

INTERVIEW: Interview I
DATE: February 23, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: RADCLIFFE KILLAM
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: Mr. Killam's office, Laredo, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Right after the election with--was it Clarence Martens, you said?

K: No, it was not. It was another individual, a very prominent individual in Laredo, who was in the publishing business and who was very influential in South Texas politics and who, I had reason to believe, knew what he was talking about. He was a personal friend of mine, a personal friend of my family, and I had high regard for him although we very often differed on both local and state and national politics. [He] came by my house one evening, and we were discussing the 1948 election, and in effect what he said was that shortly after the election, a few hours, when it became obvious that it was going to be very close and that perhaps Mr. Johnson was not going to be elected, they asked if there were any more--the polls, of course, had been closed--votes available in Webb County. I don't know whether it was he or [who that] assured they that there were probably a lot of votes still available in Webb County, but they had a very tight and a very vitriolic local election, and it would be impossible to do anything in Webb County that would be irregular on account of the surveillance and the local political activity that was taking place at that time. They suggested, "Why don't you get them out of Duval County?" He said, "Well, we've had 6000 poll taxes paid in Duval County, and we've already voted 5983"--the figures may be

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off a few, but in other words, there were no available votes in Duval County that could be shifted or put on the record on account of the poll tax situation. That was when they apparently moved to Box 13 in Jim Wells County, which was right on the county line and which was completely under the domination of the Parr faction, which was supporting LBJ very strongly at that time. I have no reason to doubt that that was a true story and that was the actual circumstances that brought about the so-called infamous Box 13 in the 1948 election.

G: Do you prefer that your friend stay nameless?

K: I would believe so since he's been dead a number of years and no point in--there's no place to defend himself in case my memory has failed, or I have misquoted him in some ways.

G: Did he say who from the Johnson camp had contact [inaudible]?

K: No, no, I didn't. If he did, I don't remember that.

G: Okay. Now you said something else before we came on tape that--there was a second story that you knew.

K: Well, the second story is, of course, nothing but hearsay, and I suppose that you have probably had some leads in this regard since you mentioned his name. Here again, Clarence is a very good friend of mine. We see each other frequently. Like the other man I mentioned, our political ideas are somewhat different. The interesting thing about Clarence is that at the time this happened, or is reputed to have happened, he was working for a company that we had quite a substantial interest in, as a matter of fact, owned the controlling interest in it. It was a lumber company, and he was working, and I don't know whether his headquarters then was San Diego or Alice, but he has always had high regard

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for us as a [family] and had high regard for my father, who was in the oil business and in the development of South Texas. The story I hear about Clarence is that his handwriting and the handwriting which listed the 80-some-odd names--

G: Oh, the 202--?

K: --the 202 names have a good deal of similarity.

G: I see.

K: Now whether there is any truth to that, I don't know, but I also hear that shortly after the election that the people in the oil business--and for a number of years thereafter--that if they wanted a direct line to Washington, why, they talked to Clarence first.

G: Is that a fact?

K: That's my understanding that it is, that they could always get through by--Clarence would carry the message for them.

G: Do you know to whom he was carrying the messages?

K: I would assume that he was carrying the message to somebody either in Johnson's office or Johnson himself.

G: Has he ever talked to you about this?

K: No, I have never mentioned it to him. I have never felt like that it would serve any good purpose. It would be a source of embarrassment to him and probably to me, too, but in an effort to be some help in your pursuit of what actually happened, why, I thought this might be a good lead, and it might be entirely fiction.

G: Let me ask you about the local scene in 1948 in Laredo and Webb County. What was the reaction among folks that you knew down here when the Box 13 allegation got started?

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- K: Well, there was no great surprise. That procedure had been taking place in South Texas politics for many, many years, and, of course, the people--my friends on the other side, on the opposite side, the people that were supporting Johnson, in effect took the approach, "Well, we didn't do anything different from South Texas than was done in East Texas for the other side. We just balanced the books on that basis." In other words, that was usual and proper--maybe not necessarily proper--but the usual way of conducting politics.
- G: Some of them were harking back to 1941, saying that Johnson had been counted out in 1941.
- K: Yes, I believe there was some [of that]. "They were just getting even," I believe was the comment that was made then.
- G: You knew Mr. Truman Phelps, I believe.
- K: Quite well, yes.
- G: Was he asked to do anything in connection with an investigation that you know of?
- K: Well, my understanding is that Truman was closely involved in the investigation and trying to get the control of--get the possession of Box 13, and see if the box was as they thought it was.
- G: Do you know if he succeeded in that?
- K: I don't think he did. First, I think his efforts and the efforts of others were blocked by the Supreme Court ruling, and shortly thereafter, if my memory doesn't fail me, there was a fire that--something happened to Box 13. I believe that's correct. I'm not--
- G: It wouldn't have been the first time a courthouse burned up.
- K: No, it certainly wouldn't. I hope it's the last, but I doubt if it will be.

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G: Well, the Senate, I believe, investigated; if my memory serves, the Senate committee on credentials sent a man down to Jim Wells County to look into this, and the FBI did some looking into it, too. Did you have any knowledge of any of those things?

K: Well, no, I really didn't, though there was an ex-FBI man that was very closely associated with the investigation, and it was with he--whose name I don't remember--

G: It might have been Dibrell, mightn't it?

K: Yes, yes.

G: Kellis Dibrell?

K: Kellis Dibrell that Truman Phelps was working with, and I think what--Truman was the ex-district attorney here, and he was familiar with the local political situation, had many friends both up and down the border, and had an ability to lead and get information for Kellis that he wouldn't have otherwise been able to secure.

G: I see. Now, the local political organization--I hesitate to use the word "machine," but maybe it was--

K: Well, I don't think there's any question but what it was a machine.

G: It was headed up by a figure still a little mysterious to me, if not to everybody, and that's a man named Judge [M. J.] Raymond. Is that correct?

K: Yes, yes. Yes.

G: Well, what was the connection there between the local machine and the Parrs?

K: Well, I'm really not in a very good position to make that analysis. I will give you a little background and a little history as I remember it. For many years, there was a so-called old party and new party in Webb County politics. The old party was primarily the party of the

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Martins and the Brunis and that group; the new party, which was--I guess, made its strongest run on the local scene in maybe 1932, was headed by--well, I can't remember who of--a custom broker by the name of Hal Brennan, I believe, ran for mayor, and, at that time, Judge Raymond was one of the supporters of the so-called new party. It was a very close and a very, I won't say vitriolic, but it was a hard-fought election, and the new party was defeated as everybody expected it to be. Then shortly thereafter, and in what year I don't remember, why, Judge Raymond became a member of the old party, or, at least, the old party in effect absorbed him, and after he was absorbed by the old party, he became a very dominant feature in the old party politics. There was the Kazens, who were also absorbed by the old party after having run on the new party slate. Judge Raymond was a very able and a very dynamic individual. He was the dominant public leader of this old party and was until his death in 1953 or 1954, I believe.

G: Now, you say public leader. Are you implying there were non-public leaders as well?

K: Oh yes, yes, there was some. The [Clarence?] Martens, who were very good friends of ours and who I have a great deal of respect and regard for, and the Martins and the Brunis and that fact[ion]--

G: How do you spell Bruni, sir?

K: B-R-U-N-I.

G: Thank you.

K: --were the patrons and provided a type of leadership that was quite beneficial to this community, although they were subject to a lot of criticism, too.

G: Is this Martin High as in [Raymond and Tirza Martin High School]?

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K: Martin High, yes. By far, for years, they were the dominant political family in this area.

Lots of intermarrying, lots of family connections.

G: Kind of an aristocracy?

K: Sort of an aristocracy, yes.

G: Well, what side of this was Mr. Phelps and yourself on? Were you and Mr. Phelps on the same side?

K: Oh, we were on the same side. Mr. Phelps was a so-called new party man as was I and as was my father, who took a fairly active part in the 1932 elections. I believe it was 1932.

G: Are you familiar with the story of how Mr. Phelps was appointed to be district attorney?

K: No, I don't recall that.

G: I should say the conventional wisdom has it that the old party wanted one of the Kazens appointed, and Coke Stevenson, who was then governor, refused because there was a problem with vice on the local military installation. He was getting heat from Washington, and he didn't think Kazen would clean it up, and so he sent Mr. Phelps, who didn't particularly want to come. He was on the [Texas] Liquor Control Board, I think, at the time.

K: Yes, I believe.

G: But came, in any case, and this is supposed to have originated the split between the South Texas political organizations and Coke Stevenson. That they in effect said, "This is an appointment we've got to have, and if you can't honor our request, then don't expect the vote next time around. You hadn't heard that story?"

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K: No, I hadn't heard that story. I have heard the story though--and that can I'm sure be verified, but with what happens in Duval County, that a candidate in favor in Duval County could get 95 or 96 per cent of the vote in the first primary, and in the second primary and the run-off, the other candidate might get the 96 per cent, which, on its face, would indicate that it was pretty much of a controlled vote.

G: Well, there's one story that I haven't researched that a man lost the primary and won the run-off as a write-in candidate.

(Laughter)

K: Well, it could possibly be true, yes.

G: That would take an enormous effort to [inaudible].

K: Yes.

G: I have heard a story, also, that Box 13 is not supposed to have been destroyed entirely, that somewhere there exists a copy of that tally sheet and poll list and so on.

K: I am not aware of that story. I haven't heard that story. It would be interesting if it should turn up.

G: It certainly would. It certainly would. Were there repercussions in Laredo from all of this 1948 business?

K: Not really. As I recall, not any great to-do about it, no.

G: Did you know Mr. Parr? Did you know George Parr?

K: I knew him slightly. I wouldn't say that I was a close friend or knew him well at all. He was a very personable individual and had the ability to ingratiate himself and he handled himself extremely well.

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G: How about Ed Lloyd? I think he was his colleague and--

K: Yes, I knew who Ed Lloyd was. I, of course, knew--what was the other--

G: His brother's name was Frank, I believe.

K: Frank Lloyd. No. But the one whose son was killed? [Jacob S. Floyd's son Jacob Jr. was murdered in 1952.]

G: Oh, oh sure.

K: Yes.

G: Oh, I'm running all of those Jim Wells names through my head, but I'm not coming up with the right one.

K: Yes.

G: But I know what you're talking about. Supposedly, the son was killed by accident.

K: I don't think there was any question about it, that they thought that the father, the attorney, was coming out the door when it was the son that came out the door.

G: How about Nago Alaniz? Was he--?

K: Well, he was involved in it, yes, of course.

G: He's supposed to have been the one who warned the father, I believe, the phone call--

K: I believe, yes, yes.

G: --told him "Don't go to the garage. Go out the front door."

K: Yes, yes.

G: Nago Alaniz is still practicing, I believe, in San Diego.

K: I have no knowledge of that.

G: Did you know Homer Dean, who--?

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K: Just slightly. Just slightly.

G: Let me see if I've got my local picture straight now. Kazens-now, is that the correct pronunciation?

K: Kazen, yes, yes.

G: Because I've heard people call them Kazen [inaudible]

K: No, no. It's Kazen.

G: It is Kazen. Okay. Phil, is that right?

K: Yes, there were four brothers, all of them was of more-than-average ability. Charles, the oldest, was probably the least well-known, and then Philip, who was probably the best known and who was the leader of the family, and then Jimmy, who was an attorney--Philip is an attorney; Jimmy was an attorney, and Jimmy [E. James] was the local district judge for many, many years here, and then Chick--Abe [Abraham] Kazen, who started out as the representative and then was the state senator and has been our congressman from this district for a number of years.

G: Are they all still living?

K: Charlie is dead.

G: But Phil's still alive.

K: Yes.

G: Who is the district judge here now, do you know?

K: There are three district judges: [Ruben] Garcia; a young woman, an attorney, who has just been appointed [Elma Teresa Salinas], and what the heck is that other fellow's name [Antonio Zardenetta]? It slips my--

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- G: How has the political picture changed, would you say, in Webb County since 1948?
- K: Well, when you have a mayor who is a Republican you could say that it's changed quite a bit. (Laughter)
- G: Well, we've had a Republican governor, too, so maybe the whole state has turned a flip-flop.
- K: Yes, yes.
- G: But we turned right around and elected another Democrat--
- K: Yes.
- G: --just the first chance we had. How about Judge M. B. Bravo up, well, let's see, down the river, I guess, in Zapata County?
- K: He's in Zapata County, yes.
- G: I think he's still alive, isn't he?
- K: I believe so, but I used to know Judge Bravo; I have had no contact with him for many, many years.
- G: You had nothing to do with the investigation or the hearings that went on in either of these counties and San Diego and so forth?
- K: No, no. I did not. I probably should have, but I didn't.
- G: Who would you suggest that I talk to in this connection?
- K: Well, I'm sure that you have no trouble finding people that were on the Johnson side.
- G: No. No trouble at all. Of course, if one name or a name comes up, don't hesitate to throw it in because he may have slipped through our net.

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K: This so-called new party-old party division is something that has carried on since the early 1930s, and then, as I say, there was an election in 1948, and there was also another election in 1952. Lonnie Gates, who lives in San Antonio now, might have some background on it.

G: What was his--?

K: He ran for mayor in 1952--

G: I see.

K: --and at one time during--the most that the so-called new party, the most that they were able to do was to elect several members of the school board, and, unfortunately, the most knowledgeable and the one with the greatest background on it has been dead for a number of years.

G: Who was that?

K: That was, oh golly, an attorney that moved from here to Austin. You can see my memory of names is not so good.

G: Well, we run into this all the time; it's a long time ago.

K: Yes.

G: Mr. Phelps never talked to you about going up to Jim Wells County after the election to assist in the investigation or--you see, I have two versions: one is that he went up to help Mr. Dibrell when he was working for Mr. Stevenson, and the other is that he went up afterwards with the man from the Senate committee who came down and tried to impound the voting material, all the ballot boxes and so on. I don't know which is right.

K: Couldn't he have done both?

G: He could have done both.

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K: I would rather think that maybe he did both of them. I remember talking to Truman, but I must admit that my memory of the details are--

G: There's a story, and I'm afraid I have to protect the source--

K: Yes.

G: --that said Mr. Phelps' life was threatened by a number of factions or persons in Duval and Jim Wells County. Do you know if there's anything to that?

K: Well, I don't have any direct knowledge of it, but it wouldn't surprise me at all. And the name of the attorney that I was trying to remember was George Byfield, who was a very prominent attorney in Austin, I think.

G: B-Y-F-I-E-L-D?

K: B-Y-F-I-E-L-D, yes.

G: Well, we can sure find out if he is still there.

K: No, no. He's dead.

G: Oh, he is dead? Okay.

K: Yes, yes, yes. Then another fellow that was very influential in the early 1950s, which is a carry-on, was Charlie Dick [?], and he's also dead. (Laughter) Maybe it was hard on them.

G: You saved us time trying to find them.

K: Yes.

G: Maybe you have heard this story or can confirm it: someone asked Mr. Phelps that in the face of all these threats, why was he going? And he said he was more afraid of Frank Hamer than he was George Parr.

K: (Laughter) Well, I've never heard that story either.

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G: Well, it should have happened if it didn't. Okay. Is there still a discernible old party-new party going on here?

K: No, not nearly as much as there was. The so-called control of the political people in Laredo, with the election of the Republican mayor--and that was brought about primarily by his appeal to the people in the barrios, so to speak--has sort of eroded the control that they--

G: Kind of a new [inaudible].

K: --and they, of course, I think voluntarily gave it up, too, to some extent.

G: It would strike somebody that it's kind of unusual that a Republican could have that appeal. Isn't that traditionally what the Democrats had?

K: Well, I don't know but what maybe the parties haven't really changed their political philosophy. Certainly on a national scale, I think they have. Traditionally, they have. But this Mayor [Aldo] Tatangelo, who is from Rhode Island, who was a businessman in Mexico and came to Laredo and has only lived here a short period of time as far as years are concerned, had a great deal of appeal to these people, and he appealed to another element that were ready for some sort of a change.

G: Well, sir, is there anything that I have not been smart enough to ask you?

K: Well, no. You've asked me, I think, all the questions that were needed to bring out what little I knew about it.

G: Well, all right, I'll just cut it off here then.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

