

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 10, 1965  
INTERVIEWEE: CLAUD KELLAM  
INTERVIEWER: ERIC F. GOLDMAN  
PLACE: Mr. Kellam's office, Board of Education Building,  
San Antonio, Texas

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G: Mr. Kellam, when did you first meet the President?

K: Frankly, I couldn't say. I know it was 1926 or 1927 when I started seeing him fairly regularly, but I met him as a youngster back in Blanco County a good many years ago. Our families knew each other.

G: You grew up in Blanco?

K: I was born in Blanco. At the time he started to school in San Marcos, I, too, was living in San Marcos as my regular home. But our families had known each other back in Blanco County.

G: Are there any stories or anecdotes, significant or merely colorful, about the President's growing up which you have not seen printed which you think should be added to the history books?

K: Oh, there are so many facets to his school experiences and his work around San Marcos it would be difficult to say. I don't think of any offhand.

One of my early memories of the effectiveness of his work had to do with some little school organizations that every school has. The situation at San Marcos was such that it brought into play early in his school career his ability to bring groups together and to come up with some sort of working arrangement, whether it served a hundred

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per cent his purpose or not. He usually managed to find an answer to problems that had been troublesome.

G: I'll come back to some of those. I was wondering, before we get to the San Marcos period, whether there are any stories you remember about him as a very young boy. Did you play with him? Or was there just a family connection?

K: My mother and his mother knew each other rather well back in their early days in Blanco County, and there was the famous old county courthouse site problem up there. An aunt of mine had married a relative of his. Eugene Baines Browning had married a sister, Mary, of my mother, Juliet Cage, and the families were just visiting country relatives of lesser degrees. Mother and Rebecca Baines Johnson, the President's mother, were quite good friends, and there was not anything special or out of the ordinary about that. Mother and Mrs. Johnson were not in close contact after my mother moved away from Blanco, but they remained on good terms as long as they lived.

G: In terms of that county courthouse dispute, we've been told a number of times that the fact that the county courthouse was in Johnson City helped make that a center of political interest and therefore helped stoke the President's political interest when he was growing up. Is that your impression?

K: It could well be. I know the county courthouse location was determined after an election in which Blanco won the fight. Blanco proceeded then to build a nice courthouse and it remains today, I think, as a hospital, but it was never used as a courthouse.

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G: I don't understand. It was determined in 1916, was it not, by a county-wide vote?

K: I'm not certain of the year, but it was a county-wide vote. Blanco won the election and they moved the courthouse to Blanco. But before it was ever occupied as a courthouse, they had another election and Johnson City won that election, so the courthouse went to a home it didn't have and left a building that didn't have a courthouse in it. I believe you'll find that historically correct, and I can show you the building.

G: Where was it to begin with?

K: It was in Blanco and Johnson City voted to move it. That is, Johnson City won the election. And the voters in Blanco County then thought that the courthouse should be moved to Johnson City.

G: It's the San Marcos period when you really knew him best, isn't it?

K: Yes, that's right.

G: What about the relationship between the President and Professor Greene? Obviously he was a great influence on the President but I'm not exactly sure what kind of an influence, what sort of ideas the Professor may have influenced him with. Maybe they weren't ideas--maybe it was just a sense of political vigor and activity.

K: Firsthand information, no. I never had a course under Mr. Greene. I was on the faculty at San Marcos when the President enrolled there. He first enrolled in what was known at the time as the sub-college group which meant that he did not have sufficient credits to be entered full-fledged as a college freshman. And as I recall--and

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this, of course, is data which can easily be substantiated--he had to spend some little time making his credits.

G: That's right, that's right.

K: Johnson City was not affiliated and he had to prove his credits for enrollment as a freshman.

I do recall that he did move into the garage of President Evans-- Doc C. E. Evans, "Shep" Evans, as he was known. In a small college everybody knew everybody else. President Evans carried a little black notebook around in his pocket and that was his filing system; he knew every student on the campus. There were maybe four hundred and fifty, five hundred students, more than that probably. Maybe by then eight or nine hundred.

G: Mr. Kellam, you say he moved into the garage or over the garage?

K: Over the garage. They had a little apartment up over the garage and Lyndon and, I believe, Bill Cole or Booty Johnson were with him. That changed of course as a boy moved out and others moved in, but someone was always in it.

G: How long was the President in his pre-college status?

K: I don't know. I think he enrolled as a regular freshman in September of 1927, but I wouldn't pinpoint that. He had been working, I know, and had not planned to go to school. At least he hadn't started to school. While working he decided that the kind of work he had been doing didn't fit him very well.

G: Did you actually teach him?

K: I did not have him as student. I was teaching biology in the sub-college

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group and handling laboratory work in the college. I was there just that one semester while he was there as a student plus the following year when they got embroiled in this situation which first pointed out to me that he had some real techniques in settling problems. Even though they were of his own creation, he could settle them.

G: You don't have any particular recollections of him?

K: Early days as a student? No.

G: Then let's get on to the Black Star, White Star matter that you were referring to. Would you tell the whole story as you know it?

K: I don't know that I could tell you the whole story. I know that essentially the Black Star organization was an athletic group. I think that I was probably one of the early--I wouldn't swear to it but I believe this--that I was involved at the inception of the thing and when it was organized and started taking in other members.

G: The Black Star?

K: Yes. Lyndon was more involved in non-athletic activities than he was in athletic activities, but he was out, as I recall it, for the baseball team and he was not up for inclusion in the group. Actually it was just a nondescript, unofficial, disorganized group that got together at chicken barbecues. That is about all it amounted to, but it gave the girls something to talk about. Whether Lyndon's name was actually submitted for membership or not, I couldn't say. I rather think it was, but he didn't get in.

After a while the Black Star organization found itself competing with the White Stars and it became obvious that it was going to be a

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real problem around the school as the groups started fighting. The student leaders were involved; there wasn't any question about that. The Black Stars had been pretty well in control of student elections, naming the class officers. They thought they were more important than the other group. You probably find all college groups like that. But the essence of it was that it was hurting the school and hurting everybody involved and finally they just got together and agreed to kill both of them.

G: You mean the administration did that?

K: No, the groups involved. The administration never came into it.

G: They were killed while he was still there, or was this later?

K: Yes, they were killed while he was still there unless I'm mistaken.

G: Do these names Black Star and White Star have any significance?

K: No.

G: You say there were both boys and girls in them?

K: No, boys only.

G: But they would invite the girls?

K: They'd invite the girls and would have dates for barbecues and such as that. It became a talked about outfit. The Black Stars were running so and so and then the first thing you'd know tickets came up for the White Stars.

G: Who was the leader of the Black Stars, do you remember, at the time the President challenged them with the White Stars?

K: I couldn't tell you. Red Hildreth was in the Black Stars, I'm sure.

I was involved in the thing; my brother, Jesse Kellam, was involved in

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it. Others, Jack Horton, Charles Ramsey, now deceased, Howard Brown, Alfred Weir, Robert Shelton, Ross Arnold. Ed Kallina was involved in it; Terry Lowman, now dead, was involved in it. A boy named Rogers Storey was involved and Pete Shands, I believe, who is in Denton now. There were about fifteen of us.

G: Mr. Kellam, Willard Deason, whom I'm sure you know--

K: Yes, I know Willard quite well.

G: Willard Deason said that they had a meeting, the White Star group did, and they decided that they were twenty votes short and everybody said it was impossible to get twenty votes. There were only about a hundred and fifty students involved and they wanted to quit and concede that the Black Stars had it. But the President said, "Don't quit. I'm going to get them." And he got them that night.

K: I don't remember that much of the detail.

G: How would you get them? Just by going around to the rooms and talking to people?

K: I don't know, frankly. It got to the point where it was nearly as impossible to us as it was to them. We were all friendly with everybody. Willard Deason was there; Sherman Birdwell was there; of course Lyndon was there. There wasn't any outright fight and, by that time, some of the younger group had more or less taken over the thing. I was away from there, not working there at the time and, frankly, I couldn't tell you when the thing was abandoned. It got to the point where it didn't mean anything to those of us who had organized it. We felt that it wasn't worth the fight it would have involved, and we did what we

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could to get both groups to call off the dogs and go home. Now that's just about what it amounted to.

G: On another matter, did you know the President well enough to know what kind of courses he especially liked? We know that he liked Professor Greene, but was there anybody else? How about Dr. Arnold?

K: M. L. Arnold was the history professor, and I had many courses with him. Lyndon had many courses with him, and old Doc M. L. Arnold was, without question, a big influence on him, whether Lyndon realized it or not.

G: I know very little about Dr. Arnold. What did he look like? How did he teach? What were his ideas?

K: He was kind of the old southern school type, a man around 6'2", not an outstandingly handsome man, but a gentleman if there ever was one. He taught here in San Antonio before he moved to San Marcos. His son is in San Marcos today, Ross Arnold, the Arnold Motor Company there. Ross was one of the Black Star group. Doc M. L. Arnold was a fine influence on anybody who ever came under him. My recollection of Dr. Arnold is wrapped up this way: I thought that I should have had an A in a history course under him. I talked with him about it when I got a B, and he said, "Now, young man, you did A work but you didn't do A studying and I'm not going to give you an A."

Franklin Herndon, who now lives in Rosenberg, I believe, was one involved in this Black Star-White Star organization, and Franklin's memory may be better than mine on it. Frankly, it just didn't amount to a terrible lot to us and it became more important to them.

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Lyndon was a leader. There is no question about that.

G: You say Dr. Arnold was a southern gentleman. Do you remember what his interpretation of history was?

K: I sum it up this way. He wasn't waving the flag. He wasn't trying to pull anything down or raise anything up except just trying to sell the country. He was doing that.

G: Would you call him a liberal or a conservative?

K: I certainly would not have called him a rock-ribbed conservative. He wouldn't class as a liberal to the extent that Dr. Greene was. But he was a liberal, yes. There's no question about that.

G: Coolidge and Hoover were presidents then. Did Greene talk about them?

K: Yes, Greene talked all of the time.

G: Did he lambast them?

K: He was outspoken. He was rather a slouchy, slovenly sort of an individual who liked to have attention drawn to him. Dr. Arnold stayed in the background. Greene wanted to be right out front.

G: Was Greene what you might call kind of a Populist in attitude?

K: That might characterize him. He was a man who apparently had been accustomed to very few of the so-called niceties of life. Dr. Arnold knew how to live and enjoyed it and could afford it. Dr. Greene made about the same salary, I guess, but he had a number of children, as I recall. I may be wrong.

G: Was he the sort of man who would have thought that the New Deal was good?

K: Greene? I would say so, yes.

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G: Whereas Arnold?

K: He would have been for it, but wouldn't have gotten out and made speeches about it. That would be my guess.

G: Do you know whether the President at that time was thinking of a political career? Some of his friends have said that he was thinking of both teaching and law as permanent careers rather than as stepping stones to politics.

K: He was sold on being a teacher and a coach of debate when he left San Marcos and went down to Cotulla. Then when he finished at Cotulla and came back and got his degree and went to Houston, he was delighted to be a teacher of debate. The man who changed his life more than anybody else is Bob Kleberg.

G: How did he come to get the Kleberg position?

K: Actually I don't know. I'm sure that my brother could tell you but I think that Alvin Wirtz of Austin told Bob Kleberg that he needed somebody who could work and work and work, and that he ought to get Lyndon Johnson. He went up with him as secretary, administrative assistant or something like that.

G: Did the President engage much in politics--I don't mean college politics but regular politics--while in college?

K: I think not. He might have been but right there on the campus and around San Marcos the only politics involved at that time was who was going to run for sheriff.

G: Now his dad, of course, was a politician of the old line. I am sure Lyndon was exposed to it from the time he could understand anything.

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Representative Sam Johnson was the typical country, Central Texas politician, from the time Lyndon started to know his dad.

His mother, of course, was a completely different personality than his father.

G: Did your mother have a home there in which the President lived for a period?

K: No.

G: This is incorrect information?

K: No, he did not live with us. This is incorrect.

Lyndon lived in two different boarding houses, so far as I know, after he lived over the Evans garage. He lived for a while with a woman by the name of Gates, Mrs. Terrell Gates. He had a room and paid about five or six dollars a month and maybe eighteen dollars a month room and board when he was taking his meals there. He had a lot of irons in the fire all the time. He was selling this, that and the other thing, and he was eating out on invitation any time he could.

G: Did he pay any rent at all when he lived over the Evans' garage?

K: I think not. He was doing janitorial work in the early stages of it.

G: His other places of living were first over the garage, then the other two boarding houses. You mentioned the name of the one lady. Do you know the name of the other?

K: Gates, Mrs. Terrell Gates. She has a son who is now one of the principals of our schools. He lived in her home there at the foot of the hill, in what is known as the Gates house.

G: Then his family actually moved to San Marcos for a while, didn't they?

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K: I think so. I think his mother possibly was down there for a while.

G: But not his father?

K: No, I believe not. He was in a session of the legislature, and I think they maintained their home in Johnson City practically all the time.

G: How did the President first come to know Alvin Wirtz? He was the state senator, is that correct, and perhaps through his father--

K: He was the senator from Dallas, and I'm sure Wirtz met him through his father. He first met him through his interest in the Colorado River Authority because that is the thing that Alvin Wirtz lived, breathed and died on. The connection with Alvin Wirtz actually put the stamp on Lyndon, it seems to me, from the very early days. If you go back and trace it out far enough, you will find that Alvin Wirtz called on him time after time.

G: Many people have mentioned what a thoughtful, intelligent person Alvin Wirtz was.

K: They sat on our front porch there at San Marcos many, many years ago. I couldn't begin to give you the reason for it, why they were there, or anything else. I know that my brother, Senator Wirtz, and Lyndon Johnson came by, and they were talking Colorado River then.

G: Senator Wirtz was interested early not only in conservation but also electrification?

K: Public power.

G: Who could tell us more about Senator Wirtz? Who would know him best?

K: Have you picked my brother's brains on him?

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G: No, I didn't realize. . .

K: I think he can tell you more about Wirtz than anybody else.

G: Fine!

How did the President spend his holidays while at San Marcos?

K: He never had many. I've dealt more with him after he was out of school than I did while he was in school because I was away from there and working.

When he got involved in the NYA, I talked with him on several occasions. Of course, Jesse went to work for him shortly thereafter. But even before that, I had known him because of his work with Kleberg. One of Kleberg's good friends was an uncle of mine, Jim Cage. Knowing that Lyndon was working with Kleberg, and Jim Cage, Mother's brother, and Kleberg being good friends, the conversation popped up rather easily. My most direct knowledge of anything that the President was involved in at that time came while he was in the NYA setup and after my brother went to work for him.

G: Were you in San Angelo during the NYA period?

K: No, San Antonio.

G: Did the President have much to do with La Villita?

K: My brother, of course, was the state director at the time, but I'm sure that Lyndon had a part in it. Jesse and Maury Maverick were the ones that really worked out the La Villita thing. Maury Maverick, Sr. --he's dead now of course, but Brother and Maury Maverick worked that out.

G: What were some of the NYA projects that you can recall that the President

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was involved in?

K: I'm sure he was involved in all of them. The state roadside parks were one of the early things that they did. Then the restoration of the La Villita became rather important.

G: Mr. Kellam, do you recall any of your conversations with the President during the NYA period?

K: I recall one rather key one, as far as Brother was concerned. I met Lyndon one morning, and he said he wanted to talk with me about Jesse. I met him down on the courthouse square.

G: Where was this?

K: In San Marcos. My brother was working for what was then the State Department of Education, now known as the Education Agency. He had just taken over as director of the Rural Aid Division of the State Department of Education. Our family didn't have much income. Jesse was gainfully employed and I was gainfully employed. Lyndon was kind of hesitant, I guess, to talk to him about going to work for NYA and was wanting to feel my pulse on what I thought about his asking Jesse to go to work. While I'm the younger brother, Jesse and I have always been rather close. He had changed jobs just a year or so before and was rather hesitant about changing again because the director of the Rural Aid Division of the Austin Education Agency was a good spot for him. I suggested to Lyndon that he see if he couldn't get a leave of absence out of the Education Department. I suppose, technically, he is still on leave of absence. The man, L. A. Woods, is long since dead and the department has been completely reorganized.

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But Lyndon and I sat there and talked about it. He said he wanted to get Jesse with him on the thing if it wouldn't create too much of a problem as far as Mother was concerned. Our father had been dead for many years. My mother is still a pretty salty old character, and the President is rarely ever in San Marcos but what he goes by to see her. The last time he walked in, she was sitting there picking pecans, rather unconcerned about his walking in the back door. But Johnson has always been considerate of the problems of other folks and he didn't want to pull Jesse out of a job, a good job, unless the family felt that it had something to merit it. Jesse went ahead and went with him as assistant director of NYA and eventually, when Lyndon was elected to Congress, took over as state director.

G: Do you remember any other conversations in which Mr Johnson may have talked about the excitement he felt with the NYA job, what he was learning from it, et cetera?

K: He was sold on it. He was sold very, very hard on it. We talked at times about several different kinds of projects. Of course, we had youngsters all over the state in the NYA setup making seventeen to eighteen cents an hour or something like that. The old NYA program was important to us at that time.

G: Harry Ransom told us that--Ransom was a reporter then covering the NYA--he felt that the NYA period was the turning point in the President's thinking, that for the first time the President began to see that the federal government really could do things that were useful to human beings, do things of personal importance. Did you have any conversations about that kind of thing with him?

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K: Not that you could identify as such. I do think this is quite appropriate though--that he was thoroughly convinced that those youngsters had to have an opportunity to stay in school, regardless of other phases of the program.

G: You mentioned earlier that the President's working in Congressman Kleberg's office was important.

K: The thing that convinced him that he was going to stay in politics was when he took over, I don't care how you express it, the Little Congress up there. It was about the second year he was there. A cousin of mine who had known him pretty well had gone with him and told me at the time that, "Lyndon's going to be elected president, chairman or whatever you want to call it of that thing for sure." I said to Nettie Lee, "He's got a real job on his hands if he does." He said, "He'll get it, you watch him." And sure enough he whipped seniority and everything else and took over, and then Nettie Lee went up there and worked some. Nettie Lee had known Congressman Kleberg's family for some time. That's one of the facets of his background that's not generally covered.

G: Is this while he was working for Congressman Kleberg?

K: For Kleberg, yes, but he took that thing over pretty quickly.

G: Thank you very much, Mr. Kellam. You have been very helpful.

[End of Tape I of I and Interview I]

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