

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 10, 1971
INTERVIEWEES: MR. AND MRS. EUGENE McDERMOTT (MARGARET)
INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB
PLACE: The McDermotts' home, 4701 Drexel, Dallas, Texas

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DM: Well, first of all, I think we need to know something about you two. Where do you come from? Where were you born and when? Where were you educated?

EM: Start in with Margaret, because she's native.

DM: She's native? Mrs. McDermott?

MM: Yes, I'm a native of Texas. My mother's family came to Texas in 1824. My great-great-uncle fought against the Mexicans in 1836. So I'm an old-timer.

DM: And what was your maiden name?

MM: My maiden name is Margaret Milam.

DM: Milam?

MM: Yes.

DM: This is the Milam that was in the Texas Revolution and so forth.

MM: Yes, yes. He also was a great-great-uncle.

DM: An illustrious name, to say the least.

MM: Thank you.

DM: Well, then, did you grow up here in Dallas?

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MM: I grew up in Dallas. I was born in Dallas and have lived here all my life.

DM: And you were educated where?

MM: Sweet Briar and the University of Texas. My mother met my father at the University of Texas.

(Interruption--recorder malfunction during part of recording)

DM: What I was getting was background information which is not the most essential thing.

MM: Oh, no. You know, as I said to my husband, "Let's keep it short about us."

EM: Well, that's about it.

MM: He said that's what we know the most of.

DM: That's what we wanted was the background information and how you came to Texas and started in the geophysical area, the industry, and built up these companies which finally grew up into Texas Instruments. When did you meet, by the way?

EM: Oh, twenty years ago.

DM: Twenty years ago.

MM: Twenty-five.

EM: No. We might have, yes. A little over twenty.

DM: Maybe I shouldn't push any further on that question.

EM: Twenty-five, could be.

DM: Then you got interested in Dallas civic activities of various kinds.

EM: I got interested in St. Mark's when it came down here as the Texas Country Day School in the middle thirties, 1934. It moved out to

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its present location about 1941, burned down in 1945 or '46, and then was rebuilt and it's been building since.

DM: When did you first meet up with Lyndon Johnson or the Johnson family?

EM: Oh, just recently. We happened to see them, remember? But where were we, in Sweden or Denmark?

MM: Sweden.

EM: We were visiting over there.

MM: When President Johnson was vice president.

DM: Oh, what happened there?

EM: He was visiting, and then we saw him in--where was it, Finland?

MM: Well, we were at the same--

EM: And he made quite a hit there. He was roaming around the market and sort of met an old lady who told him that was her birthday today. So we started singing "Happy Birthday to You".

MM: And the Finns loved it.

EM: Helsinki, Helsinki.

MM: The Finns loved it. Yes, they thought that was really, really a very, warm, personal thing to do.

DM: Why were you there?

EM: Just touring.

DM: And you just happened to see him on the street or what?

EM: He was staying at the hotel where we were.

DM: Had you met him before this?

EM: No, no.

DM: You just recognized him?

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EM: Yes.

MM: I met President Johnson long before my husband did, I guess. I once went to a cocktail party, and it was years ago at the home of now-Judge Noel, Judge James Noel of Houston. I think at that point Lyndon Johnson was a congressman, and I met him for the first time. When he came in the room everyone said, "There's Lyndon Johnson." And even at that point, of course, he had a most commanding presence. And I met him then, which was the first time. It was just a chance meeting, but it was an impression, a solid impression.

DM: You say a "commanding appearance." What do you mean by that?

MM: Well, everyone in the room sort of gravitated toward President Johnson. Everyone that met him he had something to say to that person, and even then I think the people thought that he was an extraordinary person, particularly then. I mean, you know, I guess it's been that way with President Johnson all his life.

DM: Well then, what happened in Fredericksburg and what was your connection there?

EM: Do you want to go ahead?

DM: You'd better give me some background on Fredericksburg and how your interest grew in it.

MM: It was my husband's idea to--

EM: Well, first we were visiting the Dr. Phil Montgomerys from here. They have an historic monument now down here; they reconditioned an old house and go down frequently. We were down visiting them when we saw this old courthouse that they said had been condemned for a

long while, and eventually they reached a point where they had to tear it down. It was a beautiful structure.

DM: And this interested you, and so what did you decide to do about it?

EM: We went to see some friends there; he was an architect and his wife was a decorator, and we just asked them what it would cost to recondition it. Because we knew their library facilities were very small, their meeting facilities were. They had none except--the one I went to was in the basement of a bank there. So they needed that facility, and it was a beautiful building. Is that about it?

MM: This old courthouse had been empty and had been used just as a storehouse since 1928. This is on our first visit to Fredericksburg. We'd never been there before.

DM: When was this? Do you remember?

EM: Sixty-five or so, middle sixties.

MM: Six years ago. Anyhow, we were charmed with Fredericksburg and the people. Our friends Dr. and Mrs. Montgomery had this lovely house that they had restored as a second home, and they lived there just because they loved the community. In any event, when we saw this courthouse and heard that it was going to be torn down my husband said, "I feel we must restore this." After we contacted Mr. and Mrs. Milton Moseley and talked a little bit about it and about what it would take, we went ahead. The restoration, I think, took around eighteen months. I took a great deal of personal attention in it because I love that courthouse. It's a beautiful building, and we had felt that it was a gift not only to Fredericksburg but to the

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whole state. May I say that I can think of no other gift that has given us more personal pleasure than that restored courthouse.

EM: That's true.

MM: It's terribly exciting to us to think that people from all over the world will come to Fredericksburg, will come to see President and Mrs. Johnson, and one of the things that they see when they're in that lovely Hill Country is the courthouse. It gives us pleasure, too, that people in Fredericksburg love it and appreciate it. It's been a warm feeling that the whole town, the whole county enjoys it, that it's kept for all Texas, and that it's utilized by the townspeople, by the people in the county, and that visitors from all over the world see it.

DM: Were you actively involved in directing the restoration itself? Did you talk to architects and engineers and painters and carpenters and that sort of thing?

MM: We considered every detail of the courthouse.

DM: So you know just about where every nail is.

EM: Not that far.

DM: Where did the Lyndon Johnsons fit into this story?

EM: Well, Mrs. Johnson was always interested in it. She became interested in the courthouse when we started reconstructing it.

DM: Did she come down there to see it?

EM: Yes.

MM: Mrs. Johnson was at the dedication and made a wonderful speech, which we appreciated. The storehouse is a gift to Texas and the county from

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us; to have the Johnsons so interested in it was just a lovely, wonderful dividend.

DM: How did they get their interest in it? Did you invite them to see what you were doing?

MM: Oh no, no.

EM: No. Mrs. Johnson just was over, I guess visited Fredericksburg and knew the architect. She was [interested] sort of I guess as a result of being interested in things beautiful.

MM: Of course the President and Mrs. Johnson were in Washington while we were working on the courthouse, and they were terribly, terribly involved and busy. But I think even so they always had a great love for their home. Fredericksburg and the Hill Country. They were always interested in what was happening there no matter how involved they were on a national scheme.

EM: She was especially at that time.

MM: I think both President and Mrs. Johnson loved the Hill Country, and particularly since they had been back from Washington that they visited it more often just because they have a little more time.

DM: And you think their interest in this courthouse came out of their love of the Hill Country?

MM: Oh, yes.

DM: At the dedication of the courthouse you say Lady Bird gave a talk, did you invite her to do this?

EM: No, no. We had nothing to do with that.

MM: There was a committee of townspeople that arranged everything.

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EM: That's right, yes. There was a committee that as a matter of fact supervised the whole thing, and Dr. Phil Montgomery was chairman of that committee.

MM: The whole town celebrated it at the dedication.

EM: Yes. It was a town celebration, and she just came over, I guess. She knew the architect and his wife quite well.

MM: They happened to be in Texas for the weekend of the dedication, and it was a town celebration, and she came and made a charming speech. I remember one word that Mrs. Johnson said, "Use it. Let me say that, number one, this is a beautiful old building that has been restored for all of us, and use it." I think the people of Fredericksburg and Gillespie County have used it and enjoyed it, and it certainly has given us great pleasure.

DM: Was the President there also at this dedication?

MM: No, he was not. I feel that there were so many demands on President Johnson at that time that he was represented by Mrs. Johnson, hundreds and thousands of demands.

DM: Did you have a chance to say anything at the dedication? Did you give a speech, too?

MM: No. My husband spoke for us, as he does so ably.

DM: What did he say?

MM: I think that what we both hoped for, that the building would be maintained and it would be kept as a jewel of early Texas architecture. And it has been.

DM: Have you become involved in anything else in Fredericksburg?

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MM: Have I?

DM: Yes.

MM: No.

DM: This is your main project then?

MM: Now.

DM: Do you have any further plans for Fredericksburg?

MM: No, we have not. But we'd certainly like to maintain the integrity of that building, because we feel that it's really one of the most beautiful old buildings in Texas.

EM: Yes.

DM: Was there any difficulty, incidentally, in the restoration of the building?

EM: No, it was a good structure.

DM: You didn't have to shore up any walls?

EM: Oh, no. We just had to do a little extra mortar here and there in it, but the structure itself was good, good from the beginning.

MM: Wonderful.

EM: Solid structure.

MM: They really built in 1870.

EM: The old hardware was found. Fortunately, it wasn't on the doors or it wouldn't still be around.

(Interruption)

DM: Mrs. McDermott, you mentioned that the Johnsons were considerate people. Can you explain that?

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MM: Well, to get to Fredericksburg: I feel that they have not only been considerate, they've been terribly appreciative of anything we've done to contribute to Fredericksburg, which the Johnsons love so much. Mrs. Johnson signed her book at Fredericksburg, the proceeds going to the Library, and they invited us down for that very special and gala occasion. The whole town was there, and the signing of Mrs. Johnson's book was in the old courthouse, which made it very meaningful for us. When the President and Mrs. Johnson were in Washington we went to Washington to one of the state dinners, and Mrs. Johnson in her most considerate way called me up from the White House at nine-thirty and planned the day where I could see the treasures of the White House. I'm terribly interested in art, and I was taken through the White House by someone who explained to me the wonderful heritage on the art treasures that are in the White House. That had a great meaning for me. It was a consideration in her busy, busy schedule that I particularly appreciated because of her busy schedule.

Every time I've seen President and Mrs. Johnson in Dallas or Fredericksburg or wherever in the last months they always reiterate how they have enjoyed and appreciate the courthouse. All the people in Fredericksburg have been very kind to us and have made us feel that our gift . . . Well, we've had many rewards from this gift. But I feel that the Johnsons have really made us feel that it means something to them personally, and that gives my husband and myself great pleasure.

DM: Thank you very much. I believe you have to go.

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MM: I'm sorry I do, and it's so nice to have you.

DM: It's a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.

(Interruption)

DM: I think you mentioned before that you have been invited down to the Ranch on occasions.

EM: No. I've gone down with a group once when the President was signing a bill, which had to do with the federal building here, I guess.

DM: And you were invited to go down with the delegation?

EM: Yes. Then I went down with some of our TI people when we had a group from Japan over here, from Sony in Japan.

DM: Oh, yes.

EM: We are now in with them in Japan in a company fifty-fifty. Some of our old friends went down. They had an engagement to meet LBJ down there. We went down with them and then took them over to Fredericksburg for lunch.

DM: I see.

EM: They saw the Library and Ibuka, who was an old-timer there, sent us a half dozen books on Japan for the Library. Morita was pictured on the last issue of Time, who is the head of Sony now.

DM: By the way, how do you spell Ibuka?

EM: I-B-U-K-A. I think that's it. But Morita, M-O-R-I-T-A, is the head of it now, and he was there on that trip, too.

DM: Was the trip with the Japanese fairly recent, or was that while Johnson was [still in office]?

EM: Yes. It seems like it was recent, within the last six months, about

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six months ago.

DM: And did you visit--?

EM: We met on the lawn there. They were very much interested in discussing how the trip to the moon originated, and apparently, according to LBJ, it was his idea to push this.

DM: That's what Johnson told you?

EM: Yes. They seemed to be very interested in that. Then he took them on a ride all around, which he loves to do, to take people riding around the Ranch. I've ridden around when they had this group from Dallas, and they had two busloads, and LBJ was on one and Lady Bird on the other explaining the Ranch.

DM: You mean you took a bus over the [Ranch]?

EM: Well, we came down in a bus so we went around the Ranch in these buses. Each one had a bus as a guide over the Ranch.

DM: What did they tell you about the Ranch, talk about the cattle, the deer?

EM: Oh, yes. He talked about his old house, where he was born there, you know. He's a pretty down-to-earth person.

DM: Did you ever have occasion to visit him in the White House?

EM: We were there just once.

DM: How did you happen to get there?

EM: Well, I don't know. It was, you know, just one of the dinners.

DM: Was it a dinner or something?

EM: A dinner, yes. Some visiting celebrity from the Far East someplace. I forget who it was.

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DM: Having had this contact with the Johnsons, do you have any overall impressions of them and their contribution to this part of the country?

EM: Yes. As Margaret was saying, they're certainly interested and they seem to me to be really enjoying themselves now. Recently they were up here a few weeks ago at dinner at Stanley Marcus's, and he was in great form, telling jokes all the time. He seems to be enjoying himself thoroughly. I had a feeling the few times I visited him on the Ranch, talking out on the lawn--and we all expect after that thing to just go off and go home because he had to go to Washington--[that] he seemed to hate to want to leave that place. And he did. I asked him about that since. I told him I had that feeling, and he said, "Yes." He loves that Ranch. He loves that country, and he's thoroughly enjoying himself now and he's putting on this big show. That's going to be a humdinger.

DM: You're talking about the Library?

EM: Yes.

DM: Did he ever talk to you about appointing you to a committee or anything like that?

EM: Oh no, no.

DM: Then your relationship with the Johnsons has been almost purely social?

EM: That's right, yes.

DM: And in connection with Fredericksburg?

EM: Yes.

DM: All right. Now, is there anything that I should have asked you about that I didn't, or anything you can think of in connection with the

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Johnsons that you want to mention?

EM: No. I told you to start with there wasn't very much to say about it.

Our acquaintance was short but very delightful.

DM: Well, let me thank you then for the interview.

EM: Yes, well, thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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