

INTERVIEW WITH MR. BOB PHINNEY

PB: September 19, 1968. We are in the office of the District Director of Internal Revenue for the Austin District. Mr. Bob Phinney is the District Director. Mr. Phinney, as you know, we are making these audio tapes for inclusion in the National Archives who will in turn administer the LBJ Library Archives Division. We are attempting to get from all of the people who have known Mr. Johnson during his early years, their recollections of those early years and any stories illustrative of his character that are pertinent, and that sort of thing. Now, your friendship with the President goes back a long ways, does it not?

BP: It certainly does, Paul. In fact, when Lyndon Baines Johnson arrived in Texas in June or July, 1935, to head the newly established National Youth Administration, I was officing in the Littlefield Building where they moved in. As I tell it, we were on relief together back in those days; I was with the Work Projects Administration, District Director of Employment. So we had the pleasure of assisting Lyndon Johnson and his entire NYA state staff in establishing this new organization, working out their procedures, their accounting system and the whole works. We became fast friends in a hurry, because of our close working relationship and, of course, it

naturally followed--because of the type of people he and his sweet wife, Lady Bird are--this also went into a very fine and wonderful personal and social relationship.

PB: What kind of a man would you say that Mr. Johnson was in those days--in the NYA days?

BP: He hit the ground running, and I haven't seen him do anything else since. It was quite obvious to all of us that he was really a restless ..... had a restless, driving energy as much or more than any individual that I have ever known in my life. He couldn't stand mediocrity and has demonstrated in all these years that he hasn't changed from that standpoint, as well as many others. Always on the go, some people say he was demanding, but he did a good job and he wanted everybody else to do a good job.

PB: That's an interesting point, that you say some people say he was demanding. I've talked with some of the people who worked with him in NYA and according to them the hours they kept were out of this world.

BP: Well, that's certainly true. Now, I expect maybe they had a little longer hours than we did in WPA, but I remember back in those days, as I said a minute ago, we referred to ourselves as being on relief and because we were managers and in the administration of these relief programs didn't make us any different from the folks we

were working ..... It was a fast-paced job and I remember it was kind of normal to spend about 70-75 hours a week on the job where we were in WPA, and they were probably worse in NYA.

PB: In fact, you scarcely had time to eat back in those days, isn't that right?

BP: That's about true. I guess as far as Mr. Johnson's concerned that ..... I believe he must have eaten more hamburgers than any man in Texas in those days because he just said he didn't have time enough to do anything else. In fact, it worried Lady Bird considerably, but she wasn't able to do anything much about it except when he was home. He was always on the go and would just take time out long enough to grab a hamburger because he had so many things, as he put it, that had to be done.

PB: Well, didn't you all have leisure time at all?

BP: Oh yes, after our long hours we'd wind up out where he was staying at Dr. Bob Montgomery's house on San Pedro here in Austin and later over on Happy Hollow Lane. We had quite some hot domino games back in those years, and he still loves it.

PB: Do you play dominoes or "42"?

BP: Well, I play both, but I don't think I'll ever be caught playing against the President, because he can read those

things backwards--those dominoes ..... because he's played so much. And some people even claim that he cheats because he knows what you've got.

PB: You spoke of him staying at the home of Dr. Bob Montgomery, the former professor of economics at the University--I think he's professor emeritus now--; do you think that Dr. Bob ..... that he had an influence upon the President in those early days?

BP: I don't think there's any question that he did, Paul. The President was searching, seeking the best way to do things. Dr. Bob and he spent many, many hours over the years together. I know he held him in great personal esteem and affection, and I don't think Dr. Bob ever had any great difficulty selling him on anything, because their minds seemed to click--to go together. But he was a great admirer of Dr. Bob's as all the rest of us were.

PB: Tell me this. You were with the WPA which was Work Projects Administration, is that right?

BP: That's right.

PB: And he was with NYA; did you ever work together on any projects?

BP: No, they were entirely separate projects. They had some very fine ones. Of course, we had been going for several years in WPA, and I remember some of the very fine projects

that NYA worked up under this driving leadership of Mr. Johnson. One of them that all the folks in this area will remember is the Inks Lake Park Project. They did a really tremendous job up there in establishing that first park in the Lake area. I remember too back in those days, Paul, that he was tremendously interested in Lake Buchanan-- I mean Buchanan Dam, which was under construction. You remember it went broke under the old .....

PB: Ensel?

BP: Ensel interest outfit and was taken over by Brown and Root and some joint construction company went in on the job with them. I remember being with Lyndon and Herman Brown, riding around, looking over the construction of the dam, and how interested the President was, and as everyone knows has continued to be intensely interested and instrumental in doing so much for rural electrification, not only in Texas but all over the country. I've had to smile to myself many a time, and in fact I've told many a person when I've heard in later years, just as you have, that some of the President's enemies, so-to-speak, would say, "Well, he made ..... the President made ..... Herman Brown." Well, Herman Brown was made before the President arrived in Texas, and was a very splendid and able contractor before Mr. Johnson ever even thought about running for Congress.

PB: That reminds me of another point. You understand these tapes are to be used possibly by researchers in the future, and I think that many of them perhaps don't have an appreciation of what this country was like during the days of the Depression, why we had a WPA, why we had an NYA. Unless a man lives through it as you did and as I did, it's very difficult to appreciate the need for those things. Can you expound on that for a moment?

BP: Glad to, Paul. This was a period of the greatest percentage of unemployment in the history of the United States. These programs had to come--either that or a straight-out dole, which all of us were opposed to. So in the vision of the Congress ..... actually some of it even started back in the Hoover administration, as you remember ..... but certainly the impetus that President Roosevelt gave these programs really got them off the ground and provided actual meaningful employment to just hundreds of thousands of Texans, just as they did all over the entire nation. There were projects of all types in operation; they had to be sponsored and partially paid for by local political subdivisions--cities, counties, state--, they had to submit projects for approval; we had engineering staffs and worked with them and worked them all out. But it is true that, in some parts of the country the work done on

projects was not as good as they were in the sections of the country down through here that I know about. It was all because, though, the political subdivisions would not submit projects as worthwhile as they did down in this country.

PB: I recall one project, and I'm not sure whether it was a WPA or an NYA project, and that was the improvement in our own Zilker Park here in Austin. Whose was that?

BP: That was WPA. In fact, we had ..... several other projects around here. One of them the golfers will remember because we put irrigation on the Municipal Golf Course back in those days--the entire course. Another big project we had was in some of the building of the dams and the fine reservoirs of the lower Colorado River Authority. We had WPA projects that actually cleared these reservoir basins of trees and brush down to prescribed elevations. NYA had similar types of construction projects. I wish I could remember more of them. Of course, as I said a minute ago, our big connection was in procedures and operations, and we went our separate ways as far as our projects were concerned.

PB: After Mr. Johnson had served ..... was it one year or two years as NYA Director ..... two years, wasn't it?

BP: Yes it was.

PB: ..... he decided to run for the Congressional seat of the late Congressman Buchanan. Did you have any interest in that race?

BP: Oh, I had interest in unusual fashions, actually. I was going with my present wife, courting her in those days--not as fast and as furious in 1937 as I did in 1938. My future father-in-law was one of the candidates in I think about a nine-man race, and, of course, I was a Lyndon Johnson man ..... always have been. And I couldn't do anything else but help Lyndon Johnson to the full extent that I could.

PB: That was C. N. Avery.

BP: That's right. C. N. Avery, or "Pap" Avery, as we learned to call him until his death two years ago. But I think Lyndon really enjoyed the predicament that I was in. He saw of course, the real problem I had and laughed at me a number of times, but of course in a kind of buddy sort of a sense he wasn't laughing at me--he was laughing with me. I had a lot of people all over town, as well as the girl I was going with--my present wife, wondering why in the world I'd be for Lyndon Johnson against Mr. Avery. But Helen, obviously forgave me because she married me in 1939. I think it's an interesting sidelight, too, how fast friends Pap Avery and Lyndon Johnson became after that Congressional race. Mr. Avery



never went to Washington without calling on Mr. Johnson in all of his various offices over the years. I well remember a birthday party that General Ernest O. Thompson and I gave for Mr. Johnson in 1957. Some 75 men were there in General Thompson's house, and, of course, there was quite a lot of speech making and talking, and Pap Avery brought the house down when he said, "Wouldn't it have been a helluva hardship on the country if I'd been elected!"

PB: Now to pick up your story chronologically, Mr. Phinney, after he was elected to Congress, what were your contacts with him?

BP: Well, of course, I still saw him as often as he was here in town, and he'd call on me every once in a while for various things, and I was happy on every occasion to be able to help him in any manner to do the terrific job that he was doing. In 1940, though, began a nearly six-year period that I was in active service in the army--with the 36th Infantry Division for most of it. So for that long period there were only very occasional contacts. But I well remember in 1943 when the 36th Division arrived in North Africa, we were writing our wives as often as we could and because the mail was slow in catching up with us we hadn't received any mail from them.

we were giving them "ole Billy Hell" for not writing as they should. Several of them, including my wife, called on Congressman Lyndon Johnson to do something about it. And he did. He did it so well that it resulted in the Inspector General of the Army causing an investigation of the entire Army mail service. In fact, one of the inspectors called on us over there in Africa and asked us about it. I think I told them, "Well, wives will be wives, and they just were thinking about us and forgetting about a war going on, I guess."

PB: Did you know at the time that Johnson had inspired the investigation?

BP: Oh no. I didn't know that til I got back.

PB: Then after you got out of the army ..... that would be in 1945 or '46 ..... when was that?

BP: 1946.

PB: What did you do then?

BP: Well I wasn't even off the payroll and out of uniform before Congressman Johnson and several of us met up at Buchanan Dam. Included was our great old friend, Senator Alvin Wirtz, and plans were laid right there and I was included in those plans for the 1946 campaign. Just prior to that, several of us, as you well know, Paul, began organizing a thousand-watt AM radio station that's

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still doing well, KVET here in Austin. We set that up and actually then-Congressman Johnson was helpful to us in advising us and so forth on our application and on helping us all the way through in spite of the fact that his wife, Lady Bird's station was going to be our competitor. But as he said while he was helping us, "Well, I'd rather have my friends as competitors than anybody else." We were mighty, mighty grateful. And that was the spirit in which he helped us get this station.

PB: There were quite a number of people who have distinguished themselves since that time who were associated in that venture. Can you tell us some of those people?

BP: Well, John Connally, of course, our governor was one of them; Ambassador Ed Clark, Congressman Jake Pickle, Bill Deason, one of our fine commissioners in Washington, ..... I have a mental block, can't think of his agency .....

PB: Federal Communications Agency?

BP: No, no.

PB: Federal Trade Commission?

BP: One of the large commissions and I'm sorry I can't think of it right offhand. So we had quite a crew in that original bunch that organized KVET. Speaking of John Connally, I was the 1946 campaign office manager here in Austin where we had an office down in the 400 block of

Congress Avenue. Paul Hyman, of "Paul's Draperies," let us use his building down there, before he opened up. We had a headquarters there and I was the office manager. John Connally was the overall campaign manager for the district. We had a real hectic campaign. I remember so well a number of real hot arguments that took place over campaign strategy, across the board, and what should go in campaign speeches and all that sort of thing. I'm telling you, they had some knock-down-drag outs ..... the Congressman and John Connally. I had to laugh in later years when Mr. Johnson's opposition came out with the saying, and in fact even had it on some billboards against John Connally, calling him "LBJ---Lyndon's Boy John." Well, the reason I had to laugh is because I remembered all of these hot arguments over the years and knew so well that John Connally wasn't a yes-man from any standpoint. He was just like the President, a man of strong will and great ability, and they valued each other's advice and counsel as they always have over the years.

PB: That was the campaign for Congress in 1946 and the chief opponent in that race, was that Hardy Hollers?

BP: Hardy Hollers, that's right.

PB: Who is now an Austin attorney.

BP: That's correct.

BP: That's correct.

PB: Do you recall any of the specific arguments that they had, any specific policy statement that Johnson and Connally had disagreed about?

BP: Paul, I really don't, except from an overall standpoint, as I mentioned. Arguments over the best way to win was what they were all about. I think another interesting little item along about that time, that's when the Johnson family was living on Dillman Street, and you recall the huge backyard behind the house where the then-Congressman Johnson loved to sit around with his family. He was always a man that demanded instant communications, so he had a telephone on a tree out there so he could reach over and answer it or call somebody right from his recliner. I remember of the many visitors that were out in that yard over that period of time, Ouida Nalle-- Mrs. George Nalle--had two of her lady friends out there for a visit and one of them later was heard to remark, "Goodness gracious, he's got a telephone in every tree!"

PB: Ouida Nalle was the daughter of the late Governors Ferguson.

BP: That's right. Ma and Governor Jim. Wonderful folks and Ouida was a wonderful person.

PB: This is sort of a digression, but I understand that in Johnson's first race for the Senate in 1941 that Ferguson

BP: I can't comment on that because you remember I had already gone in the army in November of 1940, so I wasn't here.

PB: Okay, now let's get back to Dillman Street for a moment. I recall the telephone in his backyard myself. Can you recall any other incidents of that period?

BP: Paul, we always enjoyed so much the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Johnson both liked several of us to come join them on Christmas mornings. Over a period of several years we would bring our wives and children. They would actually wait til we got there to open their presents. I remember how big a kick the President got out of watching Lynda and Luci and our daughter, Susan, and all the rest of them open their presents. We'd all exchange presents, such as they were--all of us were still po' folks, as far as that's concerned. But we got a real bang out of watching the children and even opening our own presents. The President always had a lot of fun opening his presents; it was just a great occasion in celebrating Christmas. This watch I have on here, Paul, speaking of presents was given to me by President Johnson, I think it was back in 1951. I've been keeping it in shape by having it worked on each year and it's still in real good shape.

PB: Mr. Phinney, for a time you served the City of Austin as its Postmaster. Can you tell us something about how that appointment came about?

BP: Yes, Paul. Then-Congressman Johnson called me one day over at KVET where John Connally and the rest of us were working and said, "Bob, do you want to be Postmaster?" Well, being a new station, none of us were making much, and I knew that the Postmaster was paying more, and I thought it would be enjoyable work; but more important, he seemed to want me to be, so I immediately said yes. I guess he felt I could come out all right or he wouldn't have offered it to me. But I did come out in first place in the Civil Service procedures and investigations, I think, of some nine applicants. Ray Lee had accepted on the spur of the moment a proposition ..... Ray had been Postmaster for several years ..... accepted an offer to go on a foreign mission either with the State Department or the Army. I enjoyed those five years as Postmaster very much because I enjoy working with people and the public, and those were a wonderful bunch of employees and associates that I worked with in the Post Office.

PB: You didn't have any Inspector General investigating you during that time, did you?

BP: No. And I think they never connected me in any way with that Army investigation. I hope not; nobody said anything about it anyway!

PB: Now in the chronology we're almost to what I consider a very important year in Mr. Johnson's life. That was 1948 when he ran for the United States Senate. Did you have any part in those negotiations preliminary to his running?

BP: Yes, Paul, I'm real proud that I was one of some ten or twelve that then-Congressman Johnson called and asked to come to his suite at the Driskill Hotel; I remember John Connally, Jake Pickle, myself and Stuart Long, Jesse Kellum and ..... I can't remember the others ..... for a pow-wow in trying to decide what to do--whether or not to enter that race. During the first 45 minutes, I would say, that we were there, Lyndon was constantly on the telephone. He would go into the other room--the bedroom, and he was both calling and taking calls from the hinterlands all over the state of Texas from friends and acquaintances, talking to them about the possibility. Actually this was already a pretty late date to make a decision, and that's what he was getting in some of these telephone calls: "We're afraid you're too late; you should have spoken up sooner; we have committed ourselves." Well, we knew he was getting that sort of talk; we could hear his end of the conversation. And all this time he was talking on these calls, we were talking among ourselves about all of the problems, the obstacles, hurdles and everything



else that he'd face if he entered the campaign. During his last telephone call we took a vote and we were unanimous--everybody--that he's got to do it. So when he came back into the living room of the suite, we told him what we'd been doing, told him that we were unanimous, that he just had to get into the race. Well, it just looked like it took a big load off of him; he was trying to make a decision, because he said, "All right, let's go."

PB: Bob, at that time, what was your thinking that he had to make that particular race at that time?

BP: Well, I think all of us thought about it from an age and a time standpoint, that there would never be a better time. Coke Stevenson, of course, whom he ran against, was a real well-known individual, but he was also known as a "sitter" and not a "doer." So I think that was one of the things that made up our mind, that after all, Lyndon Johnson also was well known and he had done an extremely good job both in the National Youth Administration as well as our Congressman--had really made a name for himself and had fans all over the entire state. So we were confident that this was the time and no more delay.

PB: Well, at that time I believe, if my memory is correct, at the time he announced, the Senator was W. Lee O'Daniel,

and he had not announced what he was going to do, whether he was going to seek another term or not. He was possibly another competitor in that race. And then a fellow named George Peddy of Houston was running, so it must have been a pretty tough decision for a man to make at that time.

BP: It was. It was no small decision at all to make. We were real proud of him when we told him our unanimous opinion and decision that he never looked back.

PB: Under the Hatch Act you were barred from taking any part in any politics at that time, were you not?

BP: Well, Paul, a lot of people don't understand the Hatch Act, or they don't want to. Actually a lot of Federal and State employees--State employees that are paid from Federal funds--in my opinion, hide behind the Hatch Act and won't even do what the Hatch Act allows. I was perfectly free, as I always have been in my over 33 years in the Federal service, perfectly free to express my opinions in any and all occasions. I could carry bumper stickers on my car; I couldn't be an active campaign worker nor a manager in any sense of the word of his campaign; I couldn't make public speeches, but I did the next best thing--I didn't have any difficulty in persuading my wife Helen--she also said "Let's go," and she worked day in and day out and night in and night

out at State Headquarters in the old Hancock house, you remember, on Lavaca and Eighth Street.

PB: Mr. Phinney, a while back you mentioned the fact that Mr. Avery, who ran for Congress, and Mr. Johnson became very close friends. That's sort of a habit of Mr. Johnson's isn't it, making friends out of those who have opposed him?

BP: Yes. And that reminds me of something else, Paul. Back in those days, and it's been true all of his political life, I remember we used to talk about how people that were his bitterest enemies in some of the campaigns, some of that 30 percent "hard-core" as we referred to them, that seemed to always vote against him, some of the leaders in that 30 percent would call on him between campaigns for help in their private business affairs. And he never let them down; he never looked back. I remember we used to needle him a little bit about it-- John Connally and some of the rest of us--"How can you forget how bitter that fellow was and how many lies he told about you during the campaign? And here you are doing everything possible to help him." I remember so well, the President said--and it's always been his philosophy--he said, "You'all have got to remember that I am their Congressman, too, now."

PB: And in that connection, Paul, thinking about these old days and even right on up to date, as far as that's concerned, I believe that in my experience, and a lot of people will agree with me, there have been more deliberate misrepresentations and outright lies told on Lyndon Johnson than any one man that I have heard or read about. Some of the most outlandish things that, again, that 30 percent hard-core opposition would tell about him, and they would spread like wildfire. Sitting in this building as we are now, I remember when the land was bought for this Federal center--the Post Office and Federal building--the story got started down in San Antonio that the Government had bought this land from Lyndon Johnson. And it spread all over the State. Well, it's about as close as most of the other lies that have been told about him over all these years. It is about two and a half blocks from Mrs. Johnson's properties, the radio station and TV station. So that's about as close as any of the lies came.

PB: That recalls to my mind back in the days when he was still a Congressman when he reputedly owned practically every apartment house in Austin.

BP: Oh, yes, Paul. In fact he owned more apartment houses than there were in Austin, according to the stories, I think. It was amazing, the type of stories that came out,

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starting way early back there, just like I mentioned earlier in our talk about Herman Brown. I can't feature minds that would continually come up with such outright lies and spread them as fast as they would spread them all over the state and actually all over the country.

PB: Mr. Phinney, how long did you serve as Postmaster?

BP: Right at five years, Paul. Then out of the blue one day, then-Senator Johnson and my old friend John Dunlap who was then Commissioner of Internal Revenue, and incidentally I'd known John since 1929 in the National Guard -- called me from Washington and said "We want you to transfer over to Internal Revenue. We are reorganizing the whole Internal Revenue Service, and John said that he didn't have anybody down here that he wanted and thought would do the job he wanted as the Director of the Austin district, the southern half of the state. Well, it didn't take me long to tell them yes. Actually, during that conversation, after I said yes, I guess I must have asked Senator Johnson, "Any special instructions about this job?" And he said emphatically "No! Just get over there and do the best job you can." And never since that date has he asked me for anything--one way or the other. I know he's been accused of it, and we have been accused, by some of the opposition

The Republicans, I know, have stated in open meetings that they have been examined and audited by Internal Revenue because they were Republicans and that the President had ..... accusing the President of getting to them through us in Internal Revenue. Well, that's just another one of the big lies, Paul, because it has just never happened. We have examined and audited rich Republicans just as we have rich Democrats, of all stratas of income and wealth, as far as that's concerned. And we'll continue to make these examinations. And I expect we'll continue to be accused, because we are friends of Lyndon Johnson's, because of what he is--a great and wonderful man--we'll always be accused by some folks of working on them because they might be anti-Johnson. But it has never happened and it never will happen. I think it might be of interest - our trying to do the job that we should without any political influence or anything else.

. Those things just don't enter into our considerations at all. We are trying to do a fair and reasonable job in tax administration, always will and always have. I think it's of interest that even Mr. Johnson--President Johnson--has joked publicly about how we have audited his own returns and those of Mrs. Johnson's

radio and TV interests. And although we are prohibited from talking about our work because it is of utmost confidence under the laws, as it should be, since he's talked publicly about this, that turns me loose to say something. In his joking publicly about it, he's brought out the fact that some of their tax returns were examined by one our top agents named Jim Cheatham, and he's always got a big kick out of telling how Jim Cheatham's name was so fitting for a Revenue agent.

PB: Mr. Phinney, one final question, or rather an observation that perhaps you could make: who do you consider has had more influence in shaping Mr. Johnson's character and philosophy than anyone else?

BP: Well, of course, first, Paul, his mother--Mrs. Sam Johnson, Mrs. Rebecca Baines Johnson. I didn't know Lyndon's father too well. I met him when I was a youngster, but I got to know Mrs. Johnson, the President's mother, very well over the years and was a tremendous admirer of hers. I saw first-hand how much influence in the best sort of way that you could imagine that he had on Lyndon. She was a wonderful woman of extreme understanding, a great mind, a very religious person. It always did my heart good seeing them together--with what tender care Lyndon Johnson considered his mother and how they



acted when they were together. It was a real pleasure to see them together and see the warmth of their love and how she would talk with him and advise him. This wasn't a mother just advising a son most of the time, actually it was a son asking mother, "What do you think about this?" So she had a tremendous effect on his whole life and character and philosophy and wonderfully so. Another person whom I knew fairly closely over those years before his untimely death was Senator Wirtz, one of the greatest minds that I've known in Texas, a wonderful person of real depth that spent a good bit of time with Lyndon Johnson, at Lyndon's request actually. Senator Wirtz as we called him, because he did have a term or two in the state senate but was practicing law during these years, was sought out by Lyndon because the Congressman, later Senator, realized his worth and his depth. So they worked together a great deal. He would ask for his opinions and valued them highly. Those two people and, of course, his wonderful wife, Lady Bird I believe, Paul, had more effect on Lyndon Baines Johnson than anybody I know of.

PB: Thank you, Bob Phinney, you have been most helpful.

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Gift of Personal Statement

By R. L. (Bob) Phinney

to the

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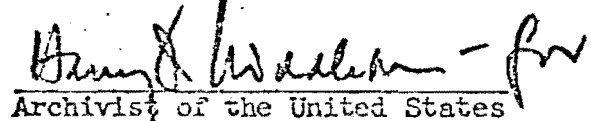
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