

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WILL ROGERS

PB: October 9, 1968. I'm in the home of Will Rogers of Bastrop, the former mayor of this city, who has spent many years working with Congressman Johnson, Senator Johnson, Vice-President and President Johnson down through the years. First of all, Mr. Rogers--Will Rogers, they call you, don't they?

WR: That's better.

PB: Mr. Will, how long were you mayor of Bastrop?

WR: I was with the mayor's office twenty-two years. I was in sixteen and out ten and went back to serve six.

PB: During that period, I believe your first contact with Mr. Johnson was when he was first elected to Congress, is that right?

WR: That's right.

PB: Can you tell us how that contact came about?

WR: No, I can't tell you just exactly, unless I was going to put in had to build a schoolhouse. You see, at that time, the school was under the supervision of the City, and the schoolhouse was about to fall down and we had to build a new schoolhouse. And then's when I think the first real contact that I had with President Johnson was trying to get through the WPA to build that schoolhouse. And I got in touch with him and he helped

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me in every way to build a schoolhouse which is the present schoolhouse at Bastrop.

PB: At that time you had never been acquainted with him, in other words you took no part in his campaign for Congress or anything like that up to that time, did you?

WR: Not the first time, but then after the first time I was very active in all the campaigns that he put on.

PB: Just what was it that Mr. Johnson did for you to help you get this money, do you know?

WR: He worked it through the WPA. And that's the way we built the school house with the WPA labor. With his help out of the office of Congressman was the way the schoolhouse was built.

PB: Following the construction of your school with WPA funds, that was about 1937 or '38, along in there, that would have been at the height of the Depression. What other steps what other things were you working for?

WR: I don't remember the year, but at that time as you said, we had a depression. Everybody was broke and didn't have any jobs or anything like that and that's when they set up the C.C. camps. And then I contacted President Johnson and at that time he went along with us and helped us get two C.C. camps.

PB: That's Civilian Conservation

WR: Yes.

PB: C.C.C., wasn't it?

WR: That's right.

PB: What did they do?

WR: Then we built the park out here. All the buildings and everything in that park was built by the C.C. boys and the materials was all Bastrop County materials.

PB: Well, you had had now two boosts from the Congressman, on the schoolhouse and on the C.C. camps. Did you get to know him?

WR: Well, I knew him personally. He and I had become very, very close friends. And the next thing I was interested in in the City of Bastrop was the utility system, and I went and talked it over with him and discussed it. He said he would give me all the help that he could, and then we

PB: Let me get this straight right here. You had a utility system.

WR: It belonged to the T.P.L.

PB: The Texas Power and Light.

WR: Power and Light.

PB: And you wanted the City to own it.

WR: I wanted the City to own it and I tried to buy it from the T.P.L. and they wouldn't sell it to us. And we voted

a \$125,000 bond to put in a competitive system. In the meantime, then, the L.C.R.A. bought out the sixteen counties and turned the utilities system over to Bastrop. The City of Bastrop.

PB: The L.C.R.A., that's the Lower Colorado River Authority, they bought the distribution systems in sixteen counties, did you say?

WR: Yes.

PB: And the one in Bastrop, they didn't turn it over to you, you had to buy it from them, didn't you?

WR: Oh, yes, I bought it from them. I gave them what it cost them, \$75,000.

PB: Has it been a profit-making thing since that time?

WR: If it hadn't been for that the City of Bastrop couldn't have operated. The utilities have practically taken care of the City ever since.

PB: You mean, income, rather than taxes.

WR: Yes, sir.

PB: There are two things that we need to bring in right there. When you speak of the L.C.R.A., did the Authority itself buy these or did it act through one of these rural electric co-ops, do you remember?

WR: No, I don't remember just exactly how that was handled. All the dealings I had were with the L.C.R.A.

PB: Well, what did the Congressman have to do with it?

WR: When I was putting on this bond election here, he come down here and made speeches. Max Starke came down and a number of other mayors--

PB: Max Starke was the Director of the L.C.R.A.?

WR: Yes, sir. They came down and made speeches and helped me in every way.

PB: To get the bond issue.

WR: To get the bond issue over.

PB: I want to ask you a question: you say Mr. Johnson came down here and made speeches for you. What kind of a speech maker would you put him down as?

WR: Well, I'll say he's a whole lot better now than he was then!

PB: He was a pretty rough-and-tumble public speaker, though, wasn't he?

WR: Yes, and I'll say this, he made a pretty good speech for a country boy.

PB: Pretty good for a country boy. Okay. Now, during this period, that must have been prior to the war, and along there someplace Camp Swift was established, near Bastrop. Can you tell us about that?

WR: Well, Mr. Johnson was very much interested in locating Camp Swift around here, somewhere around in this area,

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in this Tenth Congressional District. So they sent the engineers in here and for, oh, I don't know, for several weeks we had a bunch of the Army engineers in here, taking them all around the county and showing them all the different sites we had. And finally they made their location up here on the railroad tracks where Camp Swift is located.

PB: When it was activated, that put some strains on the resources of the City, didn't it? Of Bastrop?

WR: Oh, Bastrop was I'd say around 2,000, 2,500 maybe.

PB: And did you have utilities--water and sewage?

WR: No, we didn't have any everyone had in their own sewerage system. We had a very poor water system getting water out of the wells on the river. And so we had I had to do something about the sewerage system. So I went to Washington and got in touch with Johnson's office. At that time he was overseas.

PB: It would have been about 1941, then, wouldn't it?

WR: Yes, I guess that's about right. Then, Mrs. Johnson was in charge of the office, and through her help and the office help, we managed to get the federal government to give us a grant of \$196,000 for the City of Bastrop.

PB: Well, tell us, what do you do when you go to Washington to get money for local projects like that?

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WR: Well, this is the way I handled that. I went there, and I went to the office. And I talked it over with Mrs. Johnson. Then she got me the information on who to go to see, and I worked it out from there. And she made all the appointments, they made all the appointments out of the office there in Washington.

PB: In other words, they'd get on the phone and phone up somebody and

WR: Make appointments for me, and that's the way

PB: Did you find people in Washington eager to help you?

WR: They were very cooperative very cooperative. Helped me every way in the world.

PB: Camp Swift grew to be one of the largest training centers for the entire country, did it not? How big did it get?

WR: Well, at one time out there they had 65,000 soldiers and with the civilians and all it would run something over 100,000. I got that information from some of the army officers out there at that time.

PB: Of course, they the people who lived off base would live here in Bastrop and in Elgin and in the other towns around.

WR: Yes, sir.

PB: And that put quite a strain on the resources of those towns and places. That's one of the reasons why you had to get your utilities straightened out, wasn't it?

WR: Well, it's this way, we needed some resources for an income, and that helped us quite a bit in taking over that. We never did have to raise any taxes and up til just a short time ago we had the lowest utility rates in the State of Texas with the exception of six, I believe it was I don't remember whether it was three or six but anyway, they were operated and owned by the L.C.R.A.

PB: Now, during this period when Mr. Johnson was a Congressman, he had to run for office every two years, and you had no part, you say, in the first race for Congress. How about some of those other races? Did you

WR: I was very active, taken the lead in all his races that he had. One time here in the City of Bastrop there was 433 votes polled; he lost 33 votes and then wrote me a smart letter and asked what become of those 33!

PB: I recall one campaign back there, I guess it was in the early forties, when Bastrop contributed a lot of watermelons to a big party they had over there in Austin. Did you have anything to do with that?

WR: Yes, sir, I bought \$1200 worth of watermelons at McDade and sent them to Austin.

PB: Didn't you come over for the party and have some watermelon?

WR: You know I had to go over there and have a piece of that watermelon!

PB: Then there were quite a few parties that were thrown around over By the way, the celebrities that came down here on some of those campaigns--I seem to recall that who were some of the cowboys that came down here? Cowboy singer Gene Autry, was that one?

WR: Yes, at one time that President Johnson came here on one of his campaign tours he had Gene Autry with him, and Buck Hood and his wife with him and made some talks here on the streets at Bastrop. The fact of it is that Lyndon come down quite often and whenever we had anything when he was in Texas he would nearly always make it a point to be down here.

PB: He used to come out here and sit in this particular room that we're in right now, did he not?

WR: He used to in making his in campaigning over the country, why he would we'd go out here in some of these little country stores, and the height of his ambition was to get back into one of these country stores on a box and set there and talk to those country people for quite a while. We'd be driving down the road and some fellow'd be out there plowing. He'd say, "Stop, Will," and jumped out of the car and climbed over the wire

fence and go over there and visit with them. And that's just the way he campaigned through the country.

PB: Do you think that he is an effective person in person-to-person contacts?

WR: He was. He was, in fact, one of the greatest in making personal contacts and in making people like him. In fact, what I think about Lyndon Johnson and I think I know him just about as well as any man in Texas; I think he's outstanding in every way, and there's a lot of people that don't like a lot of things he did and there's some things I don't like he did, and there's a helluva lot of things I did that he don't like. But anyway, I think he's a great man of all times.

PB: Following the war, I believe that you had a considerable fight in order to retain Camp Swift as long as you could out here near town.

WR: Yes, sir, we 'course, all of us hated to see Camp Swift go. It was, as you said before, one of the outstanding camps, and about as pretty a camp as we had in Texas, and so we were trying to locate something to go into the camp without disposing of it. So we took it up with the Congressman at that time, and he went so far as to bring Senator Symington down here to look it over

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and see just what they had at Camp Swift so that he could help try to hold the camp. At that time he went ahead and they got them to kinda postpone it for a short time, and they were going to put another unit in here. I don't remember what it was, but they put another unit down here for a while. Then later on, when they had to go to disposing of it, and selling it out, why, Lyndon helped through the city and to get the buildings that are at the present time out here that belongs to the Legion, and through him we've got these buildings, and the Legion owns them at the present time.

PB: Symington, I believe, was he not Secretary of Defense at that time?

WR: Yes.

PB: And then he ran for the Senate after serving as Secretary.

WR: Yes, that's right.

PB: I think in terms of your political activities, one of the big occasions was that fish fry. That was in, I believe what year was that? Was it 1959?

WR: I'm not positive, but it was the year that he was making his race for Vice President. We thought at that time that he was going to make his announcement that year as President. All of us all over this country was trying

to get him to go ahead and announce that he would be a candidate for President, but he didn't do it.

PB: Okay, well now tell us about the fish fry.

WR: Well, the Tenth Congressional District, we had a meeting over at Austin and had people from all over the Tenth Congressional District to put on a party. So after talking it over we decided to put on a big fish fry. It was the whole entire Tenth Congressional District; it wasn't Bastrop at all; it was the whole entire district for Lyndon Johnson. And so we organized and decided to have the fishfry in Bastrop. They made me chairman of the committee of all these different committees. So we went ahead and we organized our committees all over the district and everyone that I had asked to help or do anything was exceptionally willing to help.

PB: I understand there was a little question raised about how you were going to pay for all this.

WR: Yes there was a question. We thought that when we first started we'd try to put on a free one. And the Congressman told us we couldn't do that because it was going to run too big, so then we went ahead and sold tickets.

PB: And where'd you get the fish for all this?

WR: Well, that's another question, where we got the fish, you know. Some of them were bought!

PB: You caught some of them in the Colorado River?

WR: Yes, some of them. They all come out of the Colorado River, either around surrounding Bastrop or up around Buchanan Dam up at the lakes.

PB: Some of them you had to buy. How much how many fish did you fry that night?

WR: We fried four thousand pounds of dressed fish.

PB: Four thousand pounds. My! How much money did you take in?

WR: Well, after all expenses, we spent something like \$4,000 and after all the expenses was paid, everybody paid, we had a fraction, a few dollars over \$900 left.

PB: My golly! Where'd you have this big shindig?

WR: Had it out here on the top of the hill at what we call the Mayfest Ground. Of the \$900 we had left, I sent Sam Winters over at Austin \$500 for the party that he was putting on over there for Lyndon Johnson and then we pulled a barbecue for Homer Thornberry that cost over \$400.

PB: That used up the nine

WR: Used up the money we had on hand.

PB: That was one of the biggest parties ever thrown in these parts, wasn't it?

WR: It was the biggest party that was ever thrown in this country. We figured that they passed out over four

thousand plates down the lines, and so we figured, there was over four thousand plates, and at that party we had Governor Daniels and his wife, we had Homer Thornberry and his wife, we had Charlie Herring and his wife, President Johnson and his wife, well, everybody in the whole country was here.

PB: He was not President then, though; he was

WR: No, he was

PB: He was the majority leader of the Senate?

WR: Yes.

PB: Mr. Mayor, you mentioned the fact a while ago that after that first campaign for Congress you became very good friends with Mr. Johnson, and worked in all his campaigns. You were the mayor of a city and of course had some influence among your compatriots around here. Tell me how a man goes about working in a campaign like that.

WR: Well, the first thing you got to do, you got to organize. You got to get your committees to working. And there are all kinds of ways the Senator would get on the telephone and call people or go see people in person and contact all the influential people around all over the county and they were urged to go cast their votes for him. When they had a good long ticket to vote on, why, we'd tell them to go down there and vote for Lyndon

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Johnson. That's all we would tell them to vote for.

PE: But in those days we had no television ---

WE: No.

PE: ...you had to do everything by radio or by word of mouth.

It would seem you were pretty effective, you always carried this part of the country for him, didn't you? Here in Bastrop?

WR: He always carried Bastrop. I don't think he ever....I don't recall that he ever lost Bastrop county.

PE: Can you name some of the other prominent supporters in the Tenth District, that you knew?

WR: Oh, yes, there's a whole bunch of them around here. Well, you take when we had our fish fry, the Mayor from Smithville and the Mayor from Elgin, and Mr. Howard Rivers from Elgin -- nearly all of the people who really had some influence were always behind him in every way..

PE: Now you had this fish fry and you had the representatives of all the ten counties in this congressional district there -- did I understand you to say this was supposed to launch Mr. Johnson's campaign for the Presidency?

WR: We thought that possibly he would announce that night as a candidate for president; but he didn't. And as I

said before, it was one of the biggest things in the whole country that we ever had here. We had fifty acres out there all lit up where they had parking space, we had the sheriff's posse on horseback to park all the automobiles. It was one of the biggest things that was ever in this country.

PB: Mr. Mayor, when you were out campaigning with the President and he'd get a bunch of people back in the back end of the stores as you described a while ago, what would he say to them? How would he talk to them?

WR: Well, he'd just sit down there and go to talking to them about everything, about their farming and everything that was in life, just whatever was coming up in life he very seldom would tell them all, that he wanted to be elected, and things like that, but he didn't go too strong on it, he just more making them a visit, being with them.

PB: Do you think that he really enjoyed contacting people like that?

WR: I know he did. I know he did. And as I said before, when he was out campaigning and making those trips all over the country and come on back to my house here and pile up in bed with his shoes on and sleep til my wife got him something to eat, and then he'd lie down again.

PB: You mean you sort of worked out of

WR: Yes.

PB: out of your house. I don't imagine your wife appreciated him putting

WR: She was glad to have him. We thought lots of him. Still do.

PB: Well, no man puts his shoes on your bedspread; that ain't so good.

WR: Well, she didn't fuss much then.

PB: Mr. Mayor, I understand that when the telephone company changed over to the dial system for long distance you had a very interesting telephone conversation. Can you tell us about it?

WR: Yes. At that time I called the I believe he was still Senator. I called him long distance and made the first call over long distance after the system went over to the new dial system.

PB: Did he answer the call himself? Did you get him on the line?

WR: Yes, I talked to him myself. I talked to him in person myself.

PB: How long did that conversation last? The man is known for long conversations, isn't he?

WR: It wasn't too long, because neither one of us had money to pay for it.

PB: By the way, you made a comment a while ago before we started taping about well, you were talking about the things you got for Bastrop as mayor with the assistance of the Congressman. How 'bout your remuneration? Does the mayor of Bastrop get a salary?

WR: At that time, yes. We were getting a nice salary, we were getting \$25 a month.

PB: And all these telephone calls that you had to make to the Congressman and to his successors as well,

WR: I never called the Congressman, not the President Johnson or Homer Thornberry or any of the rest of them collect. I paid for every call that I ever put in.

PB: Looking back at your long association with Mr. Johnson, how would you sum up the character of this man? I know you think a great deal of him because he's been your friend over a great many years. But we would like to have your summary of what sort of a man he is.

WR: As I said a few minutes ago that I guess I always thought that I knew Lyndon about as well as any man in Texas, and we were very, very close together. And I think that Lyndon is a good deal like I am. He enjoyed doing something for somebody else and helping somebody else. And personally, I don't see how anyone, especially in Texas, could vote against him. Because he's done everything

that was possible to be done that he could do for the people, and not himself. And I think he's one of the outstanding men, and I think I know him.

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By Will R. Rogers

to the

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