

INTERVIEW WITH MR. FENNER ROTH

PB: This is September 23, 1968. We are in the office of Mr. Fenner Roth. What is your title, Mr. Roth?

FR: I'm Deputy Area Director of the Economic Development Administration, which is a part of the Department of Commerce.

PB: And that is spelled R-O-T-H?

FR: That's right.

PB: Mr. Roth, it is my understanding that in the early days you were a classmate of Mr. Johnson at Southwest Texas State College. I believe it was called Southwest Texas State Teachers College at that time.

FR: Well, yes, it was called Southwest Texas State Teachers College when I first knew Lyndon, which was back in 1929. I can't say that I was a classmate of his because he was a senior at that time and I was a freshman. However, I did know him fairly well. We both roomed at the same house.

PB: What do you recall of those early days of your contacts with Mr. Johnson?

FR: My first impression of him was that he was very politically minded. In fact, most of the subject matter that he wanted to talk about concerned politics, and I remember that during that time, President Evans, who was president

of the college, spent a great deal of time in Austin trying to get the legislature to appropriate money to operate the school on and Lyndon often accompanied the President to Austin, not necessarily to help him but to listen to the arguments before the committees. One of his greatest delights was to hear the debate in the house and the senate over legislative programs.

PB: This boarding house, or rooming house where you stayed, can you tell us something about that?

FR: Well, it was located on Hopkins Street, which was approximately three blocks from the main square, and it was run by Mrs. Mattie Hopper who moved from Lufkin, Texas. She had a son, Ardis Hopper, who was a senior and who was playing football, and her daughter, Auriabelle, who was to be a freshman in school, and Elvin Reed, who was a football player and myself, who had a baseball scholarship. And then the other small room was occupied by Lyndon Johnson.

PB: What did you play on the baseball team?

FR: I was supposed to play shortstop, but they cut the scholarships and discontinued baseball in the spring, so I never did letter in baseball at the college.

PB: I understand that at that time--you say that Mr. Johnson was a senior and you were a freshman--he had become quite

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a big man on the campus by the time you enrolled, hadn't he?

FR: Yes he had; he was quite well known in school politics.

PB: In what respect? Do you recall any particular activities?

FR: Well, he was I believe that happened before I got to school he was editor of the College Star, which was the weekly newspaper put out by the college, and this was an office which was given out by the student council, and naturally there was a little politics involved in the ones that got those jobs, in particular in those days, since jobs were scarce and salaries were awful meager.

PB: I can recall how meager the salaries were. Some of the people with whom I have talked have tried to tell me something about the formation of rival clubs down there. Do you know anything about that?

FR: Yes, I'm fairly familiar with it.

PB: Can you tell us about it? I don't think we have really ever got the story.

FR: Before I got to San Marcos there was a club on campus that was known as the Black Stars. It was comprised entirely of men who had lettered in various sports, such as football, basketball, track and baseball, and they had practically controlled the college as far as offices

were concerned, as president, vice president, secretary and treasurer of each class, and they also had been instrumental in electing the student council, who awarded the jobs for the yearbook and the college paper, the editor and the business manager of each. So my freshman year some of the boys who were not adapted to athletics, namely Lyndon Johnson, Horace Richards, Vernon Whiteside, Wilton Woods, Willard Deason and Norman O'Grady--now this part is heresay as far as I'm concerned--got together and decided to organize an organization or fraternity, you might call it, in which they would take boys who were not interested in athletics and try to compete for some of these various class offices and jobs on the College Star--the college newspaper--and the college yearbook. And they formed an organization known as the Alpha Omega--First and Last. And we became known as the White Stars. I say we--I was later taken into the organization; in fact, I was the thirteenth member to be taken in. And I believe the first freshman to come into the organization.

PB: You didn't room with Lyndon--he had his own room there.

FR: Well, no--we were in the same house; I did not room in the same room with him.

PB: Mr. Roth, during those days when you were a freshman and Mr. Johnson was a senior, we have already spoken of the

fact that he was probably a big man on the campus. Do you know some of the jobs he held down?

FR: The year that I was there he was President Evans' assistant. He worked in his office and did odd jobs for "Prexie," as he was lovingly known on the campus by the students. And as I said before, Prexie would take Lyndon with him to Austin in appearing before these legislative committees in his attempts to secure additional funds to operate the school on. Lyndon did odd jobs for President Evans--I don't know just how detailed they were because I was out on the campus on what's known as the "Rock Squad," in other words, I was helping to dig, or excavate, for a new cafeteria, so I didn't get too close to some of his duties, in that respect.

PB: You were there on a baseball scholarship, but it was knocked out from under you, so you had to go to work, is that so?

FR: That's right.

PB: And of course, Lyndon Mr. Johnson, I should say also had to work his way through college.

FR: That's right.

PB: What other jobs did he hold, do you know, besides editor of the Star and assistant to Dr. Evans? Were there any other jobs he held?

FR: Well, he was president of the student council; I don't recall whether it was the first term or the last term when he was a senior. But I know we had quite an election and the race was very close, in particular for president of the student council, which Lyndon won out on.

PB: What kind of a campaign? Did you help him in the campaign; did you work in the campaign?

FR: I doubt that I helped him in his campaign; I was busy trying to elect some people in the freshman class because each class elected their own representatives and then the representatives in turn elected the president of the student council.

PB: Oh, I see. But your job was to help elect freshmen representatives who would be for Lyndon.

FR: That's right. And I might add that we were successful.

PB: To revert for just a moment to this organization--fraternity, or whatever you call it--the White Stars. Did it continue after Mr. Johnson left the school?

FR: Yes; of course I continued at San Marcos for three more years before I completed my work in the spring of 1933, and the organization was quite active and as far as I know it continued for approximately another seven or eight years. A total number of 121 people in that period of time were taken into the organization and they

continued to I might say dominate the class offices and the student council.

PB: Does this organization still have a being today?

FR: Yes; it's not active on the campus. In those days, fraternities were forbidden, and I think that's one of the reasons the Black Stars and the White Stars were formed and were successful. In the meantime, national fraternities have come on the campus, which did away with these two organizations. However, the White Stars continue to meet once a year and with our wives and have a dinner and renew old acquaintances, and so forth.

PB: Where do you meet?

FR: Well, it varies; we have at times met in San Antonio, in San Marcos and Seguin; the last few years we've been meeting in Austin at the Gondolier Hotel.

PB: Has Mr. Johnson attended any of these meetings?

FR: Not in the last few years. I'd say since he has become known nationally from United States Senator through the Vice Presidency and the Presidency he has not. And that's understandable I think, for security reasons and others, that it was probably best that he not. But in the early days he did attend some of them.

PB: Do you have an organization? Do you have a president, etc.?

FR: We have no offices and never had any.

PB: How do you get together for the dinner?

FR: Oh, different ones assumed the responsibility from year to year.

PB: Are you going to have a meeting this year, or have you already had one?

FR: We had ours in July of this year and we'll have another one next July.

PB: Next July at the Gondolier.

FR: Yes sir.

PB: Perhaps now that he is will be out of the Presidency by that time perhaps you can get the guy who started the whole thing to come down to the dinner.

FR: There has been some discussion among us that possibly he can attend in the future.

PB: Now, Mr. Roth, you graduated in 1933. What did you do then?

FR: Well, I

PB: It was right at the height of the depression, too, wasn't it?

FR: It sure was. I went to Diboll, Texas, and started teaching chemistry and physics in the high school there, and I taught there in '33, '34 and started the '35 year, got a call from Willard Deason asking me if I'd like to go to

work for the National Youth Administration. Of course, I knew that Lyndon had been made state director. I advised him that I would; I resigned my teaching position December 13th, 1935 and reported to the National Youth Administration on December 16, 1935.

PB: Mr. Johnson was in charge of the Youth Administration and he remembered you from

FR: College days, yes.

PB: when you lived at Mrs. what was her name?

FR: Mattie Hopper's residence.

PB: Mattie Hopper's house. What was your assignment?

FR: Well, my first assignment was known as a field representative and I was sent to Palestine, Texas, and from there I took over the territory of Marshall and Tyler and some two years later I was transferred to San Antonio as liaison officer between the National Youth Administration and the Works Progress Administration. The WPA state office did all of our financial and procurement work, and I was sent there to handle the liaison work between the two state offices.

PB: Did you have contacts with Mr. Johnson during that period?

FR: Mr. Johnson only stayed with the National Youth Administration approximately a year after I went with it. He resigned to run for Congress of what is this, the 14th Congressional District?

PB: The Tenth.

FR: The Tenth Congressional District, and of course was successful, in being elected. His successor was J. C. Kellam who had been my high school coach in my high school days at Lufkin.

PB: I see. Was he a baseball coach as well as a football coach?

FR: He coached all of it in those days; they didn't have too many different coaches.

PB: Well, I'm sure that's right. Mr. Roth, during the year that you say you worked under his direction, what kind of a boss was he? What did you all do?

FR: Of course, the National Youth Administration at that time was in an experimental stage, and one of the first things that I remember that Lyndon did was to go over and talk to Jimmie Allred who was then Governor of Texas, and convince him that the roadside parks would be an ideal project for our organization to take over. Governor Allred agreed with Mr. Johnson and saw to it that the state highway department cooperated with us in every respect. Lyndon was very dynamic and you might say a real pusher in seeing that this program was put into effect. And even after he went to Congress he continued to have an interest in the National Youth Administration.

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PB: I've been told by others who worked for the NYA at that period that it was sort of a man-killing job to keep up with Mr. Johnson. Was that your experience?

FR: Well, I wouldn't say that it was man-killing, because we were all interested in our work, but I will say this, that there were no clock-watchers with the National Youth Administration. We worked long hours from early in the morning until late at night and I particularly remember when we used to come to Austin to meetings that they'd turn the lights out in the Littlefield Building at 10:00 o'clock and that's when we got to quit and go home.

PB: These meetings you speak of--what did you talk about? What did Mr. Johnson say? How did he approach his job? Is that asking too much of you to remember?

FR: Well, the meetings were naturally calling in the field coordinators or field representatives from all over the state. We had some twenty I would say, and they would bring them in and outline policy and programs that they expected to be put into effect.

PB: How did you find jobs? You had the roadside parks, I know that was one of the things that you did. What other things were done during those NYA days?

FR: We put in all types of training schools. We trained people for auto mechanics, airplane mechanics, radio

mechanics, welding. In fact in the latter part of 1939 and '40 I expect the National Youth Administration was responsible for training as many young men and women to go into industry as any organization in the United States. Particularly did we train people for welding. I know that Brown and Root, Kaiser Steel and all those places were constantly in our shops to see how well these people were getting along and when they would be able to take them and put them into private industry.

PB: After Mr. Johnson was elected to Congress and you continued working for the NYA, did you maintain any contact with him after that time?

FR: Yes, Lyndon and I continued to keep in touch with each other through correspondence and through personal contact. In fact, I named my only son after him and in all probability as far as I know, he was the first boy to be named after Lyndon Johnson. He was at that time a Congressman. My son was born in September of 1937.

PB: He'd only been in Congress a very brief time at that time.

FR: That's right, just a very short time. I'd always considered Lyndon one of my close personal friends and had always had an admiration for him.

PB: After your NYA days, Mr. Roth, what did you do then?

FR: In 1941, about the time the war broke out, the Office of Price Administration was formed by President Roosevelt,

and Lyndon had Mr. Frank Covert from Austin, Texas, appointed Regional Director of 75 counties to carry out rationing and price control in South Texas, and the regional office was located in San Antonio. Lyndon contacted me and asked me if I would transfer from NYA over to OPA to help Mr. Covert out since he had never worked for the government before, and he needed someone with administrative experience. So I transferred over to OPA, or the Office of Price Administration, in October of '41 and stayed with them through October of '45. At that time I resigned from government service and went to Corpus Christi and went in business for myself as a dealer for Friedrich Commercial Refrigeration and Air Conditioning.

PB: You were a little bit ahead of your time on refrigeration and air conditioning, weren't you?

FR: Yes, there weren't too many people that thought air conditioning was necessary in the very beginning.

PB: That's right.

FR: But now it's a going concern. I stayed with that business for approximately sixteen years, and sold out and, you might say loafed, for the next couple of years and eventually decided to go back to work for the government, as really and truly that's my first love. Though I was successful in business, I still think I enjoyed working

for the government more than anything that I've ever done.

PB: During your period in Corpus Christi when you were in private business, you happened to be there during the time when Mr. Johnson announced for the United States Senate. Did you take any part in that campaign?

FR: Yes, Lyndon called me one day and wanted to know if I would manage his campaign for South Texas, or the 14th Congressional District which comprised some twenty or twenty-one counties. I had only been there a short time and I told him I thought that he could get someone who was more knowledgeable with the people of South Texas or who was better known down there. Apparently, as you know, Mr. Stevenson had been a very popular Governor and there had been some difficulty in getting someone to take this job over. So I did manage the campaign and I might say that we were successful in that area in getting him some 10,000 vote lead.

PB: Now, as a campaign manager for a considerable area down there, can you tell us something about how a campaign was operated in those days?

FR: Well

PB: Was it any different than today? You didn't have television then

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FR: Of course, we didn't have television we had radio. I think you would find that picnics and barbecues and get-togethers were more prominent and you could get a crowd to come and listen to someone speaking for the candidate or listening to the candidate a lot easier than you can today. At that time Mr. Johnson made his campaign in a helicopter, which attracted considerable attention in most of the towns because most of the people had never seen a helicopter. The biggest trouble was keeping them out of the way so you could land it once you located a space.

PB: You did have the support of the principal newspaper in that area, did you not?

FR: We had the support of the principal newspaper, the Corpus Christi Caller-Times, yes, which was one of the few papers that started out supporting our campaign.

PB: Is that so?

FR: Yes.

PB: That's one of the Harte-Hank chain of papers--Houston Harte of San Angelo?

FR: I believe that's correct, yes.

PB: Did you know the editor, Bob Jackson?

FR: I didn't know Bob Jackson until I was asked to take the campaign over and after agreeing to accept it, Lyndon

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insisted that I go up and meet Mr. Jackson, which I did. And since then we have become very close personal friends. I think Bob's a very capable newspaper man and in addition to that he's a close personal friend of mine.

PB: Of course, you are aware that they roomed together in Washington?

FR: Yes I am.

PB: During this campaign you sort of glossed it over as seemingly an easy job it wasn't an easy job, was it?

FR: No, it was a most difficult job because Lyndon had waited quite some time to make up his mind to announce to run against Governor Stevenson and in the meantime George Petty from Houston had announced and a great number of the more prominent from Corpus Christi, or rather I should say men with money, who contributed to campaigns, had either promised Governor Stevenson or George Petty that they would support them financially, and securing money was quite a job. And also securing speakers was quite a job, because as I have previously said, Governor Stevenson was quite a prominent person and it wasn't easy to find good speakers who would get on the campaign trail and speak for a Congressman that they weren't sure could win the election.

PB: Mr. Petty, as I recall, was a man of considerable substance, financially.

FR: Yes, I understand he was.

PB: He would naturally attract the

FR: The affluent.

PB: yes, the affluent people of the area. Mr. Roth, for a businessman to take off from his business and get out and run a campaign is a considerable sacrifice. Did your own business suffer when you did this?

FR: Well, I'm sure it did, but back in those days right after World War II and the factories could not make delivery anyway, and I had enough orders stacked up in San Antonio that if there was any suffering it was possibly at a later date as they caught up on deliveries. And too I had cleared this with the Friedrich factory who was very much in favor of Lyndon for the United States Senate, and they helped me out to a certain extent on sales.

PB: Now, subsequent to the 1948 campaign, Mr. Johnson had opposition in subsequent races although it was never so serious; did he call on you again for assistance?

FR: Yes, I helped him in most of his campaigns. I remember when he ran for Congress against Hardy Hollers I came to Austin and assisted.

PB: That was prior to his election to the Senate, wasn't it?

FR: That's right. And I also helped in the campaign against Mr. O'Daniel in the first Senate race.

PB: In the campaigns subsequent to 1948, I believe his next one was in 1954, you were campaign manager then too?

FR: Yes, sir, I was.

PB: It was not very rough, then.

FR: No, it wasn't too difficult to secure help or money in that campaign. He was now a United States Senator and a very popular Senator and as a result it didn't take as much of my time and effort. And too, I had the services of Cecil Burney, a young and upcoming attorney who had finished law school and had come back to Corpus Christi to start practice.

PB: Mr. Roth, from your long friendship with the President, starting with his days in school, could you summarize for us your candid opinions of the man's character? I know that you must have thought a lot of him; you named your son after him. But I am interested in what you thought of the man as a man in that sort of a I know that I'm phrasing this very poorly, but I would like to have, if you would care to do so, your opinions about Mr. Johnson.

FR: As I have previously told you, I always had a great admiration for him, and I like to think that we have always been close personal friends. I think that he is honest, sincere; I think that every move that he has made

that he has made in what he considered the interest of the country. I don't think that he's been partial on any of his motives. There are times when he has done or taken moves I probably wouldn't have done with my limited knowledge. However, were I in his position, I might possibly have made the same move. I think he's made a good President and I think that he will go down in history as one of the great men of our country.

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By Fenner Roth

to the

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