

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 5, 1971
INTERVIEWEE: HARRY PROVENCE
INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB
PLACE: His office at the Waco Tribune Herald

Tape 1 of 1

M: First of all, we'll get some background information. I'd like to know where you were born and when and where you got your education.

P: I was born in Taylor, Texas, which is only thirty miles from Austin, but my parents were living here at the time and I grew up here until we moved to West Texas. We moved a lot of places in the next few years, and I came back here in 1933 to go to Baylor University. I graduated in 1937 with a Bachelor of Arts and a major in journalism and came up the street and went to work June 11, 1937, for the Waco News Tribune as a copy editor, and I have been with the paper ever since.

M: You spent your whole career right here?

P: Right here.

M: And I might add that you are now editor. Is that the correct title?

P: Well, they call me editor-in-chief. I'm vice president of the company and editor-in-chief of the group. We have newspapers in four cities--Waco, Austin, Port Arthur and Lufkin.

M: The Austin American Statesman is part of your group, is it not?

P: Right.

Provence -- I -- 2

M: When did you first meet up with Lyndon Johnson?

P: It was in 1941. Senator Morris Sheppard died rather suddenly, and his funeral was in Texarkana. I was in the home of my predecessor, whose name was Frank Baldwin, late the afternoon of the funeral-- we hadn't gone there, we didn't have any reason to go to Texarkana for that--when Lyndon Johnson phoned Frank Baldwin and told him that he was going to run for Mr. Sheppard's place. This was an hour or so after the funeral, and Frank told him fine, we'd do all we could. And doing all we could meant running Johnson's campaign here in this part of the state, practically out of our newspaper office. I've forgotten the month, but it was shortly after that that we organized the first local meeting for Johnson when he was here.

M: Was he a friend of Mr. Baldwin's?

P: That goes back to Johnson's election to Congress in 1938, I think it was. The partner of this publishing company was in Austin at that time; he was editor and publisher of the American Statesman, and his name was Charles Marsh. He sort of sponsored Johnson in that first race, that special election. Marsh was close to Henry Wallace and therefore close to Roosevelt, and Johnson's candidacy was the only one in that special Tenth District election that had any meaning for Roosevelt. All the rest of the candidates were against the New Deal and against the Supreme Court bill and so forth, and Johnson took the ball, took the New Deal flag and ran with it. Marsh was sort of his advisor, mentor, sponsor, and Frank Baldwin had grown up under Marsh and was aware of all this and knew how the game was played.

Provence -- I -- 3

So when Johnson called him that afternoon from Texarkana and said, "We're going to run for the Senate," why, that meant the team was in.

M: And you actually ran the campaign from here, as sort of a campaign manager for this area?

P: Frank Baldwin was the man in charge of the strategy here, and he was getting all his signals from Marsh, who was traveling with Johnson in that Senate race in 1941. They were in here twice that I recall, once for a sort of a hand-shaking tour of the downtown with a reception at the Roosevelt Hotel and then towards the end of the campaign for an open-air rally at the courthouse. That was traditional in those days, and I well remember that the bait to get the crowd out was a raffle for war bonds. I believe they called them defense bonds that year. But they gave away fifteen hundred dollars worth of defense bonds, I believe, in the raffle to be sure they had a crowd, and they had a pretty good crowd.

M: What was your role in this campaign? What did you do?

P: Oh, I'd write things for publicity stories, and we were in contact with the Harte papers, for example; they were on Johnson's bandwagon, and I was back and forth with them with mats and copy and so forth and getting all sorts of telephone communication with the Johnson entourage. I was kind of a leg man, dog robber, second or third man in the--

M: When he came to Waco, was this the first time you actually met the man face to face?

P: Yes.

Provence -- I -- 4

M: Here you were working for him and you hadn't met him yet.

P: Right.

M: Were you impressed with him when you finally met him?

P: Yes, as an energetic, eager young candidate. He was a pretty lively person to be around.

M: Was he a good speaker in those days?

P: Yes. Yes, he'd start out with a written speech and throw it away and ad lib.

By the way, I'm wrong about the first time I ever saw him though. I was in Baylor when he was the head of the NYA in Texas, and he came to chapel. Pat Neff was president in those holy days, and we were required to be in chapel five days a week every morning. Of course that tested Mr. Neff pretty good as to how to fill that steady schedule. So when Johnson showed up on the NYA business he was appointed to speak in chapel, and that's the first time I ever saw him. I had no personal contact with him there, and he was just another one of the chapel speakers. We had everybody from Jim Ferguson to Leadbelly to all the preachers that Neff could lay hands on. But I do remember that he was there.

M: You don't remember what he said?

P: No, not specifically. It was a pitch for the way the NYA was making it possible for more students to get through school. Of course there was an NYA program at Baylor, and the girl I later married had an NYA job there one term or two terms and neither one of us thought anything about it. I was working my way through school in the college

Provence -- I -- 5

press. I was editor or managing editor, whatever year it was, on the campus paper.

M: Well then, you went ahead and worked through that 1941 campaign which Johnson lost.

P: Right. Have you had any interviews on that subject?

M: Oh, yes.

(Laughter)

P: Boy, it took five days, as I recall, for him to be counted out of that race, and he damn sure was counted out.

M: Did you hear anything from him after the loss?

P: Yes. Buck Hood, who was managing editor at Austin at that time, and I and our wives went to Washington in September of 1941. This was about six weeks after the campaign. It was a vacation trip for us, but we looked Johnson up. Of course, he was back in his Congressional seat then--he got a free ride in the election. John Connally and Nellie were up there and I don't recall what John was doing, whether he was working for Johnson at that time. I kind of believe he was. But I know one evening we had dinner with the Johnsons at their apartment, the Connallys and us, the four of us and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, and the highlight of the evening was a showing of color movies that Mrs. Johnson had made during the campaign. She photographed the crowds mainly, and I can still see them. Those were great movies, we just had a ball looking at the great unwashed who came to the courthouse squares and other places where the political rallies were held during that campaign.

Providence -- I -- 6

M: Did Lyndon Johnson say anything about his defeat?

P: No, he wasn't bitter. I don't recall that we talked much about the fact that he'd lost. We were all young and this was just another chapter. We figured that he would be back again, we didn't know in what manner. But there wasn't any atmosphere of gloom or recrimination or anything, and those movies gave us something to look at besides each other. That was a lot of fun. (Laughter)

M: Then in those years in the 1940s did you have any more contact with him?

P: Not really, not until 1948 when he ran for the Senate again.

M: Then what happened?

P: We were supporting him again.

M: Again through Mr. Baldwin?

P: Yes, Frank was still editor. He didn't die until 1951. It was just more of the same as far as we were concerned, except maybe on a little bigger basis. By that I mean that as I recall we did a little more promoting his candidacy. That was the year he was campaigning in the helicopter.

M: Did he come to Waco in his helicopter?

P: Yes. As I recall he landed over here in south Waco at what we call the Cotton Palace Grounds; it was the site of the old Cotton Palace Exposition, which at that time had been dead eighteen years. But [there was] still a lot of open space and so on.

M: What did you try to do, get a crowd there to meet him when he came in or what?

Provence -- I -- 7

P: Yes, we tried to whoop it up for him, and we did. He had pretty good campaigning through here, and he always carried this county any time he ran. But again it was a fairly casual personal contact, he was just in and out.

M: You were doing much the same kind of work again?

P: Yes, writing stuff, mostly for this paper. Then we were called on to rush up to Fort Worth one morning early to the state Democratic convention to be sure--you know, part of the long drawn hassle after that election was getting certified as nominee. So Frank Baldwin, Carlton Smith and I've forgotten who else filed in a car before daylight and tore out to Fort Worth.

M: Why were you called on to do this? What could you do in Fort Worth?

P: I was a delegate to the convention. The custom around here has always been to appoint a whole slew of delegates and maybe a dozen of them show up at the convention, so this time they wanted warm bodies.

M: And that turned out to be a pretty hot fight, did it?

P: Yes. I've forgotten all the details. We weren't in on the committee hearing, which was really the hottest part of it, or I wasn't. I think maybe Frank went in there.

M: You were at the main convention itself.

P: On the floor, yes.

M: That's after the executive committee had accepted the majority report?

P: Yes.

M: And then what did the convention do, just endorse that?

Provence -- I -- 8

P: Yes. I can still see Johnson sitting down there on the front row sweating it out, the roll call.

M: He was worried even then?

P: I don't know whether he was worried or not, but he was concerned. He was giving it his full attention. (Laughter)

M: Well, he won that one. Did you happen to speak with him at that time or shortly after that?

P: No, I don't recall whether we looked him up after it was over and shook hands with him or not. We were so damn anxious to get on back home we didn't hang around, and there was a lot of turmoil anyway. We didn't go up there to get in fist fights or anything like that.

M: This made him a senator. Did you have much contact with him then while he was a senator?

P: Yes, from then on. The next time I saw him I believe was in 1949. He was elected in the summer of 1948 and took office in 1949. When Congress adjourned in 1949--I guess it was adjourned, or recessed or something--he set out to go around and meet all the businessmen and all the bankers and everybody like that that had been with him, and I guess a bunch who hadn't been with him, to try to get better acquainted. You know, [on] these whirlwind campaigns you never really meet anybody. He was around, on this time I'm talking about, doing a little real close communication, and I remember when we went to the Roosevelt Hotel, Frank Baldwin and our publisher and present chairman of the company, Harlon Fentress, and just a handful, maybe two or three others. We had a few drinks and had dinner, and Johnson regaled

Provence -- I -- 9

us with his observations and experiences and comments on his first session as a senator.

M: Any part of that that stands out in your mind?

P: No, not really, except that here was a guy we never really had looked on as a statesman who looked like he might be trying to turn into one. It was the beginning of a transformation that was quite remarkable finally.

M: But you got to know him a little bit better then?

P: Yes. Then as time went on he became more interested in keeping up contacts. His philosophy was that you win your election the year before the election if you work it right.

M: This means meeting people and--

P: Yes, lining up support and making sure from a newspaper standpoint that you get as good press as you can, and so forth. By 1953 he was really working at it, and that year I joined the American Society of Newspaper Editors. In the meanwhile Mr. Baldwin had died, and I had been made editor here. That was in 1951. In 1953 I went to Washington to the annual meeting of the Society and went up to the Capitol to see our congressmen and Mr. Johnson and just to get acquainted. I've forgotten whether I had any errands up there that year or not, but anyway, I saw quite a bit of him during that meeting. Then [with] subsequent meetings of the Society it just got to be a habit of going up there to the Hill and visiting with him.

M: These were social calls primarily?

Provence -- I -- 10

- P: Yes, just checking in and talking about things back home, and he usually had some idea or some project he'd want to talk about.
- M: Was there anything in particular that you talked about? Anything that he helped you with or that you helped him with?
- P: Yes, beginning in 1954 the Korean thing was over, and the Army engineers study of the Brazos watershed was before the Congress. The public works bill was reopened after being frozen, you know, shut out, put aside during the war, and in 1954 I was sitting at my desk here--not here but across the building where my office used to be--about this time of day and Johnson called me from Washington. He said, "Get hold of Bob Poage"--that's our congressman--"and tell him that you have learned that the public works bill is alive again. The proposed new dam at Waco will be up for consideration, and [he should] get busy and be ready to support it." Why he didn't pick up the phone and call Bob Poage across at the Capitol I don't know, but he called me, and so I had to alert people down here and alert our congressman.

Well, that annual process, as you probably know, of public works appropriations goes on year after year; you have to go back and justify the project every year until you get through with it. So that became a regular order of business, not only when I was up there for the American Society of Newspaper Editors but, oh, I guess maybe a half a dozen times going up there for hearings. And he was always helpful. The fact of the business is if it hadn't been for him I expect we would have had a whole lot more trouble and we probably

Provence -- I -- 11

wouldn't have gotten the thing when we did, and it took eleven years from the time it was started till the time it was through. That's not really part of the story. It was just a snake-bit project.

Anyway, through those two means and the fact that he wanted to keep up his contacts with our company at all times and in all ways I got to seeing quite a bit of him, not only in Austin but in Washington. On several occasions, one or two occasions, when I would be in Washington for this editors meeting he'd round up Charlie Guy up at Lubbock and me and maybe Tanner Hunt from Beaumont--whatever Texas editors--Charles Green, who was editor at Austin for a long time, and he'd cut a tape for Texas radio use. We'd interview him, you see. That got to be fun.

Along about that time, 1954-1955, he complained to me on one of these visits up there that he just couldn't seem to get any press coverage in Texas. He'd been courting the eastern papers pretty hard, and by that time he was majority leader, but he didn't think he was making enough impact down here. So I said, "I notice that the newspapers, the wire services, pick up all sorts of radio interviews"--this was before TV--"on Sundays and make news stories out of them for Monday morning's paper, so why don't you start you a Sunday broadcast and get it wherever you can get it. Furnish a copy or a news story based on it to the wire services and see how you come out." So he did that religiously, I guess, from there till 1960.

M: Did it work for him? Did it give him the coverage he wanted?

Provence -- I -- 12

P: Oh, hell yes. Yes, he got in the paper every week from then on.

(Laughter) But I'd seen other politicians doing it. I guess he just hadn't thought of it, but he didn't have to hear the suggestion but one time. He went to town with it.

M: As a senator, then, did he seem to do the job he should for the Waco area?

P: Oh, yes.

M: No complaints?

P: None whatever.

M: Then I assume that the newspaper here supported him in the other campaigns he was involved in?

P: Yes, we have always supported him, and our county's always voted for him.

M: Did you happen to have anything to do with the fight within the Democratic Party in 1956?

P: In 1956? No, I wasn't in on that. (Laughter) I've heard enough about it.

M: Sounds almost as if you're happy you weren't. (Laughter)

P: I sure am. That was a trauma. Judge Wilson, who died here last Friday night, was at that time very active with Price Daniel, and he was in on the bloodletting in Fort Worth. I heard his version of it, and he's a real sweet, sort of naive, honorable guy. He'd never gotten into anything like that before, and his account of it was something. (Laughter) And I heard Johnson's version and the

Provence -- I -- 13

other side's version. Some of the anti-Johnson leaders were Waco people, labor people. They came home screaming their heads off.

M: But Johnson was still able to carry this county?

P: Yes.

M: In spite of that?

P: Oh, hell, yes. It didn't really matter here as far as the rank and file voters were concerned.

M: Then through the fifties did you have any particular contact with him other than what you've related?

P: Yes. I guess you might say he was courting me because of my position. I remember, oh, I guess 1955 or 1956, 1955, he began to invite me and Frances down to the Ranch occasionally.

M: Frances is your wife?

P: Yes. And that continued off and on until 1963.

M: Why did it stop in 1963?

P: He got to be president. He had other problems. And my experience told me that if he ever needed me he'd holler and he didn't holler, so--

M: When you went to the Ranch, what would you do? Would you drive over the fields in the automobiles?

P: That got to be a thing later, but when we first went down there there wasn't much to it. I've forgotten how big the thing was originally, seems like to me four hundred acres, and mostly we'd walk around the yard there and walk up and down the river bank. I remember one afternoon we were strolling along there on the Pedernales; he was in one

Provence -- I -- 14

of his low moods. He said that he needed somebody like me to come to Washington with him and tell him when to shut up, what not to say. He didn't seem too enthusiastic about being a senator at that time, talking about how their broadcasting station would pay him just about as much as he could make. I think their salary was still ten-thousand dollars at that time. [It was] just one of his downdraft periods.

M: Was it anything in particular that had gotten him down?

P: I don't remember now. There probably was; somebody had probably been mean to him. That always shook him up.

M: Did you take him seriously when he said you ought to come to Washington?

P: No I didn't, because that's not my line of work. I'm a newspaper editor, and I just let it slide on by without responding. But we had very pleasant experiences down there. It was just a relaxed atmosphere then, and he didn't have all this communications gear. I think we were there the first time maybe just a year or two after they moved in. You know, they bought that thing from one of his aunts, and it was pretty run down. They didn't have that bedroom wing that's been there so long now where his bedroom is, that was built later. But it was just a real comfortable country place. They're nice people, and Mrs. Johnson is a very relaxed hostess, you know. [There] just wasn't any strain, no sweat. We enjoyed it.

M: You can understand, then, why he would seem to recharge his engine by going down there.

Provence -- I -- 15

P: Oh, yes. Yes, we went down, Harlon Fentress and a man named Kultgen here, a Ford dealer--

M: How do you spell that?

P: K-U-L-T-G-E-N, Jack Kultgen, J. H. Kultgen. He's a papal knight and just a real leader among men. The three of us went down to visit the Senator at the Ranch when he was recuperating from his heart attack. He had gotten down to either 180 or 175 pounds; he looked thin as a rail, and he gave us chapter and verse of his convalescence: his doctor's orders, his cardiogram, no-calorie candy he kept munching on. That's the first time I knew that you could figure the calories in whiskey by the proof--86 proof Scotch is 86 calories. Whatever the proof is, that's how many calories. He had that calibrated and gave us a real lesson in cardiac recovery techniques.

M: Was he restless?

P: Well, yes. He'd lie in that lounge chair for a while and then we'd get up and he'd walk around, and we finally wound up driving around, I believe in our car. He was showing us something, a new tank or a new fence or something. He was pretty tired of being chained down, you could tell that, but real rigid about his weight and so forth.

M: Did you get involved in the 1960 campaign?

P: Yes, we were pretty damn well involved in that. Sam Wood the head of our Capitol staff at that time, he's now the editor of the Austin American Statesman, covered the convention for us.

M: You didn't go to the convention?

Provence -- I -- 16

P: No, I didn't go. The editor doesn't always get to go or want to go.

(Laughter) If you've got plenty of troops, you send the troops.

Johnson asked to borrow Buck Hood from the Austin American, and let me say that Buck, because of Charles Marsh, had been in Johnson's campaign headquarters in 1938, again in 1941, again in 1948. And Buck's wife also was active in that operation every time, every year. In fact, in 1960 she also worked for Mrs. Johnson as a campaign writer, traveling companion.

M: Where are they now?

P: They live in Austin, and they're both retired. Their health the last report I heard was not too good. But if you could get Buck to really unbutton and talk about Johnson, you would have a prize tape. You would have a prize tape. Well, in 1960 I put Buck with the Johnsons, and Johnson asked me to be the swing man on getting Texas reporters to travel with him on the vice presidential campaign. So I got various newspapers--Star Telegram, Houston Post, let's see, who else, the Harte-Hanks papers--to agree to send somebody in rotation. They'd send a guy with him, and then all the papers would use the story from whoever it was. Sam Kinch would write for us for a week.

M: Is that difficult to get these reporters to do this?

P: It took a little persuasion to get their managing editors to go along, but Sam Wood carried more than the normal share of it. The main pain was to be sure they would take Sam's stories, you know, from Salt Lake City or Tacoma or Milwaukee or Chicago, wherever the hell they happened to be.

Provence -- I -- 17

M: So you got reporters going along with him.

P: Yes. And in the process of that he also had an old Baylor classmate of mine, James Blundell--

M: B-L-U-N . . . ?

P: D-E-L-L. Jim and Buck were his campaign staff. Jim was manning the so-called office in Washington. They had a cubbyhole on the same floor with the Kennedy organization there on Connecticut [Avenue]. Was it Connecticut? I could go right to the building right now, but I've forgotten the name of the street. Anyhow, Buck was traveling with Mr. Johnson and so was Lorraine, and Jim was the guy on the phone. But I went up there on some kind of business, I've forgotten what now, towards the end of the campaign, I think about a week before it was over, when Johnson and Kennedy were in New York together for that final mob scene at Madison Square Garden or wherever it was. I dropped in to see Blundell to see how things were going, and he had just gotten a call. Johnson called from somewhere, New York I think, and suggested to Jim that the campaign was all but over and why didn't he just pack up and disappear, they didn't need him anymore. Jim nearly fainted and asked me to get on the phone, so I persuaded Mr. Johnson that he ought to leave Jim there at least till the election was over with and to leave Buck alone. That didn't sit too well with him, but he did.

M: Why would he say that? Didn't he need their services still?

P: Well, I don't know. They were sort of puzzled, too. There was quite

Provence -- I -- 18

a bit of stuff that really need doing there in the last few days of the thing.

M: Yes, I'd think so.

P: He was in one of his moods, and I think maybe it could have been that Kennedy kind of overshadowed him in New York, I don't know. He rode Buck all the time because Kennedy got more exposure. You know, hell, there just wasn't any contest about that. But it didn't sit well with Mr. Johnson.

M: Were you somewhat surprised that he agreed to run for vice president?

P: Yes, I was. In fact everybody in Texas was not only surprised but flabbergasted. (Laughter) I say everybody in Texas, practically everybody that had been with him and for him or pushing him, and a lot of them never quite got over it. Yes, that was a shock. It was a shock.

M: Do you have any idea why he did it?

P: I've never asked him. I've read everybody's version. I think part of it was the fact that, after all, vice president may not amount to much but it's just not something you can lightly turn aside. And I think there's a further factor, that he knew, and I think everybody that followed things would recognize this, that Kennedy could not carry the South or Texas with a guy like Mennen Williams, for example, or Symington or somebody that couldn't give him some help. Aside from all the personal and egotistical considerations, I think that's really the governing factor, because just as a cold-blooded proposition

Provence -- I -- 19

that they were going to win he had to have Johnson, and I think that's the reason he wanted him.

M: Well then, while Johnson was vice president did you have much contact with him?

P: Yes, yes, quite a bit, because he was lonesome as hell.

(Laughter)

M: So what did he do about that, call you?

P: Yes, and I was in Washington quite a bit. By that time one of our daughters was attending National Cathedral school, and we had business on the Hill in connection with this dam which was still being put together and other federal projects. I was a member of the Brazos River Authority Board, and we had business up there in connection with the river projects, so every time I was in Washington, why, it seemed like we'd get together one way or another. I remember I went to see him one afternoon--it was the same afternoon he moved into the EOB, the Executive Office Building. He and Mary Margaret were there, and they hadn't gotten the furniture straightened out and Mary Margaret hadn't found out where all the buttons were. He had this new console telephone that looked like an organ keyboard, and he was trying to figure that out. (Laughter) So I watched them for a while and got up and left because I could see they didn't need me around to get in their way.

M: Did he seem like he didn't have much to do then?

P: Yes, by his standards he didn't; by an ordinary person's standards

Provence -- I -- 20

he had all that anybody would want to do, but it wasn't enough.

(Laughter)

M: Then did you see him down at the Ranch, too, in that period?

P: Yes. On one occasion he had the Thornberrys and the Hoods and Frances and me and Harvey Payne from Austin and I've forgotten who all, mainly talking about Homer Thornberry's--oh, let's see, I'm getting my years telescoped again. Anyway, whatever year it was, the object of that weekend up at the Ranch was to make sure that everybody had their signals straight about supporting Thornberry. I can't remember now what the problem was. I guess Thornberry was fixing to have some major opposition. Anyway, it was a real pleasant weekend.

M: Do you have any insight in that period of time into the relationship between Johnson and President Kennedy? Did they get along? Was there friction?

P: As far as I could tell from listening to Johnson, we didn't talk about it too much, he had every respect for President Kennedy and seemed to be on good terms with him and [had] entree to the White House. I never did punch him around on how he got along with Kennedy's staff because I didn't really give a damn. That was his problem not mine, and he didn't unfold on it that I can recall. I've heard a lot of stuff since then, and I do know that he must have trouble with a lot of the Kennedy people. Blundell, because of that summer in 1960 when he was officing with the Kennedy people, got real well acquainted with the whole bunch of them and was kind of a Kennedy man from then on, and consequently he was out of favor with Johnson from then

Provence -- I -- 21

on. Moyers became real close to the Kennedys, and that didn't set real well with him either. But I didn't worry about those things. Hell, it wasn't my problem.

M: Did you have anything to do with the Kennedy-Johnson trip in 1963 that brought Kennedy to Dallas?

P: No, Johnson congratulated me on that later. I went to Germany with the Second Armored Division; you know, that was the time they flew the division over and the equipment was positioned. I sent two reporters with them when they went over, and I went over to join them and spend ten days in Germany with the commanding general and come home with him. So all the turmoil of preparing that trip and getting ready for it was over with by the time I got back. I came back on Wednesday, and this thing happened on Friday in Dallas, didn't it?

M: Yes.

P: By that time the whips had already been laid to everybody, and the big deal was for Waco to sell a lot of tickets to that dinner in Austin that night, the one that never happened.

M: Right.

P: Johnson and John Connally both were putting the prod to everybody in town. (Laughter) He said I sure knew when to leave Texas.

But I had seen a lot of him that fall. One day when old Tom Connally, the former senator from Texas, died, he called me from the Ranch. I was here at the office, [and he] wanted to know if I'd go to the funeral with him over at Marlin, which is thirty miles away, and then go back to the Ranch with him that night. So I said,

Provence -- I -- 22

"Sure." He picked me up out here at the airport, and we flew down to Marlin and then flew on to the Ranch from there. That was the afternoon that Mary Margaret's baby was born, and the news was passed to him as we were flying from Marlin to Austin.

M: Was he delighted with the news?

P: Oh, yes. Yes, he was just tickled to death.

M: On that trip, did he talk about anything in particular or did he just want company?

P: I think he just wanted company. They held that funeral for us I don't know how long. We were late getting over there, and they had a pew right in the middle of that church saved for him and his party. Well, his party consisted of him and me. (Laughter) We had that whole pew to ourselves. Then we went to the cemetery, of course. I guess he's been to more funerals than most people have been to-- funerals, parties, ball games and all--because I don't know of one he's missed. [With] people he knew, he's just death on going to them.

M: He became president, and right about in this time, somewhere in here, you wrote the book about him which was published in 1964.

P: Yes. I had signed the contract with the Fleet Publishing Company I guess about 1962. I don't remember now when it was, maybe January. I don't know, it was February or March of 1962, I believe.

M: They wanted a biography?

P: They wanted a biography of Johnson. He was vice president, they weren't in any hurry about it and I wasn't in any hurry about it.

Provence -- I -- 23

I'd done a little gathering here and there, and without seeming to make any effort on it I was seeing a whole lot more of him than I ever had. It was just one of those coincidences. I'd get a call from them [the publishers] every few months wanting to know how it was coming along. I'd give them some kind of evasive answer, and they seemed to be satisfied with it. Well, of course when he got to be president, then they wanted it right away.

M: Right.

P: Instanter. So they sent a fellow named Darrell Husted, H-U-S-T-E-D, who was their editor at that time. He came down and lived at my house for three or four weeks, and we put it together.

M: Did you have much contact with the Johnson staff over that?

P: No, not too much. I had gathered quite a bit of stuff by that time on various visits to the Ranch, I'd read old Mrs. [Rebekah] Johnson's family history that you've probably seen, and he talked a lot about the early days and so forth. With the time limit they had on it, well, that's about all they could stand. They didn't want a long one or a scholarly one; they just wanted something quick.

M: Did President Johnson know you were writing this?

P: Yes, and it didn't seem to matter to him one way or the other. I remember about the time we finished it up he called me at the house one night, and I told him I was just about through with it, it would be out in the spring. He seemed in that conversation to be delighted with it--or with the idea, he didn't know what the hell it was.

M: Did he ever make any comment about it after it was out?

Provence -- I -- 24

P: Not directly. I had two letters from him, and he got hold of a copy of it somewhere and sent me an autographed copy. But really, in his mind, Bill [William S.] White was supposed to write the first book. I think they came out pretty close together. He and Bill were real close for so long. I remember one time in the spring of 1964 we were in Washington for the editors meeting, and Johnson had a bunch of us over to the White House one night just to show it off. He had been living there about ninety days at that time, and he took us all over the place. I noticed on his bedside table the galley proofs of Bill White's book were there waiting for his nighttime reading.

M: Was yours already ready to go by that time?

P: Yes. I think the publication date of mine was just a week or two before that.

M: Now you said you heard indirectly about your book. Did Johnson ever say anything directly to you?

P: Not orally, no. He wrote me a couple of letters.

M: Just the letters is what you meant?

P: Thanking me and so forth.

M: Was he favorable to it then?

P: I guess he was, because later on the--whatever Leonard Marks was the head of, Information Service?

M: Yes.

P: They translated it into Spanish, Danish, Hindi, I've forgotten what other language, and I'm sure it had more circulation elsewhere than it did here. This publishing company's a kind of a peculiar outfit.

Provence -- I -- 25

The guy I dealt with has sold it out long ago now, but they put out enough to make some money on it and then they quit. They didn't promote it worth a damn. I fixed up an updated version about a year after that for a paperback outfit, and it showed up all over everywhere, Alaska and I don't know where all. So I really don't know what kind of circulation it had. I've been told a hundred thousand copies, but I don't know; a hundred thousand what kind of copies I'm not sure. (Laughter)

M: The book itself seemed favorable to Lyndon Johnson, certainly not as derogatory as many that have come out.

P: I wouldn't write one like that in the first place, and in the second place, you'll have to remember that he had just become president.

M: Right.

P: The concern of all of us at that time was to try to present him to the country. I remember the night after the assassination, that Friday night, I was called to come to Austin to be on a CBS program with Dr. Bob Montgomery. I believe there were three of us. Who in the hell was the third one? The whole theme of it was, "What kind of man is Lyndon Johnson?" Then the next morning I flew to Washington just to see if I could do anything for him or be of any help.

M: Right.

P: I had an idea of what a hell of a mess things were in, and they were. I spent that Saturday afternoon over at the EOB with Walter Jenkins and Moyers, and Johnson was operating in and out. I went to dinner

Provence -- I -- 26

with him. He and Mrs. Johnson and a fellow from Corpus Christi and I went out to the house out there, The Elms or whatever they call it out there. You know where it was?

M: Yes.

P: We had dinner, and he was just unwinding and talking about all the problems he'd run into that day. The switchboard wasn't working and he was having to walk back and forth in the rain between the EOB and the West Wing to answer the phone, just having a hell of a time. I stayed up there through the Kennedy funeral and came home after that.

M: Did he ask you to do any work for him?

P: No. Through Jenkins and Moyers I just let him know that I was there if they needed anything.

M: Did he make any comment at that time about the job of the president?

P: Oh, not in those terms, no. He was just beset by all the confusion, and he said he was going to get that switchboard working where nobody would ever have to wait on a call again. And he damn sure did that, because I talked through that switchboard many, many times afterwards, and you could get an answer on the first ring, I don't care what time of day or night you called. He really got the phone system perking.

M: Then Johnson became president. Did he have much contact with you during his presidency?

P: Not after the first year. Well, I'd say not after the 1964 election. Because I was still useful, and I was called up there in January of 1964. Dick Maguire was treasurer of the national Democratic committee, and he and Blundell were real close. I'd met Dick on that

Provence -- I -- 27

account prior to this time, but I was called up there in January of 1964 to give Dick my judgment on some plans and proposals that they had for setting up press operations for the 1964 campaign. Wayne Phillips was designated as the fellow to run it. It was a pretty interesting operation the way Wayne had it laid out, and what they wanted me to do was tell them whether it was worth a damn or not. And it was; it was a real picture book communications deal.

M: Will you explain that a little bit more?

P: Wayne set up a long distance system where any radio station or newspaper could call in to this committee room and get a tape on whatever was hot, whatever was going on, from anywhere in the country, call no toll. Also, he had correspondents in the major cities who were reporting to him by phone every night as to what their newspapers were doing, what the local campaign organization was doing, what kind of treatment the other side was getting, just a complete G-2 on the campaign. From those reports he prepared a two or three page mimeographed newsletter that went to the White House every afternoon. I've got all of those. I've got a complete file of the newsletters, along with a whole shit pot full of other stuff. I've got a vault down in our basement just crammed full of stuff I don't know what to do with.

M: Well, I can give you a suggestion about that: you can donate that to the Johnson Library.

P: Well

M: When the time comes.

Provence -- I -- 28

P: When the time comes.

M: You went to comment on the communication system then.

P: Yes.

M: And you seem to be pretty impressed with it.

P: Yes, I was. The reason Dick wanted me up there was because he wanted me to transmit the whole thing to Johnson and to give Johnson my judgment on it, which I did.

M: Did Johnson make any comment?

P: He seemed to take my word that it was all right, and it turned out beautifully.

M: Why were you selected to come up there to look at it? Did Johnson pick you out.

P: I don't know. I kind of think Blundell may have told Maguire that I would be the one.

(Interruption)

M: [You were talking] about the communications set-up, why you had been called up there to check it. You were saying that you think it was through Mr. Blundell.

P: Yes. I'm sure that's how it came about.

M: During 1964, other than that, did you get involved in the campaign?

P: We put Buck Hood in our organization again, and Wayne Phillips would talk to me once in a while and Walter Jenkins. All through these years Walter Jenkins was the main contact man. If Mr. Johnson wanted me for something, Walter was on the phone to me. When I had a problem

Provence -- I -- 29

that I wanted help on I would talk to him first. We were very close. This was true especially during the 1964 campaign.

M: Walter Jenkins was a pretty good staff man, was he?

P: Oh, he was the best I ever saw. Absolutely the best.

Johnson never really got over the loss of Walter because he trusted him so implicitly, as he should have, and Walter was just his right arm and right ear and right brain. That was the biggest tragedy of the whole Johnson Administration, that utterly inexplicable thing that happened to Walter Jenkins. I still don't think it could have possibly been kosher. I've known him too long. I just don't believe it.

M: Incidentally, what made Walter Jenkins a good staff man? You said he was the best, why?

P: He had a brilliant mind for one thing, and a set of reflexes as fast as a computer, and he was so dedicated to Johnson. I don't know how he had all those children, working for Johnson; I don't know how he had time to, but he did. (Laughter) He just lived and breathed Lyndon Johnson, day and night, seven days a week. Nobody ever had a staff man like that. I have known a lot of staff people, but I never knew one that could even carry his water bucket.

M: Then during the campaign you were back here running the newspaper, working in this area to carry it for Johnson.

P: Yes, our whole group was thoroughly committed to the Kennedy-Johnson ticket, as we were in 1960, and we didn't leave any stone unturned that we could think of.

Provence -- I -- 30

M: Johnson wins in 1964. What's your contact with him after that?

P: Hardly any.

M: Why?

P: Well, I guess he didn't need me.

M: You used the term you didn't think you were "useful" after that.

P: Right.

M: Does this indicate that Johnson was your friend while he needed you and then dropped you when he didn't need you?

P: Well, I don't know.

M: Or am I putting your words in your mouth?

P: We still get communications from him once in a while. I wouldn't say it that way, but after all, there was very little I could do for the President of the United States who had as many troubles as he wound up having.

M: So your contact after 1964 was almost zero.

P: Pretty much.

M: Did he ever invite you to the White House to any of the social functions or anything of that nature?

P: Yes. Yes, Frances and I went up for the last big one. When was that, September of 1968, I guess. Oh, we'd talk on the phone once in a while, but nothing like it was when he was senator and vice president. But that didn't bother me at all, and I would have been astonished if he'd had any time to fool with me. I wouldn't have understood it.

M: Do you have any insight into Lyndon Johnson's relationship with the newspaper reporters? People are always talking about credibility gaps

Provence -- I -- 31

and how Johnson did not get along with reporters and so forth. Is there truth in that, and if so to what extent?

P: I've watched his relationship with newspaper reporters and newspaper editors for a long, long time. Yes, nobody can please him all the time, and when you don't please him, why, he reacts. But I'd say the reporters that treat him fairly get along with him all right. I'll cite Jack Horner of the Washington Star and Philip Potter of the Baltimore Sun; there are a good many of them, just plain, straightforward reporters that get along with him all right. It's these analysts and critics that get under his skin. He wants to be fair to them. I've seen him go to all sorts of lengths to help them and to try to do it their way, try to make things convenient for them, but his personality is kind of complex, and the ones that he can't hit it off with, he just doesn't hit it off with them.

M: Did he ever pick up the phone and call you up and comment about something you'd written about him, say, in an editorial or anything like that?

P: Yes, once in a while.

M: Do you remember any specific incident?

P: I remember I was in Austin when Kennedy came there right after his election, his first visit to the Ranch. I wrote a piece about that. He called me the next morning and said he liked it. Editorials, yes, he's always been grateful for them. My relations with him professionally have always been fine as far as I was concerned. We've never had any difficulty.

Provence -- I -- 32

M: Do you have any comments you might make about his personality? Hard driving? Intelligent?

P: Yes, he's hard driving all right, oh boy.

M: You hear all these stories about how hard he worked his staff, is that true?

P: Yes, he did it. He sure did it. I just wonder how things are getting along now. I went to see Mary Rather a few months ago up there on the top of that federal building in Austin, and it looked to me like he was zeroing in on her. She was just overloaded, all circuits. I guess she and Dale Malechek are probably getting the full benefit of his supervision now. (Laughter) Do you know Dale, the foreman out at the Ranch? [He's a] hell of a nice guy.

M: Is he rough on these people?

P: Oh, yes, he can be pretty curt and cutting. I remember we were driving from the airport at Marlin to the Tom Connally funeral. The Secret Service man who was driving--incidentally, I don't know where the hell they came from, but they met us there at the little bitty airport--took the wrong turn going towards the church, and Johnson chewed him out in a manner that just amazed me. He jumped all over him.

M: What did the Secret Service man do?

P: Hell, he just swallowed real hard and kept going. What else do you think he could do? (Laughter)

M: Not much.

Provence -- I -- 33

P: But those flashes of temper, I don't know, they weren't too frequent in my experience. I guess George Reedy could tell you a hell of a lot more about that than I could.

M: People who have written about Johnson have also often commented on the earthiness, or sometimes crudity if they wish to put it that way, of his language. Is there any truth in that?

P: Well, he and I are kind of alike in that regard.

M: So it never bothered you?

P: It doesn't bother me at all. Good old Anglo-Saxon monosyllables have their place. (Laughter)

M: And he wasn't afraid to use them?

P: No.

M: I've got one other area that I'll just ask you about a little bit. Did he ever appoint you to any positions on any committee work or anything like that?

P: He put me on a small business advisory council that headquartered in Dallas. I think I was appointed. Well, I was appointed and then reappointed. I never did know why, never had any real interest in it. I went to one meeting, but that was the extent of my appointment and I was glad to be through with that. When it happened it just got me a lot of mail, but didn't amount to much.

M: Do you have any comment about the role of Mrs. Johnson as a politician's wife or as first lady?

P: She's just a tremendous person. He needed her; she can control him. I don't know how well you know him, but Jack Valenti said it right

Provence -- I -- 34

when he said he had an extra set of glands. He damn sure does.

Without the balance wheel of Mrs. Johnson he might have just flown off into orbit someday or other--mentally, physically, politically or any other way. She's the best thing that ever happened to him, by a long odd.

M: I've heard this kind of comment before, but can you give me an example of this, any specific incident where she has had a balancing effect?

P: Oh, not really an example. I've just seen her with him a lot at the Ranch and in Washington and in Austin, it's obvious that he leans on her real hard for just her presence and what it means to him. But how to say in narrative form how she does it is a little beyond me, because I don't quite know how to put it. She's solicitous of his well-being. She got lots of practice during his heart attack; she got a lot of practice when he was president. She tries to ease things for him and make things smoothly operate when she can, but even way beyond that her mind is of such a clarity and purpose that he can depend on her judgment in things maybe. Maybe that's not the way to put it, but they're an ideal team.

M: This brings me to the end of my questions. Do you have anything else that you think ought to be in it?

P: No, I think this--my God, I don't know what you're going to do with all this. (Laughter)

M: Let me thank you then for your time.

P: Thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Harry Provence

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, Harry Provence of Waco, Texas do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on May 5, 1971 in Waco, 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) 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 I may have 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 transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Harry Provence
Donor

May 24 '78
Date

Lane E. O'Neil
ACTING Archivist of the United States

June 7, 1978
Date