainly proud of his family, his mother and father and his sister, Rebekah. He often talked about them, and there always was something that he was proud to say about his ancestors.

G: Did you meet his family?

J: No. No, I just met Sam Houston because he was going to San Marcos one summer. I just met him and knew him a little in one of the classes there. I didn't know him, you wouldn't say personally. But he was nothing like Lyndon. You'd never have known they were related.

G: How were they different?

J: Well, Sam Houston was at the time, what little I know about him, real harum-scarum and carefree and he wasn't interested in serious subjects at all, just good times. That wasn't the way Lyndon was at all. He spent all of his time reading old history and talking politics. He talked politics all the time. Nobody wanted to hear him, but he talked anyway, and he kept up on all of the senators and representatives, as his father had been a senator, you know. He really liked that, even from the beginning when he was in here. We used to laugh and tell him that he'd be governor some day. You know, we were just kidding with him, and we'd tell him, said, "You're going to talk yourself right into being governor some day." But that was his--well, I guess you would say it was his hobby or his main thought.

Now he went to the Baptist church, and the lady that he boarded with was very, very strict Baptist, and I don't know whether he was a Baptist or not; I just don't know. But he went down there to the Baptist church here in [Cotulla]. I don't know about his affiliation. I didn't go the Baptist church; I went to the Methodist, but he did go, and other than just

school activities and going to the extension courses, and we had these volleyball games. The teachers had--they called it recreation for the teachers, and the superintendent was very much on the idea that all of the teachers from all the junior high, high school, and elementary, and the Welhausen would all get together. Everybody was supposed to go, and they'd have these socials and play these volleyball games, and I don't know anything about his other social life other than that. He probably did have other social life, but I don't know anything about that.

G: Was he a good volleyball player?

J: Well, he was an enthusiastic one. He was tall and so terribly thin. He was lanky and tall, and he was one of the better players because he was in to win, and the rest of us were just to please the superintendent, but he didn't, no. Anything he did, he went in to win. That was the way he did those children playing those teams he coached. You went in to win. You didn't go in just to play for the sport and the good time; that was all right, but you went in for the idea that you were going to be better than anybody else, and he instilled it in those children. Many of the Mexican children who went to school to him and are business people and grandmothers now and what have you, they all remember how he pushed them and that they learned more, you know, at that time than they did in a lot of the years that they went. At that time, very few went on to high school. I think that, oh, maybe eight or ten out of the eighth grade would go on to high school, and the rest of them, that was as far as they went. They just, when they got through eighth grade, they were through school, and he encouraged them to go on, and they did learn a great deal.

And he was very patriotic. You never had a day on the school calendar, the presidents' birthdays and Columbus Day, and it was Armistice Day then, and we celebrated. We had a program in the auditorium. The children were given to understand what the holiday was and why we were doing it, and I thought that was something we've lost. They don't do that anymore in the schools, and I really think they've lost a lot in the heritage part of our country because, before I stopped teaching, they thought you were wasting time if you spent a great deal of time on any one of those things. You were supposed to be teaching some of the new methods of something else.

He also had prayer and the pledge of allegiance. We did that every day. The children all went outside when they put up the flag. Instead of putting it up, the Texas and the United States flag, Texas flag--well we all went out and said the pledge, and then they had a prayer, and it was a prayer that all the children repeated. It was just a generalized prayer, not the Lord's Prayer, but it was just very much like children say grace.

And we didn't have too many things. The school was a fairly new building, and the facilities were as good as could be expected at that time, but there were no frills in any of the schools or none of the extra things that you expect to find in schools now. You just improvised the extras yourself.

G: There was a story that when LBJ first came that he ran into trouble because other teachers didn't want to supervise recess. Do you recall anything of this?

J: He had [laughter] a very hard time at first. It wasn't about supervising. The lady who had been there all those years expected to step into the principalship, and she just took it as a matter of fact that she would be the next principal. She had worked under the previous

principal all the years she'd been here, and she was a much older person than any of us, and she was very resentful that they would give a little "upstart," she called him, the principalship. It created--that was the incident. It wasn't about the other teachers; we all got along fine with him. There were the three of us. We were young women, but she would not go out on the playground, and she wanted to leave when her children got out. She had always left school just as soon as the little ones--she had the beginners, and they got out at two, and then she would just go on home, and he wouldn't let anybody go until it was four o'clock. One of the young women was married, and her husband very often would come for her, oh, forty minutes early, and he told her that she had to stay just like the rest of us. They called him an "upstart" because he was bossing them, and they thought he was too young to be--and I don't know, but I think that some of the others--they didn't want the principalship over there at all, but they thought he was too young to be the principal. He was very young at that time, but he made a good principal. He made a good principal because he was interested in the--I imagine that he was that way everywhere he went. Wherever he was, he went into it full force.

He and Lady Bird came back, and we had a program, and he spoke to the school over there. I wasn't any longer in that school, but I went over, and I was one of them on the platform with he and Lady Bird and the others, and it was good to see him again. It had been a good many years.

G: Did you talk to him?

J: Yes, I talked to him and had my picture taken with Lady Bird. You see, Lady Bird was the roommate to one of my good friends when they were going to the university.

G: Who was that?

J: Charles Ethel Barbara. She and Lady Bird were roommates, and she had often talked about Lady Bird. I didn't know her personally, but Charles Ethel did, and they had visited each other even after they were married. But they came back for a visit, and it was a big day over there. My goodness gracious, the whole town was over there, and only so many could get in in the--it's not a very big auditorium to that school over there, and it was in the school, and he went into the room where he taught, and he let the class--those grown, Mexican people went in and sat down in the seats where they used to sit, and he went in there and talked to them a little bit from the desk, and they were very proud, I can tell you. They were beaming to have the President come and do that for them.

G: Was Danny Garcia one of those?

J: Yes, oh yes, Danny. He has always been just devoted to all the things. He was one of the--Lyndon especially liked he and the Ortiz twins. They were very live-wire and energetic children. Dan's a smart boy. He made a smart man, but we were all invited up to the Ranch, and Dan went and got his picture. Then he got on some TV show, *I've Got a Secret*, and that was because the President had whipped him when he was a little boy, but anyway, he just loved to get in on it.

He saw me the other day, the first time you had talked to him, and he said, "Oh, [inaudible], and I told him about you and he's going to come see you," and I said, "Well, now Dan, I've told the story a million times." "Oh," he said, "you knew him better than any of the rest of us." And I said, "Well, you know, a teacher"--and we were a small school, and if you've never lived in a small town, everybody knows the teachers and what the teachers

are doing and what they ought to be doing, and whether they ever do it or not, it's not the thing. But that's true in a small town. You know the teachers. Everybody does, and he was very much on the scene. I mean, always around somewhere. And this coach they mentioned there was a very delightful young man.

And we had also at that time Bailey Wright. His brother was head of the English Department at San Marcos, and Bailey went on to be president of a college in Missouri, and I had a picture of him and a write-up about him and--oh, this was years later, of course, but I always felt--I never had any more contact with him, but I did get this clipping showing that he had been elected president of this college, and I thought, "Well, that's pretty nice." We were in meetings and together, and I knew him real well while he was here like you do know your co-workers. He was here just one year, too, just like Lyndon, but he was a very fine fellow.

G: When did the school year end at Welhausen?

J: May. It ended in May, and he left right after school to go to San Marcos to go to summer school, and then--I presume it was the very next year--went on down to Houston.

G: I believe that's right.

J: Yes.

G: Well, he made a side trip to Pearsall for a month or two, I think.

J: Yes, he came to Pearsall. He was going to start the debating because I saw him a time or two. He came down here. Yes, it was, part of the year, and then he went on to Houston. I don't know why he left, but I guess it was a better offer. He was always out for the better.

G: You say he came down here once or twice when he was at Pearsall?

J: Yes. He was down just for visits, not to stay.

G: I see. Was it Judge Martin that was the county judge, I believe, at that time?

J: Yes. Yes. Judge--we called him "Jay"--Martin. Now that is Annette Luedermann's [Luedman?] father.

G: I see.

J: Lyndon's cousin that I mentioned that taught out at Los Angeles married into the Martin family, Mrs. Judge Martin's brother, and when their daughter married, Lyndon came down for the wedding. I didn't go; it was a private affair in the home, and this would have been his second cousin that got married, but he and Lady Bird came to the wedding.

G: That would have been during the vice presidency?

J: I think it would have been, yes.

G: That was Mr. Kimball?

J: Yes. Margaret Ann was the daughter that got married, and I remember their coming for that.

G: I have it that there were five teachers altogether at the Welhausen School, and I think you confirmed that.

J: Yes, there were. There were the three young women and then the elderly lady, and Lyndon made the five. Yes, and we had eight grades, and we rotated. That is, I taught all the language arts department, and Lyndon taught the math and science around in the different grades, because he didn't want to teach--we were self-contained classes. It was not a departmentalized thing, in a way, but when he came, he wanted to trade. We just called it "trading." And I took all the language arts, and then he took the math and science.

G: I've heard that he was a pretty tough disciplinarian.

J: Yes, he was. Now, he was very strict, but you had to be when you had that many children coming and going all the time. If you didn't, you didn't accomplish very much. But he was very strict, and he took care--in the hall and out on the grounds and then, of course, he had his own room. He had a whole grade to be responsible for, too. Two grades; we all had two. And he was very strict. If he left the room and came back, he expected them to be still busy.

G: Well, now, how many grades were there into a room?

J: Well, they were divided differently. There were no kindergartens. There was the first grade, and the elderly lady had that, and then this other young woman had the second grade, and that was self-contained. Then I had third and fourth, and the other girl had fifth and sixth, and he had seventh and eighth.

G: I see.

J: That's the way we divided it up.

G: So most of the grades shared a room.

J: Well, you had two grades in the same room.

G: I was wondering how five teachers could handle eight grades.

J: Yes, that's the way you did, and we had half-day sessions up--not the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth, but the lower grades had half-day sessions. So many came in the morning; so many came in the afternoon, and you divided them any way you wanted to. The second grade teacher and myself, we divided ours by their--the older ones for some of them were so much older than others, and then we tried to put the younger ones in the morning session

and the older ones in the afternoon session because the older ones--they wouldn't have been so old if they had been the brighter ones because they were kind of slow learners. And that was the way. It wasn't called slow learners; it was just the afternoon group. The morning group were the quicker children, but they were younger. It was their first chance at showing what they could do, and those others, some of them had been in every grade two or three years. One reason was, they didn't attend. They'd stay home half a day here or two days there. That's the one thing about that. We had that right up to the day I stopped teaching. They'd go see their aunt that was sick [and] be gone a whole week right in the middle of the most important something you were teaching, and that's why they always were behind. They wouldn't be consistent.

G: What was there to do in the evenings and on weekends in Cotulla in those days?

J: Well, we had a picture show and a movie, and they had quite a number of activities. We had rodeos quite often, and well, there really wasn't very much, now, if you want to know, other than private parties. That's always been Cotulla's main social thing is private--now private barbecues or swim parties, you know, amongst the young couples and all. But even back then, it was to just go to somebody's house and play games and have refreshments and things or maybe a supper or something, and the church had more activities then than they do now.

G: Well, now, you were a native of Cotulla, is that right?

J: Yes. I've been here always.

G: So presumably, you would get invited to some of these. Would LBJ get asked to some private parties?

J: Yes. Yes. They were very much in demand; don't think they weren't. These three young men that I mentioned, they were very much in demand because there were three eligible, extra men to be invited, and I know they were invited to a lot of places that I didn't get invited. He would laugh and say something about it to me, especially if it was over the weekend. He'd get invited to dinner. Many of them--mother that had a daughter would invite these young men. They've always been that way, I guess, looking around for eligible suitors of some kind. But none of these were interested, I can tell you that.

G: Why do you say that?

J: Well, they were not. They were here to make some money, and every one of them had a future ambition, and that was what they--really and truly, all three of them were interested and doing what they were doing well, and then they were all knowing they were going to move on, and each one was on an educational ladder. You see, none of them had finished. They were all working on their--I presume most of them came because we needed the teachers here because it didn't pay very much, and it was a small town, and nothing alluring about the social life for young people, so they had to be young people who were not interested in those kind of things. They wanted a job; they wanted to get some experience, and they wanted to make a living and get themselves started on the ladder, I guess you'd say, and it seemed like they all did do well.

G: Did Lyndon ever talk to you about his ambitions?

J: Oh, he talked all the time about it. No, now, he never did say--he was very much interested in the Senate, so I suppose that was always his dream to be a senator. He always was talking about it. The more of the debating--he always was arguing some subject, and if you

didn't want to argue with him, why you just didn't answer him. I always thought he was practicing on anybody he could, and that was one thing people, I think, in Cotulla--these ranch people--they can't care. They keep up with politics, but they're not interested. They would rather talk about the price of beef and the drought. So, I think, that's sometimes the reason you've heard people say, "He didn't get along," or something like that. It was because he was so different in that he was so politically minded, and that's kind of out of character for a young man, as young as he was. But evidently, from the way he talked, his father--that's all he'd talked about either when he was a little boy. And he had told me that his mother just dreamed of him being in the political arena. So I guess it was just all his life that had been a subject that had been talked about a lot anyway.

G: Did he talk about his mother a lot?

J: Yes. Yes. He did. He talked about her. He told me--us, not just me, us--many times about now, his mother believed this, and his mother thought that, and they were always complimentary thoughts about his mother.

G: Did he not have a sweetheart here in town, ever, a girlfriend?

J: No. No. He went around in groups. I mean, he was socially minded, but, now, when he was at Pearsall, I believe he went with somebody for a while. I understand that he did. I don't know. But down here he didn't go, didn't date anybody.

G: Who was the superintendent? Was Mr. Donaho superintendent at that time?

J: Yes.

G: Do you know how LBJ learned of this job down here?

J: He was in San Marcos going to school, and I imagine, because this school even until today, they place lists in the University and San Marcos and different places when we need a lot of teachers, and I'm sure that they got the job from all of these. We get people today that way. I mean, people come down here, and they hear about the job through some of these listings.

G: What did a teacher get paid in those days?

J: Well, let me see now. Well, that year, I guess--I don't know what he got. He got a little--I think it was $90.00 a month, and I see they--I saw that exorbitant amount--because I know that it was $80.00 a month, $90.00, or $100.00 at that time. That's what they paid the teachers.

G: And he might have gotten a little more because he was the principal.

J: He got the principal's salary. It would be more. Yes.

G: I see.

J: And the men teachers had to be paid extra, too.

G: Why was that?

J: Well, for years that was the--it didn't make any difference. You could say, "But he just--" "Well, but he's a man. He's the head of a household," and they wouldn't even be married. But that was just a category then that a man--

G: Things have changed, haven't they?

J: Oh, yes. There was no woman's lib then. I can tell you that, but let's see. I don't care who you are, you are criticized from one way to the other. But, in general, I think he was well liked. You know, in general. There were picky people, I'm sure, and a lot of them probably knew that I liked him, and we got along beautifully, and this other young teacher from San

Antonio. We just fell in line with whatever he wanted to do; [it] didn't make any difference to us. We were so glad somebody else would take the initiative and run around and do all that because we knew we needed it, but we were not in a position to be that type person to get it under control. We didn't mind; we just followed along. Whatever he wanted to do, we did. I mean, you know, carried out the programs. But, of course, there's always resentment if somebody initiates something new wherever you are; there's people that resent your doing it even though they didn't want to do it themselves.

G: Did he make any enemies? Was there anyone who actively disliked him?

J: I don't think so. I think the lady was--she really liked the boy, but she never could give in that he wasn't a whippersnapper. It was just because she thought she'd get the job; I know. She'd say, "They shouldn't give it to him. He doesn't know a thing about teaching" because he hadn't ever taught, you see. "He oughtn't to be made principal when he hadn't ever taught." But, I think she liked him, and he would go right on and pay no attention to her fussing or anything. She knew that he was ambitious and willing to do all this, and she knew she wouldn't have wanted to do any of this. She wasn't in a position to do it at all. But now, she talked fluent Mexican, so she was the interpreter for him because he didn't talk any. She had to be the interpreter for families that came that didn't talk English. And I think that's about all now that--

G: Did you see anything of him when he came campaigning in his first campaign for Congress? I believe it would have been about 1937.

J: No. He came here, but I wasn't here. I remember that they said he came to town. Yes. But I didn't see him that time. I remember. He did come here, but I was out of town.

G: Did you see him any other times outside of the times he came back to Cotulla?

J: That's all. Yes. And then, I saw him at San Marcos in the summer school one summer, but I think he went on full time after that year and finished.

G: Now, that would have been the summer after he was here?

J: Yes.

G: He was editor of the paper, I think, wasn't he? Or do you recall that, at San Marcos?

J: Oh, he was on all kinds of things. He was busy, busy, busy, busy. You saw him everywhere on the campus. He was here, there, and yon. He was usually in the company of some professor, I suppose having a debate with him. I don't know. But there's where he was so different from Sam Houston, his brother, because he was fiddling around with the girls, laughing, and carrying on or going to get us something to drink or riding around, or doing something. They were entirely different.

G: And you didn't see him then in later life?

J: No. No, I did not. I was invited to go up to the Ranch. They had a picnic--I mean a barbecue--and I was invited. But I didn't go at that time. I had illness in the family, and I didn't go, and I did not see him any more after that.

G: I see. Well, Mrs. Johnson, this has been most informative.

J: Well, I hope.

G: I'm glad we cleared some things up like about the salary, for example.

J: Yes. Now, I don't know. I can't say for sure what he got, but I know that sounds awful big to me, but maybe he got that much because he was principal. I don't know what the

principals made. That's one job I never did want, you know, to be the principal. I was always in the grades.

End of Tape 1, Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

ELIZABETH WOOLLS JOHNSON

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Sarah Roberts, of New York, New York, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted with my aunt, Elizabeth W. Johnson, on February 19, 1986, in Cotulla, Texas, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording may be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Sarah B Roberts — 2/25/08
Donor — Date

Sharon Fawcett — 4-15-2008
Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries — Date