

INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD S. "CACTUS" PRYOR

INTERVIEWER: PAUL BOLTON

PLACE: Mr. Pryor's office, Austin, Texas

September 10, 1968

B: This is September 10, 1968. We are in the office of Richard S.

"Cactus" Pryor. Pryor has been employed by the Johnson  
radio-television interest. . . . how long have you worked for  
KTBC, Mr. Pryor?

P: I went to work, significantly, D-Day--the day I started here.  
I had just gotten out of the service and worked for two weeks at  
KNOW before they fired me. And I was hired by Pat Adelman at  
KTBC as an announcer.

B: And after being hired as an announcer, Mr. Pryor went on to be  
program director and master of ceremonies of, I should say,  
national fame. You have done shows all over the country since that  
time, have you not?

P: Yes, I'm a local comedian who spread his range a little bit.

B: And you've been in a couple of movies, too.

P: Yes . . . just in them.

B: What was the last one, Cactus?

P: Well, "The Hell Fighters," which is a story of oilwell fire fighting,  
which John Wayne has made in Houston.

B: Now, Mr. Pryor--I'm going to call you Cactus because I've known

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you for quite a few years --Cactus, during the past several years, your talents have been utilized at parties at the LBJ Ranch, which is some sixty miles from here, and we thought it would be interesting for you to tell us about some of these parties that were thrown at the LBJ Ranch. What is the first one that you recall?

P: Well, it started actually not as an assignment, but my wife Jewel and I would be at the ranch for private parties, dinners, or meetings, and the entertainment would kind of evolve into leading a singsong, or whatever. Then a little later on the Johnsons would be entertaining groups of friends, and they would sometimes invite me and my wife, and I would bring along a few entertainers like Marilyn Bronson, the folk singer who had a program on our station. I'd bring her, and then after the meal we'd sit around the fireplace in the living room and sing folksongs and I'd tell a few gags; very casual-type entertainment. Then when President Johnson, then first Congressman Johnson, then Senator Johnson, got a little more involved with the world, and as he would bring the more important personages into the ranch, the entertainment took a more formal form and I was called on to provide entertainment frequently and to emcee.

The first person of international fame with whom I had any dealings was Chancellor Adenauer of Germany. It was Senator Johnson then; he was Majority Leader when he entertained Adenauer. It was a very colorful affair. There were, I guess, about a hundred guests.

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They set up a huge tent, two huge tents, as a matter of fact, outside the ranch house because they didn't have room enough to accomodate them inside and they were fearful of bad weather. So they rented these two huge tents. They carpeted the floor, [there were] flowers and ornately set tables. Mary Kooock from Green Pastures catered the affair. It looked sort of like a rich Turk's harem. Pretty fancy spread. But my duty that evening was to bring up two teams of folk singers: Tommy and Sandy, who then went on with Arthur Godfrey, you remember, and became the nucleus of the Serendipity Singers; and a couple of chemical engineer majors at the University of Texas, Mel and Tom I think their names were. Actually, I thought I was just functioning as a chauffeur to bring the boys up. But about five minutes after the dinner had begun, Liz Carpenter came out and said, "Mrs. Johnson wants you to be master of ceremonies."

PB: Liz Carpenter was Mrs. Johnson's press secretary?

P: Yes. I said, "Well, I haven't prepared any remarks, Liz, and I don't speak German, and I understand the Chancellor does." She said, "Well, just come on in and present the acts." So I immediately acquired an almost lethal attack of stage fright--tent fright, I guess you'd call it--and then when she signaled that she wanted the entertainment, I went on in and here were the heads of several states, the German Ambassador to the United States, the United States

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Ambassador to Germany, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral . . .

I believe Admiral Nimitz was there on this occasion.

PB: I believe so.

CP: And the Governor, you know, more brass than I'd ever seen assembled in one place in all my life. There was no microphone. And, of course, tents with carpeting and loaded with people absorb sound like a sponge. So, very meekly, nobody introduced me, very meekly I said, "Could I have your attention, please?" And it had all the effect of a kite in restraining a hurricane. And I said a little louder, "Could I have your attention, please?" They went on eating and conversing. Finally, I shouted out in my best Texas voice, "Simmer down!" And they did. I emceed very much like I did the other functions at the ranch, very casually. I said, "The head of the ranch here has asked me to bring a little entertainment. They wanted some typical Texas entertainment so I rounded up a couple of Texas folk singers, and we've been frantically trying to learn some traditional cowboy songs in the past twenty-four hours. " I then told a few gags and presented the folk singers. Very warmly received. And, incidentally, as I told the stories the translator had to translate them to Chancellor Adenauer so there was a little pause there as I would wait for the translation, thinking frantically. But it turned out to be a very pleasant evening. The entertainment seemed to have been well received.

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I was astounded, for the first time, as I was later to be many times, by how similar an audience of top brass is to an audience of people on my level.

PB: Just plain ordinary people.

CP: Yes.

PB: In translating the stories, didn't they lose the point of the joke when the translator comes along?

CP: Yes, but I played on that fact. I'd say, "Chancellor Adenauer, this is an American joke that you probably won't understand, but we'll stop and let your translator explain it to you, and if it's not humorous to you, it's obviously lost in the translator's interpretation because I'm basically a very humorous person, and an internationally humorous one. "

PB: That got you off the hook.

CP: Yes.

PB: I know that you used topical jokes. Do you recall any that you used at that time?

CP: No. I don't. I haven't got the slightest idea what I said. Usually I liked to prepare my ad libs in advance, but on this occasion I had no opportunity to do that so it was strictly off the cuff.

PB: Well now that one was strictly off the cuff. The next big party you attended was what?

CP: The next one I guess was for Ayub Khan of Pakistan. He was entertained

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by the Vice President of the United States--President Ayub Khan.

PB: Ayub Khan, of course, was educated in England. He had no difficulty in getting your jokes.

CP: That's right. He was a very happy fellow. He laughed very easily. We had two parties. The first was an evening affair around the swimming pool. I organized a water show to be presented in the swimming pool. We got the Austin Aquatic Club and teamed them up with the San Antonio Aquatic Club with the help of my brother, Wally, who was coach of the Austin Aquatic Club. There was a very beautiful white linen table cloth, silver, a candlelight dinner around the swimming pool--full moon provided by, I assume, the weatherman. There were about fifty couples seated at round tables around the swimming pool. And again top brass, mostly Texas brass: the Neimans, the Marcuses, the Browns and the Roots, the Governors, people of that sort. The water show went over very well. I was master of ceremonies and used a few topical gags like, "This dive is unique in that the swimmer comes down in two parts, sort of like Pakistan." Which was separated. Then we presented an Australian singer, Diana Trask, a beautiful redhead who was then very popular nationally; she was on the Mitch Miller Show. She was wearing a beautiful blue gown, that lovely red hair and there was a full moon. We put a blue spotlight on her from across the pool. I never will forget this. She was singing "Blue Moon," and it was a very romantic setting,

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and she was really selling the song. The Vice President spotted some leaves in the pool. The pool was between the audience and the singer, and so he tells one of the yard boys to get the long leaf remover, a pole-like affair, and remove the leaves from the pool. So here's Diana singing "Blue Moon," and here's Gonzalez with his long pole between the audience and the singer, removing the leaves from the pool.

The next day, we had the barbecue, and the planes came in from all over the Southwest--jets--swarming around like turkey buzzards coming in for landings. There was a typical barbecue, and I'll describe it a little more to you in length--the atmosphere that prevailed at these barbecues, if you'd like.

PB: I'd like!

CP: We had Eddie Arnold, the Tennessee Plowboy--he was one of the President's favorites--to entertain. We had it all planned so that immediately following the meal I would present Eddie Arnold, who would sing, then I would present the Vice President, who in turn would present President Khan. Incidentally, I had memorized all my opening remarks in Pakistani by having them translated for me by some Pakistani students at the University of Texas, and for a week I did nothing but try to memorize this Pakistani--it's a very difficult language. My son Paul was about fifteen months of age at that time, and I would go out on the patio of our home to practice my lines and

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babysit with Paul, who was in a crib. I think he spoke Pakistani before he spoke English! Sounded that way! But anyway, I got up and made my remarks in Pakistani and prepared to present Eddie Arnold, and all of a sudden here comes the Vice President up on the speaker's platform that had been erected underneath the trees, and he said, "Present me." Well, I'm not going to argue with the man and I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Vice President of the United States." Whereupon he made his welcoming address, presented a Stetson hat to Ayub Khan, who comes up and responds. And then the two of them take off in the Vice President's golf cart. I then present Eddie Arnold, who begins singing to the backs of two hundred departing heads as they follow the Vice President and President Khan off. Brother Arnold was a little bit miffed on this occasion, but this was typical of President Johnson. He's a good audience when he can sit still long enough to listen and be entertained. But as you know, he's a very restless person and he changes his mind many times about proceedings, and this was one of those many occasions.

PB: Now tell us something about the barbecues. You said that you could give us a good description of them.

CP: Well, I think I can best describe one by describing the barbecue he gave for the United Nations delegates. I think he was still Vice President then. He had all of the ambassadors of the United Nations, or many of them, down for a barbecue. [It was] one of those events that could



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only happen in Texas. The first thing that struck you was the contrast: the Oriental and the Occidental, there were Paris frocks and Levis, you heard Texas twang and clipped British, [there was] Perle Mesta and Cousin Oreole asked Perle Mesta, "What do you do, Mrs. Mesta?" Perle Mesta thought a moment and she said, "Well, I give parties." "You mean that's all you do?" "Yes, that's about all I do." "My, that's a funny way to carry on!" [Cousin Oreole said]. It was quite a contrast because there were a lot of Texas people there wearing their western clothes. The Ambassador from Ceylon was there, I remember, in a gown-like attire with a Stetson hat on his head that had been presented to him by the President.

On all of these occasions, they'd manicure the ranch grounds, and the barbecues were held underneath the big oak trees down by the riverside. They were always held when the grass was green. They'd bring in bales of hay and place them strategically around to hide the paraphernalia such as the recording equipment and platforms, things of that sort. As a matter of fact, the manicuring sometimes becomes a matter of controversy. I remember Dale Malechek, who is foreman of the ranch and Bess Abell, who is the social secretary and one who really organized all the barbecues, the details. [They] were going over the grounds to see where we'd place the tables and where we'd place the bales of hay, and she said, "Now Dale, I want a bale of hay here and I want a bale of hay here." And she said, "Now Dale, there

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is one other matter. You'll notice that cows have deposited various deposits around the barbecue area, and naturally these have to be removed." Dale, in his typical Texas way of talking, said, "Getting the cows to do that is my business. Getting it up is your business. I'm sure you've got some vice-presidents in charge of that." Do you know who ended up removing it?

PB: You?

CP: No, the Air Force. Being an old Air Corpsman, I thought that was highly appropriate. But they actually staked out the cows on the other side of the river for atmosphere. We had cowboys over there to make sure the cows stayed in place. They would hang baskets of flowers from trees, and you'd always see these brown baskets of flowers almost parallel to the ground because the wind was always blowing during these barbecues. You just mention the word barbecue and the wind would start blowing out there. But Walter Jetton, the famous mobile caterer from Fort Worth, the late caterer I should say, because he died about a year ago, would set up his chuck wagon and portable barbecue pits, and by nine o'clock in the morning the aroma of the barbecuing pork ribs, for which he was famous, the beek brisket and the chicken would convince your stomach that breakfast had been days before. He was a great showman, Walter Jetton, and he would take a whole beef and put it on a rotating spit out in front with a little fire. I guess it was barbecued many months ago, but he'd use the same beef over and over. It was strictly

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for atmosphere. The round tables with checkered tablecloths and coal oil lanterns on top for atmosphere. All of his help dressed in Western attire. He had big old iron washpots full of melted butter in which you would dip your corn on the cob. It had all of the look and feel of the "chuck wagon" dinner.

And on all of these occasions, the drive from the river up to the ranch was lined with the flags of the United Nations. Of course, the flag of LBJ was on top of the flagpole whenever he was at the ranch; he has his own personal flag. One of the farmhands on one occasion almost created an international incident by backing over the flagpole holding the flag of Greece. Hysteria prevailed until cool George Bolton, who was assisting me--you know George?

PB: I know George.

CP: He made a splint for the fractured pole and restored poor Greece to her rightful position among the powers of the world. But all of this took place down on the river.

You'd also have Secret Service men behind every tree. They would try to disguise them to make them as inconspicuous as possible, but they always stood out like a sore thumb.

PB: This river that you speak of is the Pedernales River, spelled P-E-D-E-R, but it's pronounced Perdenales.

CP: Right.

PB: And it's about a hundred yards from the ranch house or farther.

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CP: I'd say about a hundred yards, yes.

PB: About a hundred from the ranch house.

(Pause in recording)

CP: On this occasion of the barbecue for the United Nations ambassadors, I helped Bess Abell line up the entertainment. We had the Geezinslaw Brothers, who were favorites of the President. They were from Austin and were a satirical hillbilly act. We also had a girl named Mary Tuggle who was a University of Texas student from Odessa. She was an expert with a bull whip. We wanted to present a typical Texas program, so we invited Mary up. She is a very attractive blonde girl, and came riding in on a horse full speed, cracking a whip. Then she gets off the horse and with her huge bull whip starts doing her act. Part of her act consisted of inviting a volunteer from the audience to place a cigar in his mouth, and then with the bull whip at a distance of about twenty feet, she would slowly cut the cigar into ribbons. She was accurate enough to do this. So we asked for volunteers, and one of the ambassadors from one of the iron curtain countries volunteered; I think he was from Albania. He came out and I put the cigar in his mouth, and the length of his nose exceeded the length of the cigar by about an inch. The State Department representatives there achieved a state of anxiety never reached by man before in peacetime until I took the cigar from his mouth. Now you know my nose is more ski-shaped than protruding, so I put personal safety aside and for my

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country let her cut the cigar to ribbons.

On that same occasion we had invited Billy McElroy with the Texas Rangers. He's the man who teaches the Texas Rangers how to shoot. [We asked him] to put on a pistol-shooting demonstration, and he does amazing things with a pistol, including splitting a playing card placed with the edge toward him, splitting it in two. As I said, we were very heavy with security there at all times. Billy was supposed to arrive at about eleven o'clock, and he travels with an arsenal. He carries rifles and pistols. He even carries a machine gun, shotguns. As I said, he was supposed to arrive at eleven; the barbecue was to begin at noon, and at eleven thirty he wasn't there. Then it finally dawned on me that I had forgotten to explain to the Secret Service that this man would be arriving with this small arsenal. I should have known that he'd be stopped at the main gate by the Secret Service, but when this hit me, I dashed madly for my car, swerved expertly between Bulgaria and Iran on flag row, and sped like the wind past Lebanon and Japan and Nigeria to head them off at the pass before my old Texas Ranger partner was ambushed by the Secret Service men. But as I approached the gate I saw that I was too late. Billy was out of his car and had his hands up on the side of his car, leaning over as the Secret Service men were frisking him and he was saying, "But I really am a Texas Ranger!" Incidentally, Billy was to have entertained President Kennedy the day after he was assassinated.

He [Kennedy] was coming from Dallas to Austin for a dinner, then

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the next day we were going to give him a barbecue. And ironically, as I said, at these barbecues we tried to present things that were typically Texas rather than show-biz type performances, so there was going to be a cutting horse demonstration, a sheepdog act, and Billy McElroy, the Captain of the Texas Rangers, was going to put on this demonstration of a pistol shooting. And, ironically, the Secret Service worked with Bess Abell and Billy McElroy and myself for a couple of hours that morning to make certain that there was no danger of the President being injured by a ricochet. So Billy had to go through his act several times, and while we were down there taking all of this caution for the sake of the President, Dale Malechek drove up in his pickup and he said, "Mr. Kennedy's been shot. Mr. Kennedy's been shot." Then Mary Davis, who was the cook at the ranch, came running out the front door yelling that the President had been shot. So we all rushed into the kitchen of the ranch house and watched Walter Cronkite report the news on the television set in the kitchen, Secret Service men included. Some of them were back at the communications trailer behind the ranch; they would bring in reports that they hadn't received yet on national television. And there was Bess Abell, who was social secretary, and members of the Secret Service. Immediately they placed the ranch on what they call a "Presidential Alert" because Johnson then, they had assumed, was President. They sealed off the ranch just like that. Cousin Oreole came down, trying to get in the ranch house and they weren't going to

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let her in, even though she's the cousin to the President. She took great issue with this and she said, "No young fellow is going to keep me out of this house. I've been in many more times than you have." She did come into the house.

But the reality of the situation didn't really strike us until Mary Davis, who as I said was the cook, took some pecan pies out of the stove and she said, "Well, these pies were for President Kennedy. What do I do with them now?" This was the first time that a decision had to be made because of that which had happened. Bess Abell said, "Well, I'll take them back to Washington with me." Which she did. Then the Secret Service men did a very strange thing, I thought. They had known me, we had been working together for days. George Bolton was with me, assisting me as he always did to prepare the show and they said to me, "Have you got presidential clearance?" I said, "What is presidential clearance?" They said, Well, this ranch is now presidential status and you'll have to leave." So they made me leave. It was a confused act in a moment of confusion. It really didn't make sense, but nothing made sense that day.

PB: Cactus, do you recall the first big event that occurred at the ranch after Mr. Johnson became President?

CP: Yes. It was the meeting at the ranch with Chancellor Erhard of Germany. He brought with him all of his staff from ambassadors to Secretary of State, and Johnson had all of his. It was the first social occasion, real

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occasion, since he had assumed the presidency.

The first thing with which I was involved was a dinner, a stag dinner, held at the ranch house for the staffs and chiefs of state of both countries. I had recommended as entertainment--they wanted some entertainment afterwards--that we get the girl who was Miss Texas to sing. Her name was . . . well, maybe I'll think of it. I can't think of it right now, but the White House staff was a little taken aback by my suggestion that we should get Miss Texas to entertain the two heads of state, and I hastily explained that I had been master of ceremonies at the contest when she had won Miss Texas and heard her sing, and that she had a gorgeous voice. She had won the talent competition at Miss America and was runnerup for Miss America. So I convinced them. They were still apprehensive, though, because they envisioned some amateur standing in a bathing suit singing songs from South Pacific. Linda Loftis is her name. And we brought Linda in from Fort Worth to rehearse, and for her accompanist we chose Ezra Rachlin, who was the conductor of the Austin Symphony Orchestra, but also had made his debut as a child prodigy pianist in Berlin at the age of ten. So they rehearsed for several days here in Austin, then we flew to the ranch on a helicopter along with four musicians who formed a string quartet. We landed at the ranch; security was so heavy that they went through all the instrument cases of the musicians. Mrs. Johnson, incidentally, herself was not allowed into the house for this stag dinner. It was really stag. Linda Loftis was really



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honored. And it was very cute the way Mrs. Johnson said that curiosity forced her to stand in the window and listen to what was going on--she stood on the porch outside.

But after the dinner we were in the living room where the huge fireplace was, and here came Bill Moyers first, Jack Valenti, the Sorensen boys, and then Erhard, then Johnson and their staff. They filed into the living room and lighted cigars and brandy was served. Then Valenti came to me and said, "Start the show." Once again I was presented with the problem of not being presented and trying to stop the conversation of all these important people, and once again I was not successful. The President came to me and said, "Let's get the show going." I said, "Well, I can't get their attention." And he said, "Well, by golly, I think I can." Then he said, "You fellows knock it off and sit down!" They did. And I addressed the Chancellor, incidentally, in my German, whereupon he said something to his interpreter, and his interpreter said to me, "The Chancellor wants to congratulate you on your accent. He says it's the most beautiful Italian he's ever heard." And it was bad.

But I presented Linda; she's a gorgeous blonde and she had her hair done up in fraulein style. She addressed the Chancellor in fluent German, and then she sang a recital of German lieder songs. Well, the Chancellor is a musicologist who studied the piano himself. He was enchanted, he was intrigued, and Linda was not only beautiful, she sang

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beautifully. And she sang only one other song besides a German lieder and it was an Italian aria, I think Puccini, and it just happened by accident to be the Chancellor's favorite aria. After the performance they all stood and applauded, and the Chancellor got up and took a yellow rose from one of the vases and presented it to Linda, bowed, and kissed her hand. The German Secretary of State, it turned out, was in the audience when Maestro Rachlin made his debut in Berlin, remembered the occasion, and came over and related it to Ezra Rachlin, who also spoke fluent German. So it was a very successful evening.

The next day was to be a barbecue. Liz Carpenter had called me prior to all of this by several weeks and had suggested that we get up the program of Texas entertainment: fiddle bands, square dancers, and that sort of thing. I said, "Liz, wouldn't this be a good opportunity to display to the world that Johnson isn't a hick, a hillbilly, that Texans are something besides cowboys and fiddle bands?" She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, we've got a citizen of this state who had made a pretty good reputation internationally playing the piano. His name is Van Cliburn. Why don't we get Van Cliburn down?" She said, "But this is a barbecue. We can't present Cliburn at a barbecue." I said, "I can think of no more beautiful setting than to build a platform underneath those trees with the river in the background, a herd of Herefords in the background; there could be no more beautiful setting." She said, "By golly, maybe there's something to it. Let me talk to Mrs. Johnson

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about it. I'll call you back." She called back and said, "Mrs. Johnson likes the idea, so we'll get hold of Cliburn." And they did. Then they got to thinking that perhaps the weather might prove to be a stumbling block, and the forecast was not favorable, so they decided to move it into the Stonewall School Gymnasium which is across the river about two miles from the ranch. We got Harold Eichenbaum from here in Austin, a decorator, to decorate the gymnasium. We brought Walter Jetton down and we drew circles with chalk on the floor of the gymnasium, the circles representing the size of the various tables to make sure we could get everyone in. Harold decorated the gymnasium to look like the interior of a barn. It was a very colorful setting. We had to take part of the wall of the gymnasium. The President always had his hand in on these programs, and he said that he wanted a chorus of school children from Fredericksburg to participate in the program. This kind of threw things into confusion because it's a little hard to blend amateurs with professionals, we thought, but it turned out to be a typical Johnson stroke of genius, because it was really one of the hits of the day. It was the St. Mary's Catholic High School Chorus; they're all of Germanic origin, descent. They prepared "Silent Night, Holy Night" in German, and several other songs because it was prior to Christmas, or maybe just after Christmas, I forget. I think it was just after Christmas. It was still the Christmas season. I suggested to the kids that they learn "Deep in the Heart of Texas" in German

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and sing it. And that was a high spot of the program; it got a lot of press attention, and the Chancellor really got a big kick out of it.

But on this day we had mariachi bands outside to greet them as we came up to the gymnasium. Van Cliburn's mother had gotten over the trauma that she experienced when she learned that her son was going to perform at a barn dance setting and had told me in no uncertain terms that her son was not going to wear cowboy clothes and play at a barn dance. And I assured her that it was going to be presented with great dignity. He wore a black suit, incidentally, and not white tie and tails as she suggested. It was a very colorful affair. This was going to be my first opportunity to present the President to the public. It really was the first opportunity, so I was looking forward to it. They had a head table, and they were still eating and I was still waiting for them to finish the meal when Liz Carpenter came running over to me and said, "You'd better get up there and present the President, because he's getting ready to present himself." And he was: he was standing up at the lecturn, ready to get on with it. You know how impatient he is. So I headed up to the head table, stopped by the Secret Service; I had to convince them that my motive was not ulterior. So I went up to the President and said, "Sir, may I have the microphone?" He said, "What for?" I said, "I'm supposed to present you." He said, "Well, why do you have to present me?" I said, "Well, some of them may not know who you are." So I presented him, and then he presented hats

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to the Germans. He was in rare style that day; he was very funny, very relaxed, obviously enjoying it. [Secretary of State] Dean Rusk was there, and he was enjoying it, too. They were happier times then. He had presented the cowboy hats to all the Germans, and they put them on to the glory of the Press. Then I presented the German-American choir from Fredericksburg, apologized to Chancellor Erhard for Walter Jetton's inability to find a good recipe for barbecued sauerkraut, and presented Van Cliburn. As I explained earlier, the Chancellor was a musicologist so he was enthralled with Van Cliburn. It was a very successful day. A lot of people were impressed by this blending of the kids of Germanic origin and the mariachi bands outside with the great artistry of Van Cliburn. And it all melded well; it jived. It was a very successful affair.

Another barbecue we did was for President Diaz Ordaz of Mexico upon the occasion of his election as President. Actually, he was President-elect at the time President Johnson entertained him at the ranch. This was a very colorful affair with the blending of the two cultures. For entertainment that day the White House had said that they wanted Eddie Fisher to entertain because he had been very active in the campaign. I suggested that we get another Miss Texas girl, Mary Moore Swink, who had impressed me at the Miss Texas contest which I had emceed, with her dancing ability--she did the classical Spanish dances. She, too, was a beautiful blonde, and I figured that it

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would impress the Mexicans to present a Texan, especially a blonde Texan--you know how they dig blondes, attractive blondes--who danced the classical Spanish dances as well as any professional Mexican dancer could. And it turned out to be a good idea, because she really enchanted them. We also had a psychology major from the University of Texas, Ricardo Gamez, who plays the concert guitar--flamenco guitar--professionally, really good. He presented a few solos and accompanied Mary. Then we presented Eddie Fisher who, while singing, got tangled up in his mike cord as he walked up to the audience--once again we were on the banks of the Pedernales--and President Johnson, always the gracious host, was the first one to jump up and untangle him from his mike cord. Fisher said, "You know, I've never been untangled from a mike cord before by a President of the United States!" But he sang "America" for his final number, and sang it not as a song of the United States, but as a song of the Americas. It was a very beautiful day, and the cattle were in the background, and the trees were in full bloom, the flags of Mexico and the United States were waving side by side. It was a very dramatic moment, very impressive. I told some jokes, said, "The President has learned much, President Diaz Ordaz, from Mexico. For example, we have learned generosity from your saying and your living 'Mi casa es su casa,' of course you say in your country. In our country our bankers say it, 'Su casa es mi casa,' " and a few topical gags. But that

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was a very happy occasion. Gene Autry, the cowboy star, was there, and Milton Berle was there, and you know what a ham he is! And my hardest job that day was keeping Berle from getting on the stage. I had been given explicit instructions not to let him on the stage, because once you get him on, you don't get him off. That was quite a challenge, but with the help of the Secret Service we kept him off.

Another time we entertained Latin Americans at the ranch. It was the last thing I did at the ranch, the barbecue for the Latin American ambassadors from all of the Latin American countries. This was prior to the meeting at . . . what was it? Punta del Este?

PB: I believe so.

CP: The President had planned this barbecue to set the scene, to break the ice, before this meeting. And on this occasion, we chose as entertainment a group from a little West Texas town called Albany. Albany has a population of about 1,500. It's a very unusual town; it's a very wealthy town from ranching and oil, and I would imagine the intellectual level of this town is unusually high because there's a whole group of Princeton grads, Yale grads in this town, whose papas made money in cattle and oil and sent them off to the East to go to school. They got their book-learning but they never lost their love of the land, and they've come back to Albany to live the same life that their parents lived, raising cattle and living out of doors. But they have an annual production that they call "The Fandango," and it's a pageant that tells in song and story the

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settling of Texas, especially that part of Texas. They have a new pageant each year, new songs and new staging, new costumes. It's really a full production in that they have buckboards and stagecoaches, and they even have a calliope pulled by horses, and they'll have 150 people on stage at one time. The stage is an arena that they built there, a natural amphitheater in Albany. They present these performances two weeks out of the year, and they have Indians and battles and the whole thing, you know. So I went out to audition the presentation and was enchanted and reported to the White House. They were very apprehensive, because they could visualize it as being very amateurish, and it was amateurish in that the singers were not professional singers, but they made up with enthusiasm and quality of composition. Mr. Nail, who produces the thing, had some very good music there, written by people in Albany. So I convinced them that we should use it. The President himself was very concerned; he called down several times for reassurance, and he wasn't reassured, and finally I just said, "In my opinion, this will be one of the best things we've ever presented at the ranch, and I think we should do it." And then I went into a state of shell shock because I'd put it really on the line. But as it turned out, it was just what we wanted. As I said, we had all the ambassadors and their ladies from the Latin American countries and many of the Latin American leaders from Texas were there: Congressman Gonzalez and a lot of the political people from Laredo and that part of the country. I changed the script



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some, and we depicted in pageant form the settling of Texas, and of course, we were settled at first by the Spaniards. We actually had the early Spaniards in costume coming down the River Pedernales and the friars and the Indians meeting them. It showed and I narrated the settlement of Texas, and it was very dramatic. And then we had the settlers coming, and they came roaring down on horseback, shouting, the stagecoach coming full speed, the buckboards, the settlers in their old costumes, and they sang songs of windmills and cattle drives. "Punching Cows" was one of the songs, and as we sang of punching cows, why, they had cowboys across the river actually herding the LBJ cattle, which the President, incidentally, had released too soon. He saw the cattle being held in a pen across the river--we had them penned up as background, to save them as background, as props, actually, for this number, "Punching Cows." And he saw these cows and he said to himself, "These cows ought to be in the background here, or over in the river where we can see 'em." So he calls his Secret Service man over, who gets on the radio, radios across the river to turn those cows loose, so here come the cows! And I say to Bess Abell, "Our props have been released too soon!" She says, "Oh, my gosh!" So she runs up to the President, whispers in his ear, and tells him that he has released our actors too soon. So he gives the word and the cows are shoed back in the pen. Anyhow, "The Fandango" was a huge success. I watched the President with apprehension during the first three numbers, because

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he had been very apprehensive about this entertainment, and understandably so, because they were amateurs. During the first couple of numbers he was just casing the crowd with his political eyes, you know, and then as he saw the audience enjoying it, he began to enjoy it, and by the end of the performance he was laughing the loudest and clapping the loudest. And afterwards, after it was presented, I thought he and Mrs. Johnson and Governor Connally and Mrs. Connally did a very magnanimous thing. It was strictly out of their hearts: they went up and embraced all of the performers. They weren't aware of it, but they couldn't have done a more political thing, and it wasn't a political act, it was a very sincere one. But you know the abrazo of the Latin Americans and the significance of it, and when these Latin American ambassadors saw the leader of the land embracing these common people, they were very impressed. It turned out to be, I think, the most successful entertainment that we've ever had at the ranch.

PB: This was the last party that you handled at the ranch. Now, did you ever handle one of the parties at the White House?

CP: No, I never played the White House. I've never been asked to. I say it with a little bit of regret. I can understand why because, well, I'm the Georgie Jessel of the campfire circuit and they don't have many campfires at the White House! I've entertained in Washington quite a bit and have entertained the President in Washington. I entertained the White House Correspondents banquet honoring the President and

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his Cabinet, where I appeared, incidentally, as Sir Gilbert Peake from England, incognito, in disguise. I think I fooled the President; I don't think he recognized me.

PB: I might explain here that one of Cactus's talents is to impersonate a . . . what is your usual impersonation, Cactus?

CP: Well on this occasion I was Sir Gilbert Peake, and Sir Gilbert Peake was a former member of the British Army, a press officer, a general, who was in America to do research on a book he was writing on one of the former colonies. And he was especially interested in political life and therefore had been in Washington for some time to observe the political scene. And I commented with humor, and sometimes rather caustically, on politics in America, taking issue with the President and with the Vice President and ribbing him quite a bit, to the delight of the press, I might say, and I survived.

PB: Was the press in on the joke?

CP: Only three of them.

PB: Only three of them.

CP: Yes, and snowed them, incidentally. [I] also snowed Rufus Youngblood, head of the Secret Service, whom I've known ever since he's been with the President, and he was quite chagrined to learn that I'd taken him in.

Then I entertained the White House Press Photographers banquet. And I entertained at quite a few other functions in Washington, but I've never played the White House.

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PB: Thank you, Cactus. We are very appreciative of your doing this for us.

CP: Could I say one other thing?

PB: Yes. Go ahead.

CP: That I have appreciated the Johnson's confidence in me, in inviting me to do these things, but what I've appreciated the most was that they never once asked me what I was going to say. I had members of the State Department, nervous little would-be administrators who would come up and apprehensively ask me what I was going to say, but the President and Mrs. Johnson never asked me what my remarks would contain.

PB: They often were, as you put it, caustic, were they not?

CP: Well, my mission in life, if I have one, is puncturing pomposity.

PB: Okay, well thank you again, Cactus Pryor.

(End of interview.)

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By Richard Poyer

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