

INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 3, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: HARRIS MELASKY

INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB

PLACE: Mr. Melasky's office in Taylor, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

Mc: To start off with, we need to know something about your background. Where were you born and when and where did you go to school?

M: I was born in Taylor, Texas, in 1892. I finished high school at Taylor, took my B.A. degree at the University of Texas and my law degree at the University of Texas. I finished law in 1914.

Mc: And then you began to practice?

M: I started practicing first at Waco and then came to Taylor, Texas, where I formed a partnership with Governor Dan Moody. He was not governor at that time.

Mc: Yes. When did you come back to Taylor, then, to practice?

M: I came back to Taylor in 1915. Then left during World War I, 1917, went into the Army.

Mc: Did you go overseas?

M: No, I wasn't overseas. I went to first officers' training camp at Leon Springs, but I didn't go overseas.

Mc: And then after the war, did you come back here or what?

M: After the war I went to work in New York City.

Melasky--I--2

Mc: As a lawyer?

M: No. I took the New York bar, though. Then the head of the concern I was working with had some domestic trouble. His doctor advised him to go on a trip around the world. He wanted me to go along with him, and I didn't have anything else to do. So we started out and we went as far as Hong Kong, and then he had some business things in New York he thought he ought to come back to. So we started back, and I resigned on the high seas. He went on to New York, and I came back to Taylor and re-formed my partnership with Dan Moody.

Mc: So this is what year now that you're back in Taylor?

M: 1919.

Mc: 1919. All right. Have you maintained your law practice here ever since then?

M: That's correct.

Mc: Good. When did you first meet Lyndon Johnson?

M: I first met Lyndon Johnson, I guess, before he ran for Congress, before Buchanan died. He was working with one of the government agencies. I met him, but I didn't know him intimately at that time. I guess I'd say I met him intimately about 1938 or 1939.

Mc: This means after he was a congressman.

M: That's right.

Mc: That's when you first met him?

M: No, I'd met him before.

Mc: I mean when you first knew him.

M: I became intimately acquainted with him after he was a congressman.

Mc: I see.

Melasky--I--3

M: Of his district.

Mc: What brought you into contact with him then?

M: Well, I represented a local refinery at Corpus Christi, and in 1940, when France fell, the only market for materials that you could sell for export was to Japan. They put an embargo on shipping any gasoline to Japan that would have lead to eighty-seven and could be used as aviation gasoline. I had known Mr. Johnson before that, but not intimately, and I wrote him a letter telling him the situation we were in and that unless we could start shipping some of this gasoline we were going to go broke. If they were going to keep the embargo on, well, that was fine, we had no complaint with that, but if they were going to lift the embargo in a week or ten days or a month, why, that would be too late for us and we couldn't understand it.

He got in touch with the Under Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, and they got us a number one permit to ship gasoline to Japan. Now you had to degrade it. In other words, at that time you could ship eighty-seven octane, but they said that you couldn't ship anything less than eighty-five, which with two cc's of lead would add up to something else. That was the lowest you could ship.

Mc: So that's what you shipped out?

M: We shipped out and it kept us from going broke. I thought he was very considerate of us.

Mc: Yes. Then when did you have contact with him the next time? Oh, from then on we became very close friends, very good friends. After we got in the war, why our company we went into dodeceane, converted one of our units to dodeceane. We'd had business in Washington all the time, and I'd go up there and I would see him at that time and be in contact with him.

Melasky--I--4

Mc: What company was this?

M: Taylor Refining Company.

Mc: Then when you'd go to Washington, you'd call on him?

M: I would go see him.

Mc: Were those friendly calls or business calls?

M: No, just friendly calls, just up there to see him.

Mc: Did you ever campaign for Lyndon Johnson?

M: Oh, definitely!

Mc: When did you first start doing that?

M: Whenever he ran, beginning I guess in--I think I campaigned for him in 1938. That was before this came up.

Mc: What kind of a role did you play in the campaigns? Did you give speeches or did you organize the area or what?

M: No, we would do organization here in Taylor mostly; we organized a group. Taylor's always been very fond of Lyndon.

Mc: It has?

M: Yes, they always supported him. It wasn't much trouble to get people around here to go along with that, but you had to have leaders that would work.

Mc: Did you then set up a headquarters here for him?

M: We would set up headquarters, yes. We'd get somebody that was a good speaker, and we'd bring him here; some of them used to have barbecues for him.

Mc: Do you remember him coming such as in 1938 or 1940?

M: He was so solid here he, I frankly say, didn't have to spend much time in Taylor. They

Melasky--I--5

were his friends. He had a good organization here. They were his friends. He would spend his time in areas that he needed to work in more than Taylor, but he would come and we would see him. We'd see him in Austin, go to his headquarters. We kept in contact with him.

Mc: What did you think about Lyndon Johnson in those days, late 1930s, early forties?

M: I thought he was a very efficient operator and that we were very fortunate to have a man of his caliber up there.

Mc: What do you mean, efficient?

M: Well, he looked after his constituents. There was nothing too small from him to attend to, and he had a good organization up there that you didn't have to go back twice about it. If he could do anything about it, he would try to help you. I don't mean all these like I mentioned about getting us these permits to ship gasoline; now I'm talking about personal things. For instance, Mr. Rowsey had a son, had two sons but one of them was a stepson, who was being shipped to Australia, and he hadn't seen the boy in some time and he thought he wanted to go. At that time it was hard to get transportation. He called Lyndon's office, and he got him a permit to go out there on a train--I don't mean to fly--to see his son leave. Later on, the other stepson was on a mission over Rumania. He was a pilot and had a mission over there. He was shot down over Yugoslavia, and they couldn't get any word about him. But they indicated from Italy where he was based that it was very possible that he had been picked up by some of the partisans there. Naturally, his mother was terribly alarmed about him. I got in touch with Lyndon's office, and in less than a day's time they reported back that he had been picked up by the partisans and was safe and would be taken back to Italy. And he was. Things like that.

Melasky--I--6

After the war was over, well , you take Mr. McConchie over here that's head of the Chevrolet business. He was in the Navy and the war was over. He wasn't doing anything and he wanted to get out; his business needed him. Lyndon arranged that. It wasn't anything big, but it was something that, by gosh, he could do for you.

Mc: And he did it quickly?

M: Quickly, yes, sir, with the utmost dispatch.

Mc: For the sake of the typist, I need to know how to spell these names. You mentioned someone by the name of Rowsey.

M: Rowsey. R-O-W-S-E-Y.

Mc: And the Chevrolet dealer?

M: McConchie. M-C-C-O-N-C-H-I-E.

Mc: Do you remember anything about the campaign that he had against Pappy O'Daniel?

M: That was the one, yes, Pappy O'Daniel's campaign, where they robbed him.

Mc: That was in the early forties.

M: That's right. They robbed him in East Texas. He was elected in that one, but the vote didn't show it so he lost.

Mc: Yes. Do you remember his coming through here to campaign or anything like that?

M: Oh, probably, but no details.

Mc: How about the 1948 senatorial campaign when he won, this time, against Coke Stevenson?

M: Yes.

Mc: You remember that one?

M: Yes, very well.

Melasky--I--7

Mc: Did he come through?

M: Oh, yes. After the first election, of course you understand, he was so far behind nobody figured he could ever make it up, even his friends. We all gave up, but he didn't. He just kept fighting, and sure enough he came out with seventy-eight votes, I believe that's correct, a seventy-eight vote majority. I was at Fort Worth at that convention.

Mc: You were?

M: Yes. I went to the convention that night when the executive committee met, you understand. They had to vote first on whether or not he would be the nominee, and it was pretty close. They called there in the hotel there in Fort Worth as they went down the line. I'm sure you've heard all this before. Why, as I recall, it was only by one vote.

Mc: Were you at that meeting?

M: Yes, I was there. I was not a delegate. I was a delegate to the convention. Yes, I was a delegate to the convention and later served on the election committee. That was the next day, after he'd been voted in by the executive committee.

Mc: What were your duties then on the election committee?

M: The election committee was just a turmoil. They were all stacked for Lyndon. You went in a room there out at the convention hall, and the chairman tried to get them to sit down and let anybody that opposed it say something. Well, of course, they weren't about to let anybody say anything. They would shout it down, and all they wanted to do was, "Let's vote! Let's vote!" That's all. And they finally did vote. It was pandemonium, let's put it that way. [That is] all they were interested in, naturally, all of the committee; there wasn't anybody on the committee that was not for Lyndon.

Mc: Coke Stevenson apparently tried to take some legal action.

Melasky--I--8

M: He did take some legal action, and he got an injunction to start with. Of course they went to the Supreme Court with that, and Judge Black moved as how they didn't have any say in it. He went to the federal court.

Mc: Did you have anything to do with that legal action?

M: No, nothing with that part of it. I knew what was going on, but I didn't have anything to do with it.

Mc: He got elected senator. Did you have any contact with him any time after that?

M: Oh, yes.

Mc: Shortly thereafter?

M: Numerous times.

Mc: Did he ever say anything to you about that election in 1948?

M: Yes, I guess so. Naturally in conversation we'd say something about it. We didn't discuss details. We discussed [how] we were happy he was elected.

Mc: Then in the other elections that he got involved in you also campaigned in the Taylor area?

M: Definitely, tried to support him, did everything we could to see that he was elected. He didn't have too much trouble after that.

Mc: Were you involved in any way in the 1956 fight in the Democratic Party in which Johnson and Rayburn opposed Allan Shivers for control of the party?

M: No, I wasn't at that. I think I went to one of the state conventions, but I was merely a delegate there. We were probably voting for Lyndon Johnson, with him, the group. As I recall, I don't think it was an open fight there. That was not an open fight between Lyndon [and Coke], as I recall. You know memory deceives you at times, and you are

Melasky--I--9

very forgetful. But I remember that that came after the Allan Shivers fight went up; [Lyndon] was in control up there at the convention. He [Stevenson] later on went for Eisenhower. But the reason for that, on that account, was in connection with the depletion allowance, wasn't it?

Mc: Yes. Do you remember when Lyndon Johnson took the vice presidential nomination in 1960 at the Los Angeles convention?

M: I was in Europe.

Mc: You were in Europe? When you heard about it, were you surprised?

M: Very!

Mc: Why?

M: I just didn't think that he'd want to be second fiddle to anybody.

Mc: Yes. Did you have any contact with him when he was vice president?

M: Oh, yes.

Mc: What kind of contact did you have with him?

M: Oh, just casual.

Mc: Social?

M: Social.

Mc: Did you see him in Washington?

M: I was trying to think. I would imagine that I did, but I have no definite recollection of it. I'm sure I did.

Mc: Well then, after the assassination of President Kennedy did you have any contact with Lyndon Johnson?

M: No, only indirectly. I was invited to the White House, but due to the fact that my wife

Melasky--I--10

was having some dental trouble we didn't go to one of the receptions they had up there.

So we didn't go to that at that time. We didn't see him. I'm trying to think whether we went to his home, whether we saw him up at Johnson City as vice president. No, he was president the last time we went up there. No, I don't think so.

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

M: Finally in 1968 before he went out; he had a party up there for all of his old Texas friends. We attended that. Yes, my wife and I attended that party. It was a lawn party, very nice.

Mc: It was? What did you do? What happened at the party?

M: Well, they had a big [tent]. Of course, when you got there he greeted you graciously, he and Lady Bird both. They had cocktails and hors d'oeuvres under a tent, and then they had tables set out on the [lawn]. I get mixed up on which it was. It was out on the lawn. There were about eight people who would be seated at a table. When we got there one of the aides came along and said that we were supposed to sit at the President's table, which was rather flattering, I thought. We were very surprised and very pleased. My wife sat on his right side. The Mayor of Austin was at that table; Lieutenant Governor Ben Barnes. Let me think of who else was there. I can't remember. We just stayed there, and then afterwards he made some talks and he mentioned me in one of his talks.

Mc: What did he say?

M: I don't remember. That's insignificant. Let's forget that. It was embarrassing to pick one person out, you know, of the whole assembly. But he was that way. If he liked you, he liked you. He'd try to promote you.

Mc: Did you visit him down at the Ranch, too?

Melasky--I--11

M: Yes.

Mc: Do any of those visits stand out in your mind as being significant?

M: No. Yes and no. He's a nice host, and his wife is an excellent hostess. They try to make you feel comfortable. And if you've known him this long, you just don't realize you're talking to a president.

Mc: Let me ask you some questions, then, about Lyndon Johnson's character and what he's like. He has a reputation for being a hard worker.

M: He is. He's industrious, and he expects all of his staff to be industrious. But he believes in rewarding them. He may be very stringent with them; then, by gosh, the next minute he's leaning over backwards to do something for them.

Mc: And he has a reputation for having a rather quick temper.

M: Yes, he has if he thinks he's being abused. I think that's right.

Mc: And he has a reputation for a good sense of humor.

M: He has.

Mc: Have you seen his humor in action?

M: No, I wouldn't say, just by hearing about it.

Mc: What kind of opinion would you have about his capacity as a politician?

M: He was superb.

Mc: Why do you say that?

M: He just worked hard at it; he knew what to do. His memory of friends over the state--not only after he got to be a national politician over the United States--was fantastic, how he could remember everybody and know them.

Mc: He had a good memory?

Melasky--I--12

M: Oh, gosh, yes. He never forgot anything.

Mc: Was he a highly intelligent man?

M: Definitely. Definitely. Of the first order.

Mc: Do you have any comment to make about Mrs. Johnson and how she helped him?

M: Mrs. Johnson was wonderful. You know, they all said that Lyndon was gruff and everything like that. With her sweet nature, she made up for all of Lyndon's faults.

Mc: Is that true?

M: I don't think there's any question about it. Of course so far as I was concerned, Lyndon never showed that side to me.

Mc: Is there anything else that you'd like to comment about Lyndon Johnson and your relationship with him?

M: No, I don't think so.

Mc: Let me thank you for your time.

M: Okay, I thank you for coming and giving me the opportunity to sound off for him.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

HARRIS MELASKY

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, Michael Lowenberg, of Dallas, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all rights, title, and interest in the transcript and the tape recording of the personal interview conducted with Harris Melasky on August 3, 1971 at Taylor, 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) A copy of the tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright 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 transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

 10-5-00
Donor (Power of Attorney) Date

 10-27-00
Archivist of the United States Date