

INTERVIEW I

DATE: April 14, 1971
INTERVIEWEE: RALPH MORELAND
INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB
PLACE: Mr. Moreland's office, 1905 North Lamar, Austin, Texas

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Mc: First of all, Mr. Moreland, I'd like to know something about you for future reference for historians. Might as well start off by asking you where were you born, and when, and where did you get your education?

M: [I was] born in Stamford, Texas, January 8, 1927, and moved around over the state with my family. My father was a preacher. [I] moved to Austin in 1934 and have lived here ever since. I went to the Austin public schools. And after the war, I attended the University. [I] graduated in 1950.

Mc: What did you get your degree in?

M: B.B.A., Restaurant Management.

Mc: Restaurant Management. And then, after you graduated, you went into the restaurant business?

M: No. For a year I worked for a consultant, a restaurant consultant. Then, after that, I went into partnerships in Waco with a man; that lasted only three months. And then, after that, returned to Austin and went into business for myself.

Mc: Is that when you set up 2-J's, or what?

M: No. I bought out the second of the two partners who originated

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the Holiday House drive-in on Barton Springs Road in 1947. I bought them out January 2, 1952. I've been in business here in Austin ever since.

Mc: Is the 2-J chain part of your work?

M: Well, my father built 2-J and operated it for years, and I bought him out six years ago this coming June.

Mc: I see. So you're running Holiday House and 2-J's.

M: Right. We have sixteen places in all.

Mc: All right. When did you first meet Lyndon Johnson, then?

M: Back in the middle thirties. He and Mrs. Johnson, and Governor [James V.] Allred and Mrs. Allred were guests in my home, my father's and mother's guests for dinner. But I, at that time, must have been about eight or nine years old. It didn't mean anything to me except that there was company. (Laughter). I don't remember anything, really, about it.

Mc: Well, then, when did you meet him again after that?

M: Right after the war. My father and I were having lunch at El Matamoros restaurant one night. Mr. Johnson walked in, and my father introduced me to him.

Mc: By then, he was in Congress.

M: Right. And it was interesting, in that he had a way of shaking hands with you, and lingering over the handshake, and looking into your eyes, and you'd almost think he'd been waiting for years to meet you.

Mc: Is that right?

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M: I've never met another man that could give you that impression.

Mc: And you got this impression when you met him at El Mat that second time?

M: Yes. And until today I've never met a man that gave that impression like he did.

Mc: Does he still give you this impression when you meet him, if you met him on the street, or on the ranch, or someplace?

M: Well, I don't get that full impact, now, like I did then.

Mc: But it impressed you then.

M: It sure did. It sure did. And I'd met, you know, a couple of governors and some high officials. But none ever gave me that impression like he did.

Mc: All right. You met him at El Mat, the second time. Then when did you come across him again? Did you see him at any parties, or . . . ?

M: I'm just thinking. I believe the next time was at a party that Don and Jane Thomas threw for him over in their yard, a few years later. I think he was Vice President then.

Mc: So this would be in the 1960s.

M: Most likely. I don't remember any contact during the fifties.

Mc: So you saw him again, then, in the 1960s. When you met him, in that period of time, were these mainly social occasions, or did you ever have anything to do with his campaigns?

M: No. I never had anything to do with the campaigns. I borrowed \$50,000 from one of his trusts, one time. A little anecdote there:

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you know, he would come back to Austin periodically, as I understand, to go over the investments that his top men had made of his monies during his absence.

Mc: Right.

M: He was going down the list one day up there at KTBC, in the conference room, and came across "Holiday House, \$50,000." And he's reported to have laid that paper down, and said, "You mean you loaned \$50,000 for a hamburger stand?" (Laughter). And they said, "Yes." And he pushed his chair back, and stood up, and said, "I want to see that." And out they went, down the elevator, and into the car. He drove out to the Holiday House on Airport Boulevard, which is a real handsome building; drove all the way around it; back down to the basement; up the elevator; back to the table; picked up the paper and started on the next line. Didn't say a word.

Mc: He didn't say a word?

M: Yes. But I know that only secondhand.

Mc: Did you get the impression that Lyndon Johnson was a pretty good business man?

M: I have been told by Don Thomas that, in his opinion, if the President hadn't been oriented towards politics, that, in his opinion, he would have undoubtedly ended up one of the wealthiest men on earth; that he had an instinct and a feeling for business that was just uncanny. Don's knowledge of and acquaintance with businessmen is extensive. But he told me that one time in

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all seriousness.

Mc: I always heard that Lady Bird was a good businesswoman, too. Did you ever have any contact with her in business matters?

M: No. Not in business matters. No.

Mc: Your contact with business with Johnson, then, was through KTBC.

M: KTBC. As an advertiser has been the business contact. I've heard, too, that she's a real capable, intelligent, smart woman. I'd also heard that she was the business mind behind their holdings. But from people that I've heard that are much closer to that situation than I am, while she is astute and has contributed to the business, there's no doubt, in the minds of any of those people directly involved, who the guiding hand and mind is. It's the President's. He has it. I'll tell you, too, he put together a team of men who have overseen his business, that if that group of men had been working for me fifteen or twenty, twenty-five years, I would undoubtedly be extremely wealthy, too. Because I'm talking about sharp, capable, honorable, decent, fine, hard-working men. The old saying that, "Birds of a feather flock together," I've never seen a dud among his top men.

Mc: In other words, he was able to attract good personnel.

M: Right. And they've worked for him . . . Well, only my very best people work as diligently for me as they do for him. And I'm talking about some strong capable ones: Jess Kellam, Don Thomas, Walter Jenkins, some others. Very capable. And anybody that had had the services of those men, over an extended period of years,

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I don't think they could spend money quickly enough to not become wealthy. There's just no way.

Mc: I've heard that Johnson was pretty hard-driving on his personnel; you know, that they worked hard for him and he required them to work hard. Is that your impression?

M: I've heard that. I'll say this though, I've also heard that he's fair with them, and has paid them fairly, and treated them fairly. Now, I understand he can get mad and chew them out good, but I've never heard any complaints that they didn't have it coming. Maybe they didn't appreciate the severity or the suddenness of it, but I've never heard any of them mention being chewed out when they didn't have it coming. (Laughter).

Mc: Yes.

M: And I've never heard anyone say he goes around looking for excuses to jump on people. I've never heard that.

Mc: Well, then, his business organization here in Austin was able to operate because of this good personnel, even though he was in Washington, D.C.

M: Oh, absolutely. Sure. With this caliber of men, you're better off not to over-supervise them or interfere with them.

Mc: Well, this could also have some bearing on the opinion that some people have that Lyndon Johnson made his money because of political influence.

M: That's a bunch of junk. You know the argument that he was holding the only television station in Austin and wouldn't allow anybody

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else in?

Mc: Right, right.

M: I once jokingly mentioned that to Don Thomas, and he just laughed, and he said, "Would you like to have a permit to operate here in Austin?" And I said, "I sure would." He said, "Fine. I'll get you one next week. But you've got to come up with about seven million dollars ante to get in that game." But he said, "If you want a permit, I'll get you one just that quick. Anybody that wants in the television game here in Austin can get in, in a second." He said, "I'll get it for them." When the KHFI men came along and were willing to ante up, they didn't have any trouble getting a permit, none at all. You know, there's not many people knocking around with seven million dollars to ante into a game against a company that was well operated and operated by sharp, capable men.

Mc: So then, the basis of the Johnson fortune, then, is good management?

M: I don't have any doubt about it. If I had gotten in the radio, and later the television, business in those early days that he did, with the men that he gathered--why, foot!--I have no doubt that I'd be just as well off or awful close to it. Sure.

Mc: What kind of social contacts have you had with the President? You've met him some at parties, and you met him at El Mat. Have you had any other contacts with him?

M: My wife and I were his guests at the Ranch in June of 1969.

Mc: How did that come about?

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M: Jess Kellam extended the invitation to us. He and Olga [Bredt], a friend of his, and Nash Phillips and his wife, and my wife and I were the guests that evening. Got up there about, oh, I think, four o'clock.

Mc: When in '69 was this?

M: June. Some time then. I don't remember exactly.

Mc: This is after he went out of office.

M: Yes.

Mc: Was this the first time you had been to the Ranch?

M: As his guest, yes. I'd been up with Don Thomas.

Mc: Yes.

M: And I, years ago, had hunted on the Scharnhorst Ranch; which was not the home ranch, but close by it. But that was as a guest of KTBC.

Mc: I see. So you and your wife, then, went to the Ranch in June of '69. And there were other guests there, too?

M: Just Nash Phillips and his wife, and Jess Kellam and his date.

Mc: And the Johnsons were there. And what did you do? Spend the night?

M: Oh, no.

Mc: Just for dinner, or what?

M: Yes. Well, he drove us three men around the Ranch and showed us the Ranch, which was most pleasant, a beautiful site. At one point there, he reacted to a question of Nash Phillips' as to how he thought the new Administration's economic policies were

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starting out.

Mc: Yes. What did he say?

M: Money, you know, was already beginning to get tight.

Mc: Yes.

M: And he was vehement in his dislike for that. He thought that was a mistake. He thought they were overdoing it, and overdoing it too early, too hard, and predicted dire results from it, from the standpoint of the economy.

Mc: Yes.

M: And I've thought of that many times. What's this, quote, controlled recession, unquote; but the story isn't told yet.

Mc: Right.

M: But I've been interested in seeing if his predictions came true.

Mc: Did he make any other political comments at that time? About the Nixon Administration, or his own?

M: No, that was the only one that I remember.

Mc: Well, let me ask you this: he, not too long before, had gone out of office, and the office of President is one of great pressure; did he seem relaxed? What I'm driving at is, how does a man like this de-accelerate, so to speak?

M: Something I was real pleased to see was, number one, he was completely and totally relaxed.

Mc: Did he look good?

M: Oh, yes. He had a rested look to his face that was nice to see. He didn't have that haggard, drawn look to him. I was real pleased.

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He looked healthier. He had lost some weight, it looked like, but he looked better, looked healthier. We had, oh, Scotch and soda, and bourbon, and this and that. He had one drink of ice tea during the entire time . . .

Mc: That's all?

M: . . . we were there, from, say, four o'clock until ten.

Mc: So he wasn't drinking any?

M: No, not a drop. I'd heard, you know, that he liked his Scotch.

Mc: Really.

M: And he may have. And he may still. I don't know.

Mc: But not that evening.

M: Not that night, not a single time. And didn't appear to be in any way concerned over it. He never made a comment about it. No one else did either. He was just real relaxed, except during the moment that he spoke about the higher cost of money coming in. That was the only real emotion that he showed during the visit. The rest of it was just relaxed and casual. He was real gracious to me, in that he knew I had a little ranch, and showed me some things that I was interested in, and . . .

Mc: Did he talk about cattle?

M: No, he talked more about deer.

Mc: Is that right?

M: Of far greater interest to me, in that I don't have any cattle and don't want any, and (chuckles) I have a lot of deer and love them, and want more. And he recommended that I put a deer-proof

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fence around my place, as he had done his, and then . . .

Mc: That's to keep them in?

M: Yes.

Mc: In the property?

M: . . . and to keep out the smaller deer, and go ahead and buy some larger deer, and gradually build up the size of the deer, but by keeping it in balance, have larger and healthier specimens of deer. And we talked about that.

Mc: Is his interest in deer for hunting purposes?

M: Oh, I don't think . . . I know, not for his hunting. But I think, like me, he just loves deer. I got the impression he got a lot of pleasure out of having a real healthy, fine looking herd of deer. So it wasn't for his killing. I've heard from Dale Malechek, his foreman, and from one or two other people, that he doesn't get any bang out of going out and killing deer, but he does enjoy people who do get a real bang out of it, coming up and getting a nice deer. Which he needs to do periodically, anyway, to keep his herd healthy. He got a lot of pleasure out of it.

And he told me a lot about how he fertilized his ranch, and did it periodically. Oh, it was green and beautiful, whereas, the adjoining land was grey, and burned-up and, you know, dead-looking. But he just seemed to love, he just seemed to quietly love that Ranch, and the deer, and his cattle, too. He had some cattle he was real proud of. And they were good-looking cattle. He had a right to.

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Mc: I always heard that Lyndon Johnson spoke in rather earthy language. Is that right? Some people say it's crude. .

M: Maybe I've got a bunch of crude friends, but his . . .

Mc: Nothing that ever bothered you?

M: His language didn't bother me at all. I mean . . . No, I don't remember him using any filthy language. Maybe a "God damn," or a "hell," or something like that, but . . . No, I don't remember anything unusual about the words that he used.

Mc: Did you have any impressions, incidentally, about Mrs. Johnson?

M: I sure do. I left that Ranch that night thinking that never in my life had I met a more gracious, lovely woman. She was just so wholesome, and relaxed, and genuine--just a perfect hostess, just a perfect hostess, not an ounce of put-on or theatrical qualities to her at all. She was just . . . She, of course, deferred to the President when he was present. But she's just a warm, genuine, lovely woman. And this was the first time I'd ever really been around her in relaxed circumstances. I'd met her at two or three cocktail parties, things like that, receptions. But she is; she's just a real nice woman to be in the presence of. Much better looking than her pictures, you know, in person. The home itself was a most relaxing, comfortable, tastefully decorated home, not over-decorated, just . . . It was a home that I, personally, felt I'd be just real comfortable in. That's a little unusual.

Mc: Well then, you had this contact with the Johnsons. Have you seen them since?

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M: I don't think so.

Mc: Have you seen them last year?

M: No. No, I was invited again to the Scharnhorst Ranch to hunt, and they said he most likely would be by after the hunt, but he didn't make it.

Mc: You never hunted with him, then?

M: No.

Mc: Well, is this, then, your contact with the Johnsons?

M: Yes.

Mc: Okay. Is there anything else about the Johnsons, or their local political connections, or business connections for that matter, that you think ought to be part of this interview?

M: No, not that I can think of. That's about the extent of my personal contact with him.

Mc: Okay. Then let me thank you for the interview.

M: Well, you're more than welcome.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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