INTERVIEW VII

DATE: September 8, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: MARY RATHER

INTERVIEWER Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Miss Rather's residence, Gonzales, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: I am going to ask you about the Disney Amendment, which proposed to raise the price of crude oil about thirty-five cents a barrel.

R: I'm not going to be able to say anything specific about it but my recollection is that the price of a barrel of oil was always coming up because the people in the business wanted more money for it, naturally. Mr. Johnson was trying to support price control, and he would vote against it. You know, there were times when a barrel of oil sold for thirty cents a barrel or even less, and my goodness, when it became five dollars a barrel it was amazing. It probably sells for thirty-five dollars a barrel now or more. I just remember though that he felt that we had to keep prices under control, and that was a big problem everywhere, in his district I mean. People who were in the chicken business wanted more money for chickens, more money per pound, more money for eggs per dozen, and of course the farmers wanted more money.

G: Did this vote cost him support of big oil later on?

R: I'm sure it did, yes. It was a long time before anybody in the oil business wanted to vote

for him. Maybe a few people who were smaller and were independents and maybe knew him personally or something, but big oil companies were not for him.

G: Had they tried to persuade him to vote with them on this amendment, do you know?

R: I guess so. We got letters all the time, you know, for and against, and like David Gray [?], for example, stayed in Washington for years, he and Mrs. Gray. He was a lobbyist for Humble, I think, and he was a very nice man and Mr. Johnson liked him. Mr. Gray would come by our office, and sometimes I'd eat dinner downtown with Mr. and Mrs. Gray. We were friendly, and Mr. Johnson didn't dislike him, and goodness knows, he wished the president of Humble Oil and Refining and the Pews with Sun Oil and everybody else would vote for him, but he was trying to hold prices down was my recollection. If you'll shut the machine off, I'll tell you something funny.

(Interruption)

Well, I remember the Buck Taylor campaign because there wasn't much to it. He was a big talker and a raver and a ranter, and he really didn't say anything of importance. He tried to, you know, destroy Mr. Johnson in all kind of ways that were untrue, but we ignored him. I don't remember that we paid any attention to him hardly, and I don't remember--well, Mr. Johnson probably went to Texas and went around his district a little bit, and we might have had one rally, but that's all the attention we paid to him.

G: Yes. Well, where do you think the strategy came from to ignore the opposition?

R: Taylor? Because he wasn't anybody, and everybody told Mr. Johnson that he wasn't and [said] you don't have to worry about him and that no one's paying any attention to him.

G: Did you feel like somebody was behind Taylor, that somebody was backing him?

R: There might have been, but I don't remember who it was. But even his backers knew that he didn't have a chance. I really don't think he had much backing, but I can't remember.

G: Was there ever thought that Tom Miller might run against Mr. Johnson?

R: Well, Miller would blow his top sometimes, and he talked a great deal. He knew everybody in Austin, and Austin was a much smaller town then. Every day Mayor Miller would start down at the bottom of Congress Avenue and walk up to the Capitol and come across the street and walk back down the other side of the street. It took him all morning nearly because he stopped everywhere and spoke to everybody and expressed his views. He was a good man but he would sometimes be kind of childish, and sometimes he would get mad at Mr. Johnson because the price of eggs wasn't high enough, we'll say, and he would threaten all the time that he was going to run, but he never did. I never thought he would and I don't think Mr. Johnson thought he would either. He was a nice man, though, he was. He was a sweet man, but he sure was a big talker and a loud talker.

G: Now, I have a note that you went back to Washington after the campaign, after the Buck Taylor [race].

R: What year was that? I don't--

G: 1944.

R: --even know where I am. Well, I must not have gone for very long because I did come back home. I suppose I went--about what time?

G: It was August.

R: August of 1944. Oh, I'm in December 1944.

G: It was mid-August according to [the 1944 chronology].

R: Well, the only thing I can think of is that I probably went back just for a short time to get my clothes and my things and maybe help break in somebody, tell them something about the work in the office. Maybe they were interviewing people.

G: Did Dorothy Nichols replace you?

R: Well, she probably did. Dorothy would work, and then she wouldn't work and she'd miss [the] work, and she would always come back when needed. And if that was the case, of course she knew what to do; I wouldn't have had to have done anything, it seems to me that Dorothy Plyler went up there one time, but I don't know whether this was the year or not. But how long did I stay?

G: It doesn't say. It doesn't indicate, but I guess you didn't stay long, because in two or three weeks there's an indication that the Congress had adjourned and all the staff was in Austin except Dorothy Nichols [inaudible].

R: Well, I just probably went to get my things and to tell anybody anything I could that would help them in the office.

It must have been sometime along there that I went--when did I go to work in Houston [for Judge James Elkins]?

(Interruption)

He [Elkins] had become disillusioned kind of, with Roosevelt, you know, and the Democrats, although he wasn't in out-and-out rebellion. And he quit going to national conventions and state conventions because of his age and all that. But he liked Mr. Johnson, you know that because you've told me you came across that letter, and one day Judge talked to me at length about it. He had heard a lot of things about Mr. Johnson and

how Mr. Johnson could get things done, and so he liked him, I'm glad to say.

G: Let's see. The federal judge in Austin died--

R: Well, who was be?

G: I don't remember his name to tell you the truth, but there was a vacancy and there was an effort to get Senator [Alvin] Wirtz appointed. Do you remember that?

R: I can't much remember it although I guess it happened. Uncle Ben [Powell] was the one that would have loved to have been a federal judge. I don't know that Senator Wirtz wanted to be one, but he might have. But I can't think who died and then who got it.

G: I don't remember. It wasn't Senator Wirtz.

R: No.

G: Did you see Mr. Johnson in Houston during that period that you were down there? Did he come down?

R: I don't think so. He could have come.

G: You know that he did go to Europe at the close of World War II with Ed Hebert.

R: What was that [for], to find surplus property? Well, I just have a faint recollection about that, although I didn't have anything to do with it because I was in Houston. I just have a recollection that he went over there with a committee, the Armed Services [Naval Affairs] Committee, and I don't know whether they were looking for all kinds of surplus property or just army property or navy property or what.

G: I think it probably was naval material, property that could be used elsewhere, maybe on the Pacific front.

R: Where all did he go? I haven't even found it.

G: Well, they went to Paris, Rome, London, Munich.

R: Where, Munich? I think [his sister] Josefa's husband [Willard White] might still have been over there. He looked him up, but I'm not sure about that. He was in Germany. Maybe he hadn't quite been released yet.

Oh, and Roosevelt died.

G: He was in Washington when that happened, LBJ was.

R: Well, he was back. I'm reading the next part where the miners had another strike. John L. Lewis, he called one every year.

(Interruption)

G: Let's go into this.

R: In the race Hardy Hollers ran against Mr. Johnson, we opened an office in an old building. We opened an office in an old building down Congress Avenue about two blocks or three blocks below Scarbroughs, which is at 6th and Congress, and Hardy Hollers had an office also on Congress Avenue, I think. But he was claiming a great military record during the war, and we found out he never had seen any fighting and he had spent the whole war nearly in Paris at the Ritz, or somewhere, the most beautiful, expensive hotel in Paris. In 1948 when I was in Paris I went and looked at the hotel; it didn't look like a place to me that anybody did any work.

G: He was supposed to have been one of the prosecutors in the Nuremberg Trials. Do you remember it?

R: Yes, slightly. I mostly remember--wasn't Leon Jaworski the head of it, the Nuremberg Trials? But, anyway, it just didn't look like Hardy Hollers had done very much although

he was bragging a lot about it, and of course, he was saying that Mr. Johnson didn't do anything. That was a problem, because Mr. Johnson was on duty six months and then had to make the choice of staying in the Congress or going into the military, and I think Roosevelt and other people thought he was more valuable in the Congress than he could have been in the navy. We didn't ignore Hardy Hollers like we ignored that other fellow, Taylor, Buck Taylor.

It was a mean campaign though. Hardy Hollers accused Mr. Johnson of many, many things, and that is when all the rumors started, I believe, in that campaign, about how rich Mrs. Johnson was and how rich her father was. Her father was a rich man, but my Lord, it had taken him fifty or more years to acquire all of the properties he had, and living over there in the country in Karnack he didn't spend any of it to speak of. I think Hollers was trying to say that Mr. Johnson had gotten, we'll say, lucrative--use that word--contracts for Lady Bird's father, Mr. [T. J.] Taylor, with the federal government, and Mr. Johnson hadn't done that. He wasn't anything but a congressman. How could he be effective over in East Texas in getting the federal government to do something with some of Mr. Taylor's land? It just happened because that was the land that the government needed.

It was a very, very vicious campaign. I had a cousin in Austin, Florence Rather, [who] built an apartment house. It was a small one. It was about four stories high maybe; I've forgotten the name of it. But every time anything happened in Austin, why, the word would get out that it belonged to Lyndon Johnson. He was supposed to have owned that apartment house, and Florence used to laugh about it and she said, "It's my

apartment house." (Laughter)

G: Was this Travis Apartments?

R: Yes, that was the name of it. That was the name of it. And Florence had married my daddy's cousin, Roy, and he was dead. Florence was a good businesswoman and she made lots of money after her husband died, doing things like that.

G: Mr. Johnson didn't own that apartment?

R: He never did own it. He never thought about it! Something else that somebody owned--I stopped there one day--it seemed to me like it was a filling station, and the people were saying, "This is Lyndon Johnson's filling station," but it wasn't at all. (Laughter) Anything new that came up, it seemed like they would say belonged to him.

So finally he had this big rally in Wooldridge Park. Do you know about this?

G: Tell me about it.

R: He got all kinds of records of--I don't think we bad Xerox machines in those days; I think we had to type them, make copies. Oh, I guess we did have something. It wasn't a Xerox, but it was another kind of machine and you could make copies. They weren't as good as Xerox. He went to Wooldridge Park that evening for the rally, and he had a stack about a foot high of papers, all kinds of deeds and contracts and everything, including Lady Bird's father's properties, and telling the whole story about all of it. And his speech at Wooldridge Park was loaded with people. We had a fat lady, a real fat lady, who sang like Kate Smith, and she was part of the entertainment, and somebody else who had a band.

Anyway, the crowd listened very attentively, and Mr. Johnson went through it

all--he didn't read it--but he went over everything, and he said, "Now, it's all up here on this platform with me. I want anybody that is interested to come and read it." And he said, "I'm going to leave it here when I go," or something like that. Nobody came up and read it, and it did help to clear things up. Ladies who were working in Mr. Johnson's campaign, working with the women's part of it, the women voters in Austin, they carried it around, I think. One woman--I've forgotten who, Bess Beeman, I guess--was very, very strong for Mr. Johnson, and she told everybody what was in those papers, and eventually it died down. Of course, there were some people who--

G: Do you think that this affected him in subsequent years with regard to investments and business dealings? That he would tend to shy away from things, even if they involved no problem themselves, if they might allow people to jump to some conclusion that there was a conflict of interest?

R: I don't think so. He always, as far back as I can remember, told me that the things he wanted to own were land and bank stock, and not big national banks but small banks. Like he wanted to own stock in the Johnson City bank, and why not? It was his home town. And he liked the idea of owning land and owning bank stock.

G: Did he say why he liked bank stock?

R: Well, he said this one time. My Uncle Ben had a great deal of money, and the only thing he ever put money in was land and bank stocks. And Mr. Johnson told me many times, "Your Uncle Ben has the right idea." But I don't know whether that influenced him or not, but I think it was surprising that be knew what Uncle Ben invested in. Uncle Ben liked to have bank stock, and he liked to be on bank boards, and he liked to have land. I

don't mean ranches like Mr. Johnson. Rent property, real estate, was what Uncle Ben put money in. Now, Mr. Johnson wanted land. I don't remember him buying any houses like Uncle Ben did or office buildings.

G: Do you know where Mr. Johnson got the idea to put all his records forward and just deflate the issue by allowing anyone who wanted to to come up and read them, how he came up with that kind of response?

R: No, but I am sure he had some advisers--well, like Senator Wirtz, for example, and sometimes Uncle Ben was in on them, and there were others that he [consulted]. I guess just between them they got the idea, just lay it all out on the table and say, "Come look at it." The interesting thing was that nobody came up and looked at it, but it was a good idea.

G: Anything else on the 1946 campaign?

R: Well, let's see. I remember he was trying to keep whatever he could, whatever military establishments there were in Texas. I don't mean just an army camp, but anything--he was trying to keep whatever was in his district from getting shut down on account of the economy. It was worrying a lot of people.

G: How did he normally do this? What could he do to help keep it open?

R: Well, you can't do a whole lot because the military has got its own ideas, definitely, and you're not supposed to high-pressure them. What you could do though was to present them with all the facts and advantages that they would have if they did such and such. On the other hand, some other place might have better advantages, you never did know. But he did try to help his district, like Camp Swift at Bastrop, and there was something

over at San Marcos, and then over in Georgetown they had an ROTC unit in connection with the university over there. I don't remember whether it was a naval or army ROTC unit. And other things like that in other parts of his district, if he could get anything for them [he did]. All of the other members were doing their dead—level best for their little towns particularly, and the big towns, too.

(Laughter) I was just reading this note. Dorothy Plyler--you see, she's in Austin--writes LBJ in Washington, I guess he was--Mr. Johnson couldn't stay down there and campaign the whole time; he spent most of that election time, campaigning time, in Washington--that Hollers had attended an American Legion meeting in Bastrop several days ago and was circulating the story that LBJ had swapped Camp Swift for Camp Hood. (Laughter) We got Camp Swift and Camp Hood both, but Hood wasn't in our district. It's up near--where, Marlin? I don't think Marlin.

G: Killeen, I guess.

R: Up near Waco.

You know, back to Mr. Johnson and owning land and hoping some day to have enough money to buy land and also bank stock, the only other thing that he said to me--and he said it many times; he would say it nearly every year he got re-elected--[was] that he wasn't going to run again, that what he wanted to do was go back to Texas and live in a small town, and maybe Johnson City, he never did say. He'd just say maybe Johnson City. That Lady Bird, with her journalism degree, could buy the newspaper and she could run the newspaper, and he would like to have an insurance company. And he said that lots of times to me.

G: Why do you think the insurance company interested him?

R: I think he just thought that it was a nice business to have in a small town, and I have no connection between a newspaper and an insurance business, but it was just an idea he had, and he said it lots of times. When he finally did retire, though, I think he was just--it was still ranch land and small banks. I don't know that he invested in any insurance company. But he could have, I don't know.

G: Did be ever talk about wanting to teach?

R: I don't think so. He might have, but I don't remember it.

Oh, Lord! Thirteen people running for governor of Texas when [Coke] Stevenson said he wouldn't run for reelection.

(Interruption)

G: Let's talk about Mrs. Johnson's role in the [1946] campaign.

R: Well, I was just going to say that she went to Texas before be could get away from Congress, and she went traveling around by car with some other lady and a driver going with her, and stopping in places and speaking for her husband. You see, you quote her here on page 12 [of the 1946 chronology] that she gets a list of the women workers in the Tenth Congressional District that worked in the 1941 campaign, and she's getting ready to campaign herself, she says, in that letter.

G: Was she shy about doing that in 1946?

R: No, not as much by a great deal as she was in the 1941 campaign. It was terribly hard for her to get out in the beginning and stop people on the street and ask them to vote for her husband, or even go to a meeting of women and stand up on the platform and speak of

her husband, but she would grit her teeth and do it. She really would, and it was amazing, because she had never done anything like that before and had lived a quiet and sheltered life of growing up. Even in college she was intellectual and serious and not frivolous--of course, campaigning isn't frivolous. Out she preferred to stay out of the limelight, but she did it for her husband, and she would have done anything for him.

G: Was there anyone who would advise her on speaking or meeting with groups of people or that sort of thing, some coach or--?

R: Well, we had a big campaign headquarters in 1941 and in 1948, and we had a woman's division, and there were several women that were political-minded and came to help. And the men in the campaign, too, would talk to her and suggest things. I know she'd come talk to Senator Wirtz, remember that very well. And as time went on, I mean to tell you she was valuable, she really was.

Oh, here it is: "LBJ Headquarters Opens at 410 Congress Avenue. Work will be directed by Bob Phinney." That's that place we had when we were--

G: What was Bob Phinney's role in the campaign?

R: Well, he was the manager of it, at least of the Austin headquarters. But the Austin headquarters was always the center and would send out material to other places in the district. Just like one campaign, John [Connally] was the--well, the 1941 one, where John and Senator Wirtz together ran it, and then another campaign when we had a great big old two-story house down on about 7th or 8th Street, John and Claude Wild were in charge of it.

(Interruption)

G: I was going to introduce the topic of Aunt Effie [Pattillo] by saying that she was desperately ill at this time, and Mrs. Johnson wanted to spend some time with her.

R: Mrs. Johnson was very devoted to her because her mother had died, Mrs. Johnson's mother had died, when Mrs. Johnson was about six years old, and Aunt Effie came out from Alabama to run the house and take care of the little girl. They lived very quietly way out in the country, but Aunt Effie was a refined, lovely little old lady, and they would take trips in the summer, and they would go to Dallas or to Shreveport--I think Karnack is just about halfway between Dallas and Shreveport--they'd go shopping over there. They were very close, very close, a niece and her aunt, and it went on for many years. And by the time Lady Bird was grown and married to Mr. Johnson, Aunt Effie had become exceedingly old and frail. I remember one time, at least, she came to Washington, and Lady Bird kept her for many, many months. She lived there on 30th Place with the Johnsons, and then, of course, Aunt Effie would go back to Alabama, too.

G: What was Aunt Effie like? You describe her as being little and frail.

R: I don't remember her as being tall at all, maybe no taller than Lady Bird, which--Lady Bird's not very tall. She's two or three inches taller than I am, but I'm just five feet even. And Aunt Effie was fragile-looking, small bones and slender, thin, and sweet and gentle. Of course, after Lady Bird was grown and living in Washington with Mr. Johnson when he was secretary to the congressman and then he was congressman himself, Aunt Effie would come for visits. But also Lady Bird would go visit Aunt Effie, too, in Alabama, and there at the last when you're talking about, I remember she went and stayed a long, long time. I guess she stayed until Aunt Effie died. I don't ever remember--I may have

stopped in Alabama once with Lady Bird. We used to drive back and forth from Washington to Texas when Congress wasn't in session. I would usually ride in the car with Bird, or we would ride back. But I did see Aunt Effie a good many times because she would come to Washington to visit.

G: How did she influence Mrs. Johnson?

R: In ways that a mother would influence a child. She helped mold her life and teach her appreciation of the theater and of opera and music.

G: She was interested in the arts?

R: Yes, and all things ladylike, you see. And a little girl needed someone like that in her life. Of course, Aunt Effie was an old maid and never had had any children of her own, but she did know how ladies behaved.

G: Was she also interested in nature and flowers?

R: I don't recall that. I feel like Mrs. Johnson learned about flowers and all things growing and the beauty that surrounds you just from observation, living out there in the country, the quiet life that she led. It wasn't like I grew up. There was a house on each side of the house I lived in, and there were children in each one of them, and you ran out the front door or the back door, and you ran through the yards and you skated and you rode bicycles, and you played hide-and-seek. I don't think that Lady Bird had that kind of--any playmates, to speak of.

She was a very independent girl. I don't know that Aunt Effie made her independent; I think her daddy made her independent. You didn't have to have a license to drive a car in those days. When you learned, if you were twelve years old, you could

drive it, and she--not at the age of twelve, she didn't do this--but she was driving to Dallas and Shreveport to buy clothes, and maybe Aunt Effie was visiting and went with her and might have somewhat influenced her. And Aunt Effie read books also, and Lady Bird has read since she was--well, I think Bird started to school maybe when she was younger than most children, [who] start at age six. And she has read all of her life. Someone who knew her when they were children, although this person was older than Lady Bird, told me that she drove up to the Brick House one day and Lady Bird was sitting out on the front porch. She was about eight or nine years old and she was reading a book. She was sitting in a rocker, and the book was *Ben Hur*. Well, I never read *Ben Hur* in all my life. I know a little bit about it, but it's a very thick book, and Bird read it when she was about nine years old.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VII

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MARY RATHER

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