

INTERVIEW III

DATE: January 11, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: MARY RATHER

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Miss Rather's residence, Austin. Texas

Tape 1 of 1

R: In the year 1941 I was working at the Interior Department for Senator [Alvin] Wirtz, who was under secretary of the interior. He had accepted the appointment in January of the year before and had said that he would stay a year. But during that year of 1940 he had to come back to Texas and stay quite a while because of a lawsuit that he had been handling for his law firm before he went to Washington. The lawsuit lasted so long that it was kind of embarrassing to Senator Wirtz to take such a long leave of absence. So when his year was up at the Interior Department he felt he ought to stay a few more months.

Senator [Morris] Sheppard died in April, and Senator Wirtz thought very, very strongly that Congressman Johnson should run for Senator Sheppard's unexpired term. Mr. Johnson wasn't able to make up his mind as quickly as Senator Wirtz made up his that that was what should be done. But in due time--I've forgotten the date, but it was May by then. Was it May 11? Do you know the date?

G: Let's see, I've got it.

R: Or May 21?

G: Well, let's see. The opening campaign speech was on May 3, according to my notes. He

Rather -- III -- 2

announced at the White House on April 22.

R: Yes. Well, I'm thinking about the opening of the campaign then on May 3.

Senator Wirtz resigned as under secretary of the interior and went home, came back to Austin, to participate in Mr. Johnson's campaign. I came a week or two later. We had offices on the top floor of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel. Senator Wirtz had one with a large sitting room for where people could come and meetings and people who needed to see him. There was a bedroom, a telephone in both rooms. I worked and had my typewriter over there. I, of course, answered the phones and I answered the door and I wrote a good deal of mail. Then across the hall John Connally had a similar set-up. His wife, Ida Nell, helped him like I was helping Senator Wirtz.

When the election was over and Mr. Johnson was finally counted out by 1311 votes, he returned to Washington and Senator Wirtz went with him. I moved back to the old law firm of Powell, Wirtz, Rauhaut and Gideon. But Senator Wirtz felt that I needed some kind of a vacation and he needed some kind of a vacation, too, and he told me to take some time off. He was going to take Mrs. Wirtz and go on a trip.

One night, however, while I was at a party Congressman Johnson and Senator Wirtz phoned me from Washington, phoned my residence first and was told where I was, and they got me at the party and wanted to know if I would please come on up there. Congressman Johnson was receiving about three hundred letters a day from all over the state of Texas as a result of his campaign for the United States Senate, and the office staff was just too small to handle that much mail. I was asked to come up for a month and try to help them at least get caught up or stay until they could hire some more people.

Rather -- III -- 3

Senator Wirtz got on the phone, too, and that's when he told me that he had told Mr. Johnson that it would be all right with him, that he was going to take Mrs. Wirtz and go on a trip, and that if I would come up there, why, it was all right with him. So I didn't get the vacation; I went back to Washington.

G: Didn't you stay with the Johnsons at first, or did you stay at the Dodge Hotel? Where did you stay when you first went to Washington?

R: Well, when I first went to Washington--you mean when I went with Senator Wirtz?

G: No, this time.

R: This time? I don't remember. I probably stayed at the Dodge Hotel. It was close to the Capitol. It could be that I stayed at the Johnsons' house, because I was just supposed to be there temporarily. I don't remember. I think they were living in an apartment though at the Kennedy-Warren at that time. I don't imagine I stayed with them then. I imagine I stayed at the Dodge.

G: The Woodley Park Towers, they stayed there, too, I think in 1941.

R: That's true. They must have stayed--oh, I know they were living at the Kennedy-Warren in 1940. In 1941 they moved across the street--it was just across the street--to the Woodley Park Tower. I did live there for six months with Mrs. Johnson--or maybe not the whole six months, but at least part of the six months--while Mr. Johnson was in the navy.

It turned out, of course, that I stayed in Washington more than a month and then it was finally decided that I would stay--that was, well, I've forgotten what month that was, but at any rate it was finally agreed that I would stay until Congress recessed for

Rather -- III -- 4

Christmas and we came home. Then we would open an office in the federal building here. The old federal building is where the United States Federal Court is on 8th and Colorado, right across from the Brown Building. So we came home and we started the office there. I think I was the only person that came with him; I may be wrong. Because we didn't have a long time to stay here. Anyway, we came so many times that I can't remember.

But Senator Wirtz' law firm was across the street in the Brown Building, and when Mr. Johnson would go out and do a little traveling around the Tenth District, if I could keep up with my work I would slip out sometime and go talk to Senator Wirtz about when I was coming back to work for him. I was very much torn. I thought it was exciting being in Washington. I had had just enough of it by staying there from January 1940 until May of 1941 to feel that I would like to go back. But on the other hand. I've always been crazy about living in Austin and I wanted to be here, too. I had a very, very hard time making up my mind. Senator Wirtz would tell me that it was my choice and if I wanted to come back he would certainly be pleased if I did. But on the other hand, he wanted me to be happy and he thought maybe I just hadn't quite had my fill of Washington and that I must think about it from my standpoint. If I felt like I wanted to go back, why, go back.

Then I would talk to Congressman Johnson and he took just an entirely different view on the matter. He wasn't that generous. He wouldn't say, "Well now, Mary, you stay here if you'll be happy, or you come back if you'll be happy." He kept saying, "You've got to come back. There's too much work there, and I haven't got enough

Rather -- III -- 5

employees." I'd go back to my office and I'd cry and I couldn't think what to do, and then I'd go back and see Senator Wirtz again and I'd cry over there. It was just awful and silly. I was a full-grown woman; I should have been able to make up my mind. But I wanted to be both places, you see. And I liked working for both men. They weren't alike.

G: What made you decide to go with Congressman Johnson?

R: I guess it's just one of those things like they've always said about Mr. Johnson: he'd get right down at you and he'd persuade you.

G: Where were you when you received news of Pearl Harbor, do you remember?

R: My cousin Ben Powell was in the army reserve; he was a graduate of VMI [Virginia Military Institute]. He was living down here in Austin and practicing law with that same law firm that I was talking about a while ago. Powell, Wirtz, Rauhaut and Gideon. He had received several summons from the War Department asking him if he would like to go on active duty. He had turned them all down, but in the fall of 1940 he got a different kind. It didn't give him any choice; it told him to come back. And so he did. He and his wife and his two little girls [came back]. I believe he had two little girls; they're just about eleven months apart, so they were both babies. He was living in Washington on duty at the War Department, and I was spending the weekend out at their house. They really weren't living in Washington; they were across the river in Arlington. Wasn't Pearl Harbor on a Sunday morning?

G: Yes.

R: The phone rang early Sunday morning, and it was the War Department calling Ben and telling him to come at once. Then as soon as he hung up, the phone rang back and it was

Rather -- III -- 6

for me, telling me to get to the Capitol right away, to Mr. Johnson's office, Congressman Johnson's office. So I rode in in the car with Ben as far as the War Department. That was the old War Department, those old buildings from the First World War. Then I caught a taxi and went on to the Capitol.

Just as I got in the door, almost before I could sit down at my desk, Captain--I believe he was a captain at that time, he later became an admiral--John Gingrich came in the door all dressed up in his navy uniform and his gold braid all over him. He was a beautiful sight, but he was kind of scary, too, because that was the first time I'd ever seen him except in civilian clothes. But we were at war and you were supposed to be in your uniform, and Ben had left his house in his uniform. Captain Gingrich was--oh, goodness, I don't know whether he was lieutenant commander then or not, he could have been that--oh I mean a full commander, I guess he was that instead of a captain, but he became a captain and admiral later. He had come from the Secretary--he was an aide to the Secretary of the Navy and he had come up because Mr. Johnson was on the Naval Affairs Committee and was in the naval reserve. He had come up to give Mr. Johnson a report, whatever he was allowed to say about the attack at Pearl Harbor. Of course, Mr. Johnson had gotten there before I did, just a little bit before I did, but he was closer.

G: What was LBJ's mood?

R: Oh, I don't know how to describe that. There was a great feeling of awe and tenseness, because nothing like that had ever happened before. I couldn't even think of anything to say. I just sat around almost struck dumb. But the phones were ringing and that was keeping me busy.

Rather -- III -- 7

G: What was he doing? He met with Gingrich, that was the first thing you remember?

R: Evidently Mr. Johnson had gotten a call at his home and so he came racing down to the Capitol. Also, he had called me or told somebody to call me to come on in from Virginia. I'm sure that Walter was there in the office and I expect that O. J. [Weber] and Norman [Heine] had gotten there, too. I was probably the last to arrive.

G: Did he say anything about what Gingrich told him, what he reported to him?

R: No, I don't know that he did. I don't think so. I think it was probably confidential information. I suppose all the members of the Naval Affairs [Committee] were given that information, but you didn't just tell everybody.

G: What else did he do that day? Did he have a staff meeting?

R: I don't remember. I don't remember whether we stayed there all day or whether we all went back home. I just don't remember.

G: Of course, the agencies were closed, weren't they? I mean, it was Sunday.

R: Yes, everything was closed. I was just trying to think. After such a horrible thing had taken place, we couldn't just sit there and start answering mail, you know, routine mail that came in all the time. I know the phone rang a good deal. I don't know where Mr. Johnson went from the office, whether he went to meet with other senators and talk to them, or whether he went home. But it would be more characteristic of him though to have gone and conferred with--I don't mean senators, he was a congressman then, but he was on the Naval Affairs Committee--some of the other members or maybe he had gone to talk to Mr. Rayburn. I'm just guessing though.

G: He was the first member of Congress to go on active duty. Do you recall his--

Rather -- III -- 8

R: I just recall that he did say in the 1941 campaign something to the effect that if our boys have to go and fight, [he would go, too]. See, I think, most everybody was kind of anticipating maybe getting into a war, but just didn't expect to get all the ships bombed out of Pearl Harbor. He had said though in his campaign that he would go, too. And he did; he went right away. I can't tell you any details except that I know he went to the White House and talked to the President about it, and I'm sure he had to talk to members of Congress about taking six months leave of absence. The reason it was limited to six months was because the President did that. He told Warren Magnuson and Lyndon Johnson that he thought that they were really needed up on the Hill at the Capitol. But he did give them each a mission which he said he would like to have done for himself, and Mr. Johnson did his and I'm sure Magnuson did his.

G: The first thing I guess that he did in uniform was go through some sort of training procedure or preliminary briefings in Washington every day.

R: Yes.

G: Do you remember that period at the War Department or the Navy Department, wherever it was?

R: I don't know much about what it was. I know that he did something like that and that he would come by the office later in the day to see how we were getting along.

G: Then he left Washington and came here for the holiday I think and spent Christmas with his family. Did you come back to Texas then? I know Mrs. Johnson came with him.

R: I don't remember whether I did or didn't. I nearly always did though, unless he just came for two or three days, because it was necessary that somebody come with him. It was

Rather -- III -- 9

usually more than just one person. Anyway, I had a place to live here and anybody else having to come suddenly would have to find a place to sleep and eat.

G: He came here and I think spent Christmas and then went to the West Coast.

R: Listen, I want to take it back. I did not come home with him at all, because I remember that was the first Christmas--I'm thinking now--in my life that I did not spend it with my family. But Christmas night my parents and my brother called me. They had come up here to Austin for Christmas with our relatives here, and then had gone back home and it was a small town and everybody had a post office box. Daddy went and checked his post office box before he took my mother and my brother home, and my brother had received orders from the 8th Naval District in New Orleans to report to duty. I remember that now. And they phoned me to tell me.

G: Well, do you remember anything about his trip out to the West Coast?

R: No, I don't remember anything except that we kept him informed; we wrote him letters every day. We left a wide margin on the left-hand side so he could write his comments by each paragraph, and we tried to tell him about everything of importance that he ought to know about or that he would want to know about that had happened in the office.

(Interruption)

G: Let's just talk for a little while about the congressional office during his absence. I gather Mrs. Johnson went out there with him at first to the West Coast.

R: I believe she was with him a little bit of the time, but then she devoted herself to--well, she learned how to take shorthand. I don't ever remember seeing her type, but I saw her making notes a lot of the time in shorthand. She came to the office and stayed every day.

Rather -- III -- 10

I really do think that the office ran very well. I know we missed Mr. Johnson and there weren't any of us who could do everything he could do. But we kept it going and she did it wonderfully. She would take the calls from constituents in Texas. She saw all the mail. She would phone to any government agency that a constituent called or wrote about, and she would talk to people who were in charge of that. It was not easy for her because it was something she wasn't used to doing. She's a very modest lady and a very smart lady, and she did it well, but I mean she felt like, "What am I doing here?" But she stayed all the time, and she did a fine job.

G: I gather when she was first going to school taking the shorthand and whatnot that she only worked part-time in the office and then after, as she put it, she graduated herself she started working full time.

R: Well, yes. She would come right straight on over to the office. That was before the Johnsons had any children, so she didn't have the responsibility of the little girls.

G: Did she assume more and more authority in the office as she became familiar with it?

R: Well, she did things with more ease.

G: But who was in charge of the office?

R: Well, you've almost got to say she was, because Walter [?] kept on and O. J.[?] kept on and Norman [?] kept on as long as they could, but it wasn't very long before they started getting orders also to report to the air force or the navy or something. She was just a little bit shy about what she was doing, but she did it just like she does everything.

G: Well, since the Congressman himself was gone, he couldn't vote, could he?

R: No, no.

Rather -- III -- 11

G: How did you deal with that problem of not being able to vote?

R: I don't remember. My guess is though that we just probably didn't mention that, but if anything came up with regard to something that was pending in a committee, why, we would just call the committee clerk or somebody over there and find out what the situation was, when it was going to come up for hearing or whether it had or what action had been taken, and we'd write back and say it's such-and-such.

G: Could you ever arrange pairs while he was absent and have him vote in pair, or since he was gone for such a long period . . . ?

R: Well, maybe we could have done that but Walter would have been it, not I, and I don't remember if he did or didn't. I don't think we could though, because you see, if he was just on a trip down here to Texas to check over his district and an important vote came up, he could phone back to Washington to his office or to somebody and arrange to be paired. But he was on a leave of absence from the Senate [House], so I don't know that he could be paired.

G: While he was out there working on developing these manpower training programs, I gather that he became more and more discouraged about the training situation and about his own job there and felt like he wasn't being as useful as he could be elsewhere. Did you have that impression?

R: Well, I don't know I had that impression then, but I knew afterwards that he really wanted to get where some action was. That's how he finally got sent off to the Philippines to see General [Douglas] MacArthur. I don't know what that involved. I just know that Roosevelt and the Navy Department gave him that assignment. It was probably

Rather -- III -- 12

something that was top secret.

(Interruption)

G: Let me just ask you generally about the life in Washington during the war. Did you have a problem with say, allocations of gasoline? I know you had rationing.

R: Well, I didn't own a car, so I don't remember anything about that. But there were lots of problems. It was awful living in Washington because there were so many people there. Many of them had been called to duty there by one of the military services. If you tried to go to the picture show, the line went down to the corner and halfway down the next block. You'd stand in line finally to get up to the window. And the restaurants were that way. It was hard to find places to live. If you got hold of a place, why, you didn't want to let it go. If you had to leave town and be gone you'd let somebody else live in it while you were gone so you could hold your lease. Then the Navy Department, and I presume the other services did, too--oh, you've just never seen so many uniforms, and all the men looked so handsome; it didn't make any difference what age they were or what kind of uniform they had on. Then there was a movement to get all the young men overseas or on a battleship or stationed out of Washington.

G: This was something that President Johnson stressed, wasn't it, getting the able-bodied people out of desk jobs?

R: Well, he was made chairman of a subcommittee of the Naval Affairs Committee, which I guess still had to do with manpower, but I've forgotten the name of it. But at least as far as the navy was concerned, his committee was wanting to get the young ones out of Washington and at sea. And they did it pretty well.

Rather -- III -- 13

G: He was also concerned. I gather, with absenteeism in the contractors.

R: I remember that as a word, but see he had a full staff of people working for him on that subcommittee. We in his congressional office didn't have anything to do with it.

Sometimes we knew what was going on, and we knew the names of the different subjects that they were working on, and we knew Donald Cook and Harry Coles and several others that were working on the staff of the subcommittee.

G: Did Mrs. Johnson continue to put in work in the office after he came back from overseas?

R: I don't think so. I don't remember that she did.

G: I guess they bought their house on Thirtieth Place during the war. There is an indication that she did a lot of house hunting, that she wanted to get a house.

R: Yes. They must have bought it in--well, I don't know what year. It could have been 1943.

G: I think it was late 1942 or early 1943, something like that.

R: Or it could have been a little sooner, yes, in 1942.

G: Do you recall how that came about?

R: No, I just knew they were looking for a house and that they found one. Just one funny thing that I remember. I don't know how he heard about it, maybe he read about it in the newspaper in the want ads. Somebody was going to have an auction or a sale of furniture in a house, and he rushed out there and bought a whole bunch of it. Mrs. Johnson nearly flipped.

(Interruption)

You asked me about why did they buy the radio station, and of course, I don't really

Rather -- III -- 14

know; I'll just have to kind of guess and put two and two together. She was a graduate in journalism at the University of Texas. Newspaper work and radio work are a little bit similar. He often said, in fact he would say it nearly every two years when he was re-elected to Congress, that that was going to be his last term, and he wasn't going to run again. But he always did. He said more than once in my presence that what he would like to do would be buy a newspaper, not in a big city, not a great big newspaper. But he thought it would be nice if he and Mrs. Johnson owned a newspaper, and with her interest in journalism it sounded real logical. He used to say, too, that he might try to have an insurance agency. And it did make a nice, nice picture, living in a nice but a smaller town, having an insurance agency and having a newspaper.

Then this radio station here became available, and it really didn't cost very much, but of course prices were different in those days. I don't know how they heard about it. But he always did everything quickly, and while other people were haggling around trying to decide what to do or trying to get them to lower the price or something, why, he and Mrs. Johnson just went in and bought it.

G: I gather Bill Drake was considering buying it. Did you hear that?

R: Well, I had forgotten it, but now that you mention it he was, and certainly Mr. Kingsbery wanted it. Kingsbery, I've forgotten his initials right now, but I believe that he wanted it very much. John Kingsbery?

G: Do you think Mr. Johnson might have been buying it in part for self-defense, to keep the other people from buying it?

R: Well, I suppose that they thought it would be a good idea from that angle, but I think they

Rather -- III -- 15

just wanted it for the reasons I said. Because she stayed here then for ages and ages, or she would come back to Washington for a while and then she would come back here. She stayed in that station all day long and learned everything she could about it. It was a good investment from their standpoint.

G: Did he consider buying or creating a second newspaper in Austin before he bought the station?

R: I don't remember that he did at all. Have you ever heard that he did?

G: Well, that he was considering it. Of course, that would have placed him in the competition with Charlie Marsh, wouldn't it?

R: Yes. And also Mr. West--not Wesley West, but Wesley and Jim West's father--had had a newspaper here in Austin trying to compete with the *American-Statesman*, and he had lost money and couldn't make a go of it. I just don't know that Mr. Johnson or Mrs. Johnson would have thought about trying to have a newspaper here. I think they would have wanted to have one somewhere else maybe.

G: Did they mention any particular town that they'd like to live in?

R: No, I don't remember that. And of course, I don't guess Johnson City would have been--they would have wanted a bigger newspaper at least than you have in Johnson City. He loved being out there, but . . .

G: Could you imagine him though leaving politics and taking on the life of an insurance salesman?

R: No, and I never did believe him, that he wouldn't run again in two years. But I do know this and I know it well, that after all those years as congressman and senator and vice

Rather -- III -- 16

president and president, he was very glad that he didn't have to run anymore and that he could live out there at the Ranch in the country like he had told everybody for years and years and years that he wanted to do, and no one would believe him. But he genuinely did.

I can't ever forget when he first managed to make the trade with his elderly aunt who was living out there in the house that we call the LBJ Ranch house now. She was very old, and he worried about her, and the house needed so much attention and everything. He thought she would be better off living in Johnson City with neighbors and her niece and nephew and other people that lived in [town] instead of alone in the country. When he persuaded her to move in to town and made the trade with her to buy from her that ranch house and the two hundred acres of land and let her have the house in Johnson City, he was the happiest man on earth. I remember one time Mr. Johnson was expounding about his pigs or his cows, his hogs or his something, or that he was plowing the land and that they were finding Indian arrowheads out there, he was always telling us something about the Ranch, Mr. [Sam] Rayburn nudged me and said, "I sure am glad Lyndon has got something else to talk about besides politics." (Laughter) And it was, it was real refreshing to see him care so much about it. But I guess when you get in politics it's just kind of like getting on a treadmill, you can hardly get off. You just keep thinking, well, I'll just run one more time. I don't imagine many people just voluntarily decide, well, I'll not run for the House or the Senate or whatever they are [running for]. They must have some compelling reason.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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MARY RATHER

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