

INTERVIEW III

DATE: October 11, 1978
INTERVIEWEE: FENNER ROTH
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Mr. Roth's residence, Lufkin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start off with your background, Mr. Roth, how you got into the Lyndon Johnson circle and the NYA.

R: Do you want a little background on my early days, before I went to San Marcos or not? Are you interested in that part?

G: Basically where you are from, where you were born.

R: I was born in Diboll, Texas, on September 19, 1906. I finished grammar school there. After finishing grammar school my family moved to Lufkin in order that I could enter high school. In high school it was my good fortune to have as a coach, Jesse Kellam. Mr. Kellam influenced my life considerably.

After finishing high school I was not able to go to college as my stepfather had had a financial disaster, you might say. The bank had gone broke and he had lost all. At that time the federal government didn't protect people like they do now. So I stayed out three years and worked, thinking that I might get enough money to go to college. At the end of that time, Mr. Kellam convinced me that it was time that I went to college, and he got me a scholarship at San Marcos to play baseball.

Roth -- III -- 2

At the time I went out there, there were two or three boys from Lufkin that were on the football team: Ardis Hopper, Clark Gordon and Elvin Read. The first week of training I was there in order to get acquainted with the coaches, and at a Mrs. Gates' house, where the training table was being maintained, I met Lyndon Johnson. Later on that week, Ardis Hopper's mother, Mrs. Mattie Hopper, moved to San Marcos and got a house large enough for her daughter, Aurelia Bell, and Ardis, Elvin Read, myself, and Lyndon Johnson to stay at while we were attending college. At that time I, of course, was a freshman and Lyndon was a senior. Ardis Hopper was a senior. Elvin Read was a sophomore and Clark Gordon was a junior.

My friendship with Lyndon, like I say, started at Mrs. Hopper's. He was one of the few people in school that had a car, and he and I used to drive over to Austin and see football games on weekends and even go over sometimes to listen to debates when the Texas Legislature was in session, as Lyndon was very interested in politics, as his daddy was a member of the House of Representatives. He enjoyed very much going over, listening to the legislature.

G: Did he ever represent the school in any official capacity in the legislature?

R: I don't know. I know he worked in the President's office. Now whether he ever represented the college before the legislature or with the Governor in discussing legislation, I can't say. I do know that President [Cecil] Evans thought a lot of Lyndon and frequently carried him with him to Austin.

Roth -- III -- 3

G: This was essentially a boarding house that you were living in, wasn't it, or a rooming house?

R: Well, see, they didn't have dormitories in those days for boys. All boys stayed in rooming houses. This was Mrs. Hopper's home, I guess you might say. She rented the house, and we all paid her so much a month for room and board.

G: Did you share rooms?

R: Yes.

G: Who was Lyndon Johnson rooming with?

R: We had a big screen porch that Elvin Read and Ardis Hopper and Lyndon and myself shared.

G: What was he like as a student?

R: Oh, he was a very likeable person. He was full of energy, a very jovial person, and apparently made good grades in school. Of course, I was not in any of his classes because he was ahead of me.

G: Did you get any awareness that he intended to be a teacher?

R: Well, I think it was taken for granted at that time if you went to San Marcos you were going to be a teacher, because most students only went one year, and got a teaching certificate, and they'd come back every summer and continue their education. Lyndon, I believe, had taught one year at Cotulla before he came back his senior year.

G: Anything else on his experience in San Marcos, the White Stars? Was he still active in the White Stars by the time you were there?

R: As far as I know, Lyndon Johnson and Horace Richards, Vernon Whiteside, Wilton Woods, Bill Deason, Albert Harzke, Walter Grady, and Archie Wiles

Roth -- III -- 4

were the ones that started the White Stars. It started my freshman year, in the fall of 1929, when I became a member of that organization being the thirteenth person to join.

G: Were you part of that campus election when they elected Bill Deason?

R: Well, no, because Bill, as well as I recall, was running for president of the senior class, and each class voted on their own officers. I took part in the election when Lyndon was elected to the student council and was elected president of the student council that same year. But then each class had a nominee and they in turn nominated someone and voted for the president of the student council.

G: How did he get elected?

R: What do you mean, how did he get elected?

G: Well, did he campaign for it, or did he have the White Stars helping him?

R: Well, he had the White Stars helping him, of course.

G: How were they able to get enough votes? Was it just a popularity contest?

R: That's what it amounted to, yes, because the opposition, or the Black Stars as they were known, were practically all athletes, and unless you were a letterman you were not taken into that organization. All lettermen weren't taken in, but I'd say the majority of them were. They got to where they had control of the student fund, and they were allocating all the money for athletics. So we made an issue of taking part of that money and turning it over to the Little Theater, which

Roth -- III -- 5

appealed to certain students. As a result, we were able to win every one of the elections and put the people on the student council we wanted.

G: Was the White Stars primarily a political group as opposed to, let's say, a social group?

R: Yes. It was political. At that time, you see, we didn't have fraternities and sororities on the campus. At that time they were not legal. The teachers colleges had literary societies like the Harris Blair, and the Jeffersonians, the Newman Club. But the Black Stars were political and the White Stars were political as far as campus was concerned.

G: Where would you normally meet--the White Stars?

R: Oh, various places. No certain place. Maybe my room, or somebody else's room, or rent a motel room.

G: Was there any campaign strategy in getting LBJ elected to the student council, or president of the student council?

R: Well, not from the White Star standpoint, I wouldn't say, no. I would say that certain people in the senior class wanted to see him on the council. I and several others wanted to see a person elected that would do what we wanted them to do, and as a result I would say a favorable number were elected that were for Lyndon, yes. But I wouldn't say it was out-and-out strategy, not particularly for him. It was more for the White Stars rather than for an individual.

G: He was also, I understand, editor of the newspaper.

Roth -- III -- 6

R: I believe that was in the summer, though, and I didn't go to school that summer. He finished school that summer.

I guess my first political contact was for state senator when Welly Hopkins from Gonzales ran for the state senate, and Lyndon managed his campaign and I helped Lyndon in that race. I had previously done a little political work in this county for a county commissioner and a city councilman, so I knew a little bit about what politics was all about. Lyndon, Wilton Woods and I worked for Welly Hopkins, who was elected state senator and later on became legal representative for the Mine Workers' union. I guess you know that. You've got the record on that, haven't you? Welly Hopkins is his name, W-E-L-L-Y.

G: Yes. That was in 1930, I think.

R: Yes.

G: What did you do in that campaign?

R: Well, there wasn't much to do in those days. There wasn't any money. About all you could do was pass out literature and make talks for him and go to rallies encouraging people to vote for him.

G: Did LBJ organize the students at San Marcos pretty much?

R: Yes.

G: Do you remember how he did that?

R: No, offhand I don't. I guess it was more word of mouth. I know Hopkins came there and made a talk in the auditorium at the college. As well as I recall, Lyndon introduced him.

G: Do you think the campaign work was done mainly through the White Stars?

Roth -- III -- 7

R: I don't know that any of them helped other than Lyndon, Wilton and I on that particular campaign. If they did, it wasn't a White Star effort.

G: My impression is that he really admired Welly Hopkins.

R: Yes, he did.

G: Did you ever hear him talk about Welly Hopkins or indicate that this was an example?

R: Other than to think that he was a very brilliant person, and he thought a lot of him. Somewhere--I can't recall where--I have read letters that Welly Hopkins wrote to Congressman [Richard] Kleberg, recommending Lyndon as his administrative assistant, when he got that job. I don't remember where I saw those letters. But they were very good, and I think most influential in helping Lyndon get that job.

G: Did you meet LBJ's parents while you were at San Marcos?

R: I knew Mrs. Johnson. I met Mr. Johnson, but I can't say that I knew him. I knew Mrs. Johnson real well. Of course, I went to school with Sam Houston, Rebekah, Josefa and Lucia. I knew them quite well. But they were not living in San Marcos the first year that I was there, when Lyndon was rooming at the Hopper House. Mrs. Johnson moved to San Marcos the next year, and Sam Houston and the girls lived with her and went to school. Really, I had little if any contact with Lyndon after that until he became state director of the NYA.

G: Is there anything else on the San Marcos period, any anecdotes that you remember?

Roth -- III -- 8

R: No, that's been too long ago.

G: Anything about his debate activities?

R: No. I don't know. I know he went to Houston as a debate coach, but I don't recall--was he on the debate team at San Marcos?

G: I think he was. That might have been earlier though.

R: I don't really recall that. I don't know. It must have been before then.

G: Anything else on the White Stars, the organization of them?

R: The only thing I know is that through the years there was not over a hundred and twenty-five people taken in in about an eleven-year period. We pretty much stuck together and helped each other out in good times and hard times. We still meet once a year.

G: Is that right?

R: I would say that there's always from thirty to forty people there.

G: Does the organization still exist on the hill?

R: No. I would say after about 1950 they never took in any more members. What destroyed the Black Stars and the White Stars, if that's a good word, was the fact that they started letting fraternities appear on the campus.

G: Was it, to a degree, a secret organization?

R: Yes.

G: It was. Were you known as members or was that part of the secretness of it?

R: I guess apparently some people knew it, but we never admitted it.

G: Oh, really? Was this because of the university regulations on it?

Roth -- III -- 9

R: Yes.

G: Oh, I see. Okay.

R: Yes. Neither did the Black Stars ever admit belonging to the Black Stars until after they got out of school. Years after that we used to kid each other about this or that. I've heard Lyndon kid Jesse Kellam about his Black Star activities, and Kellam kid him about his White Star activities. Kellam was a Black Star because he was an athlete. Hopper was a Black Star, and he roomed with us, and so was Elvin Read. Lyndon and I were White Stars. We never discussed that in those days, but later on, after it all came to light and it didn't mean anything, well, we kidded each other about it.

G: Do you recall the details of any of this?

R: No. It was just foolish kidding.

G: Who were the organizers of the White Stars? Vernon Whiteside?

R: Well, frankly, I don't know. I can tell you who the first three names on there are: Horace Richards, Lyndon Johnson, and Vernon Whiteside. Now, that's one thing that--every year, like I say, we always had a get-together and one of the big arguments every year was who was number one. Horace claimed he was, and Lyndon said he was, and Vernon said he was. So that was always one of the things that I frankly don't know, and it really doesn't matter. It was never agreed who was the organizer. All three of them claimed it. Which one it was, I don't know.

G: Do you recall how you first learned about the organization or how you were invited?

Roth -- III -- 10

- R: Yes. Lyndon discussed it with me and asked me if I would join.
- G: Was there a meeting or did he do it by himself?
- R: No, he discussed it with me first, and then your name had to be brought up before the group. One vote no and you were kept out.
- G: Anything else about the organization?
- R: No, not that I can think of.
- G: How many members were there, do you think, when you were there in the organization?
- R: Well, I don't know. I went four straight years, which was quite unusual. The average person in those days went a year and started teaching. It would take him ten years to get his degree, just going every summer. Oh, I would say probably fifty in the four years I was there.
- G: Do you think there may have been fifty members at one time?
- R: At any one time?
- G: Yes.
- R: No.
- G: How many were there, say, the year that LBJ was a senior?
- R: I don't know. We took in one hundred twenty-one.
- G: That was all of [them].
- R: That was the total number.
- G: Was there a social component of this or was it almost exclusively political?
- R: Oh, it was social.
- G: It was social?

Roth -- III -- 11

R: Oh, mostly social, yes. I mean when we would meet every year our wives would come. We'd have a dinner and a dance.

G: No, I mean while you were still in school.

R: No, I would say it was political in school. It was to elect officers of each class and on the student council. In fact, we controlled the college after the first year.

G: Do you think that President Evans knew about the organization?

R: I don't think there's any doubt about it.

G: Really? What evidence did you have that he did?

R: None, I just don't think Prexy was stupid. I know one of the faculty members knew about it because he advised us what to do and what not to do.

G: Who was that one?

R: Mr. [Howard Mell] Greene.

G: Professor Greene, the history [professor]?

R: Yes. He was our champion on the hill.

G: What sort of advice did he give you, do you remember?

R: Well, it was whether should you try to do this or do that, or were you going too far in some things. He kept us from going overboard.

G: Did he attend the meetings?

R: Oh, no.

G: Now, LBJ was particularly close to Professor Greene, I understand.

R: Oh, yes. They were real good friends.

G: Do you think his involvement was channeled through LBJ or their friendship? How did he happen to become involved with the organization?

Roth -- III -- 12

R: I don't know. I can't answer that. I took a lot of history under Mr. Greene. I expect I was about as close to him as Lyndon during my college days. He was sort of a liberal person. He was for anybody that was going to stir up a little interest among the students, you know, get a little life on the campus. In those days you couldn't smoke, you couldn't dance, you couldn't do this and you couldn't do that. It sort of pepped things up.

G: What was Professor Greene like?

R: Well, I don't know. What do you mean what was he like?

G: Well, you've mentioned that he was somewhat of a liberal.

R: He was a very liberal individual. He was an excellent teacher in my opinion. He'd chew tobacco in class and spit it in the drawer, had sawdust to absorb [it] in.

G: Was he a good classroom performer?

R: He was excellent and he knew history, especially American history. Lyndon invited him to the White House several times after he was president. I don't know whether it was to introduce him around or get advice from him or what, but I know Lyndon admired him, thought a lot of him.

G: Do you have any indication of how he might have influenced Lyndon Johnson, either politically or--

R: No. I don't know that he did or didn't. Again, back in those days I was a freshman, and I was doing pretty well to find my way around, much less trying to delve into what seniors and teachers were up to.

G: Anything else on San Marcos?

Roth -- III -- 13

R: It was a wonderful school, in my opinion. I've never regretted going there. I made many lifelong friends. In fact, the people that I guess influenced me all my life after I got out of college were people I met at San Marcos or knew who were from San Marcos, like Jesse Kellam, Bill Deason and Lyndon Johnson.

G: What did you do after you left San Marcos?

R: I went to Diboll to teach school. I taught two-and-a-half years.

One day, unbeknownst to me, I get a long distance call from Bill Deason in Austin, wanting to know if I would like to go to work for the NYA. I said, "Well, I don't have any idea what the NYA is. I had never heard of it." I hadn't even read about it in the paper. He said, "Well, Lyndon Johnson has been made state director and he wants to talk to you and see if you aren't interested in going to work." My next reaction was, "What does it pay?" He said, "A hundred and fifty dollars a month." I said, "I'll be there in the morning." I was making a hundred and thirty-five a month, for nine months a year. I drove down to Austin and talked to Lyndon, went back and gave the school board a week's notice and went to work on December 15 for NYA.

G: This was December, 1935?

R: 1935, yes.

G: What was your job?

R: Well, my first assignment [was] as field representative, and I was in Palestine, had several counties there under my jurisdiction. At that time, NYA really hadn't been thought out in Washington or anywhere else, and we were supposed to be furnished office space by WPA. Apparently

Roth -- III -- 14

there was quite a bit of jealousy between WPA in Washington and NYA in Washington and it was rather difficult times there for a while, until they got a few problems ironed out.

G: Was there an attempt by, say, the WPA state office in San Antonio to make the NYA part of them and subordinate to them, the WPA?

R: I don't know. If there was, I wasn't familiar with it. I stayed at Palestine and Tyler about a year and a half. Then I transferred to San Antonio, as liaison between NYA and the WPA, and I never had any indication that there was. Mr. Harry Drought was director of WPA and he never left the impression with me that he was trying to take over anything. He was very cooperative and helped me in every way possible.

G: I gather in other states the NYA really was subordinate to [WPA].

R: I think in a lot of states they did have quite a few problems, but we had no problems with Mr. Drought, none whatsoever.

G: Do you think that was due to Lyndon Johnson's personality?

R: I doubt if Mr. Drought was that well acquainted with Lyndon at that time.

G: Really?

R: No. Because Bill Deason had been the NYA liaison officer in San Antonio with WPA, and he transferred to Austin as assistant state director when Lyndon was elected to Congress. I took his place.

G: He indicated that you had great success in that liaison job.

R: Well, I got along with Mr. Drought and his staff. We never had any squabbles. Then, of course, the Treasury at that time was in the building. They wrote our checks and did all the purchasing. Then eventually I took over the duties of district director of the NYA in the San Antonio

Roth -- III -- 15

area as well as my other duties, and was responsible for building La Villita. I guess you've heard of La Villita, haven't you?

G: Sure. Oh, yes. That was really one of the most impressive [projects].

R: That was probably the number-one project for NYA.

G: Let's talk about your initial work as the field supervisor now. What sort of projects did you work with?

R: Well, most of them were these little roadside projects. We were the first to build those roadside projects in the United States. Lyndon got with Jimmie Allred, who was governor, and worked out a deal with he and the State Highway Department. Our main thing was that and student aid in high school and colleges. On student aid, about all we did was allocate the funds to the schools, and the principal or the superintendent really picked the individuals who were eligible for it. Now, later on, we set up the NYA projects where we brought the people in and housed them, fed them, and trained them, but in those early days in Palestine we weren't that far along.

G: These roadside parks, do you recall whose idea the roadside parks were?

R: As far as I know they were Lyndon's.

G: Really?

R: Yes, I think they were. That's been my understanding. He went to Governor Jimmie Allred and sold him on the idea.

G: Do you know if Herbert Henderson had any input on that?

R: Well, I don't know. I knew Herbert, and he might have. I can't say, because I was not in the state office at that time. Herbert might have suggested it to Lyndon.

Roth -- III -- 16

G: I wonder if President Evans had any input on NYA programs?

R: He might have later on when we started taking people into those vocational projects where we'd house them and feed them and train them for vocational work. We had one there at San Marcos. He probably had a lot to do with a project sponsored by the college.

We had one down at Corpus Christi that was under my supervision. They were just opening the naval base there, and I went to the commander of the naval base and sold him on the idea of them hiring any of these people we trained. Then I went to the city council in Corpus Christi and got them to act as a sponsor for the project to house and feed these people. We trained them in radio and airplane mechanics. Getting ready for World War II.

G: Did they do any work at all on the Lower Colorado River project dam?

R: As far as I know we didn't. We had some projects up there. They were housed and fed there, but they were trained for welding and airplane mechanics and auto mechanics. Now, they might have worked some on a house that was built there for the Lower Colorado River Authority as a headquarters for that agency.

G: Was there a problem getting adequate funding from Washington?

R: No. As far as I know, there wasn't.

G: Was there a problem getting projects approved by Washington and appointments approved, that sort of thing?

R: No. I don't think so. Most of the trouble I found at that time was selling the public on what we were trying to do. It was new. They couldn't believe, you know, that you could do anything like that, or

Roth -- III -- 17

that you were going to train the youth. The public was the ones that you had to convince. No, Aubrey Williams and Dave Williams, who was one of his assistants, the architect, they'd almost go overboard on any project. I know one time, for example, Aubrey Williams came to Texas and he was making a speech about [how we] ought to plant palm trees all the way from Austin to El Paso.

G: Did LBJ get along pretty well with Aubrey Williams?

R: As far as I know, they did.

G: Did you ever have a chance to see them together?

R: Yes, I did. I saw them in San Antonio one time.

G: That was at a regional conference?

R: No, inspecting property in San Antonio.

If they ever had any misunderstandings, I didn't know about it.

G: Well, I'm not thinking in terms of that, I'm just wondering how their personalities--

R: Apparently they got along very well, because Texas, as far as I know, was well thought of and the projects were funded. We didn't have a lot of bickering with Washington like I've heard other states did have.

When we got La Villita going, Aubrey Williams, Dave Williams and even Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt came to San Antonio to see that project. In fact, they came down several times--not Mrs. Roosevelt, she only came the one time, but the rest came down several times. Maury Maverick was very instrumental in helping get that project going. He was kind of a sounding board for the administration. I imagine he had about as much pull with them as anybody.

Roth -- III -- 18

G: Now, LBJ had a friend in Washington with the WPA named Lawrence Westbrook. Do you remember working with him at all?

R: No. I know who he is, or was, but I don't know him. I believe he was in the Work Projects [Administration] as an engineer for NYA, if I'm not mistaken.

G: Did you have any problem getting the youths certified?

R: No. Not in those days. There were not very many people who weren't eligible. Sometimes we had problems, not with finding the people, but getting the welfare department to certify them. Really they were understaffed and I guess you might say overworked. We might have gotten a little impatient at times, because they didn't move as fast as we thought they should. But, really, we got real good cooperation from the Texas Welfare Commission and the Unemployment Commission. We worked with the Blind Commission, the Governor's Office and the Highway Department.

G: My impression is that LBJ was very conscious of operating expenses and getting as much in terms of youth employment as he could for the dollars they spent.

R: Yes, he was. He continually preached to get a dollar's worth of work for a dollar's worth of pay.

G: Did the size of Texas and the distances between cities and districts make it difficult to administer for a state-wide program like this?

R: Yes, it really did, because we didn't have that many people. For example, I was district manager here in San Antonio, but I also had Laredo,

Roth -- III -- 19

Brownsville and back around to I would guess about Hallettsville and Cuero. Well, that's an awful big territory. In those days you didn't fly; you had to drive and the roads weren't near as good as they are now. You stayed on the road most of the time. Though we were supposed to work five days a week, it was mostly seven days a week. [We] spent Saturday and Sunday traveling.

G: He organized the state into, I guess, twelve districts ultimately, didn't he?

R: Yes. I don't remember how many districts we had, but it was divided into districts.

G: Was this to make it easier to administer?

R: I'm sure it was.

G: Were there meetings in Austin?

R: Oh, yes. They'd call a meeting. Or sometimes we'd meet in Dallas, Waco or Galveston. I know one time we met with the Texas Relief Commission and Texas Employment Commission and the NYA in Galveston. Another time it might be Dallas or Waco. I believe those are the only places we ever met. I don't recall ever going to Houston to a meeting.

G: Other people have remembered late night and weekend meetings at LBJ's house in Austin. Do you remember any of those?

R: Well, I think that was mostly people that were working in the state office. I wasn't in the state office at the time Lyndon was state director.

G: Did he, as state director, come out and visit the regions and the projects very often?

Roth -- III -- 20

R: Do you mean the districts?

G: Yes.

R: Yes. He went around. I can't tell you how often. Of course, you want to remember that Lyndon was only state director a little over a year, wasn't it, before he ran for Congress.

G: He came in in August, 1935, and he left in early March, 1937.

R: Yes. 1937. About two years then, wasn't it?

G: I have a note here that there was some possibility in January, 1936, that LBJ might move his office to San Antonio from Austin.

R: I never heard that one.

G: I don't think he wanted to, but that may have been something in Washington.

R: It might have been WPA wanting him to, or Washington. I never heard that rumor though.

G: Now, he had an advisory committee.

R: Yes.

G: An advisory board. Did you have any contact with these men?

R: I knew Mr. [Alvin] Wirtz for several years. We were good friends. I knew Beauford Jester. He was a lawyer in Corsicana at this time and later became governor of Texas. That's the only two I knew. Mr. [Hayden] Perry from Robstown, I knew who he was, but I didn't know him personally. Lutcher Stark, I knew who he was, but I didn't know him personally either. There were some more people I thought that were on there. I'm surprised their names aren't on here. Judge Roy Hofheinz from Houston I believe at one time was on that advisory committee. I may be mistaken, but I was thinking he was on it.

Roth -- III -- 21

G: Did this board meet as a group very often, do you remember?

R: I really don't know, because I had no contact with them as a board.

G: Was Senator Wirtz, I wonder, active as an advisor to Lyndon Johnson?

R: Yes. He was very active. He was always a good friend of Lyndon's, before he got in Congress and after that, Lyndon talked to him a lot I know.

G: How about during this NYA period? Can you recall any examples of Senator Wirtz giving advice to him or of them working together in this way?

R: No. I wasn't in the state office at that time.

G: Okay. Anything else on the projects, the roadside parks or the freshmen college centers?

R: Well, they really weren't freshmen college centers. They were skilled training centers, teaching people a trade is really what they were. You didn't get any college credit. Now, colleges and high schools could get NYA money, and they could pay those boys and girls, I believe it was fifteen dollars a month, for duties that they assigned them on the campus. But we had very little to do with that out in the field. That was mainly handled from the state office to the school direct, and then they had people in the state office that visited these schools to see if the funds were being spent as they should be.

G: What do you think was the most successful project during Lyndon Johnson's tenure?

R: You mean when Lyndon was state director?

G: Right.

Roth -- III -- 22

R: I don't know. At that time we were just starting projects in Houston to train people to weld for building ships, and in Corpus for airplane mechanics. Really, up until then we had mostly been roadside parks. We were getting into a new phase about the time Lyndon ran for office.

G: This was one program that really seemed to benefit minorities as well as--

R: Yes. We didn't house them together, but we did have projects that would take care of all minorities. For example, we had a big project at Prairie View. Then when you got down in the Valley, well, of course that's mostly Latin American anyway, so it really wasn't a problem down there. They hadn't moved upstate like they have now.

G: Do you recall when FDR visited Texas during the Centennial in 1936?

R: In Dallas?

G: Yes.

R: Yes.

G: I am told that he stopped along the way to dedicate one of those roadside parks. Do you remember that?

R: Yes. He didn't stop.

G: Did the car slow down?

R: I couldn't tell it if it did.

G: Really?

R: No. You see, they'd laid great plans for this roadside park between Dallas and Fort Worth. Lyndon had asked several of the district directors to come into Dallas, because we knew President Roosevelt was

Roth -- III -- 23

going to be there. He thought he had made arrangements with them that Roosevelt would stop at this park and dedicate it. I don't know whether they were running behind time or what, but they did not stop, there was not a dedication.

G: Were you there when the [President came by]?

R: Yes.

G: Well, one version is that the NYA boys had their shovels up in sort of a salute fashion.

R: Yes, I think probably they did.

G: This must have been a disappointment.

R: It was.

G: Really?

R: It was kind of a letdown, really. Because we thought we were going to get to meet the President of the United States. That's something none of us had ever dreamed of before.

G: Was the project hurried along so that it would be finished in time for the President?

R: I don't know, because I had nothing to do with that, but it was complete at the time he came to Dallas.

G: What do you think happened, that he just got behind in his schedule?

R: I have no idea. I don't know whether someone misled Lyndon, or whether the President was behind in his schedule, or whether he didn't want to stop or he didn't know or wasn't told.

G: LBJ stayed in Dr. Bob Montgomery's house, I guess, at the first of this NYA period. Do you remember that?

Roth -- III -- 24

R: Yes. I remember the house. I knew it was Bob Montgomery's, that's about all.

G: Do you have any recollections of getting together there or anything?

R: Yes. If we were in town we usually went over there at night and continued talking about NYA.

G: It was really not an eight-to-five job.

R: Oh, Lord, no. It was seven days a week, ten or twelve hours a day.

G: Could most of the people who were involved work these kind of hours?

R: Yes, because we were all young. We were in our early thirties. There wasn't any old men in the group. I guess Jesse Kellam was about the oldest person. Yes, there was one elderly person over at Marshall, who had transferred from the Texas State Welfare Board. But he didn't last very long; he quit. The hours were too long. We were all young, ambitious, and gung ho.

But Lyndon worked as hard as we did. He really put the hours in.

G: I have a note here that LBJ gave a number of speeches while he was state director, including going up to Baylor to address faculty and students.

R: He gave speeches, of course, whenever he got an opportunity, but I don't recall this [one at] Baylor.

G: Another note I have indicates he went out to see John Nance Garner in Uvalde with a man named George Simpson.

R: I don't know.

G: You don't remember that. Do you remember Dick Brown's visit to Texas?

R: I'm not sure.

Roth -- III -- 25

G: I think they had a banquet for him, and I believe Governor Allred presented him with a Texas hat.

R: I don't remember it.

G: Did you get any feeling that he was on the way up at this time?

R: Well, I always knew from the day I met Lyndon he was interested in politics. But I never had the feeling, I'll be quite frank, that he would be president. Or even vice president. After he once was elected to office, there was never any doubt in my mind that with any breaks at all he could go all the way. But up until then, I'd never given any thought to it.

G: While he was NYA director, did he ever talk about the possibility of running for Congress in the future?

R: Not to my knowledge. The first time I knew he was even interested in it was when Congressman [Buchanan] died. He did call a lot of people then to see whether they thought he ought to run or not.

G: Where were you at this time?

R: I was in Tyler.

G: Did he call you to Austin?

R: No.

G: Were you still with the NYA?

R: Yes.

G: You didn't go to the funeral, or you weren't involved in any of the initial plans when he ran for Congress, is that right?

R: Well, I got involved after he announced, but not while he was making up his mind. To be quite frank, we all got involved after he announced.

Roth -- III -- 26

G: What did you do in the campaign?

R: I don't suppose I did a whole lot. I gave him some money. That was about the extent of it because we were under the Hatch Act and couldn't campaign. I did contribute to his campaign, but that's about the extent of my efforts.

G: Anything else on NYA?

R: Well, not while Lyndon was there. Is that what you mean?

G: Yes.

R: No. That's about all I can think of. Of course, he resigned when he announced. When he was elected, Kellam was made state director and Bill Deason took Kellam's place and I took Deason's place in San Antonio. After Lyndon was elected, he had an appendectomy during the campaign-- he still wasn't well. He got Bill Deason and I to go up to Marshall with him to Lady Bird's home, her father's home, and we stayed up there with him for several days after the election.

G: He stayed there I guess for about ten days, didn't he?

R: I don't really remember how long, but it was quite a while.

G: What did he do there?

R: Nothing. Talked. Argued with her daddy. (Laughter)

G: Really?

R: Yes. Mr. Taylor wasn't too liberal on some of those plans of President Roosevelt. He was rather conservative.

G: What issues would they argue? Do you remember?

R: It was mostly welfare, give-away programs. They were just getting started good under Roosevelt and Mr. Taylor wasn't too sold on those.

Roth -- III -- 27

But Lyndon, of course, who was a big kidder, would kid him about certain programs.

G: Did they seem to get along well?

R: Oh, yes. It was all in good humor.

G: Who else was there?

R: Bill Deason and myself, and of course Lady Bird. I believe at that time Mr. Taylor had just married again, and his wife was there.

G: Did you go there with him, with Mr. Johnson?

R: No, Bill and I went up there together. I think Lyndon was already there, as well as I recall.

G: I think at that interval Senator Wirtz also came over there.

R: He wasn't there when I was there. Now, he might have come up there some during that time.

G: How about Wright Patman? Do you remember him being there?

R: No, I don't.

G: Cameron McElroy?

R: No. I don't remember anyone being there except Bill and Lyndon, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, and Lady Bird.

G: Did he want you there for work reasons or for just social reasons, to sit and talk?

R: Friendship.

G: Really. What did he talk about?

R: I don't know, just school days, NYA, most anything, politics.

G: It was during that time that he made the arrangements to meet FDR in Galveston.

Roth -- III -- 28

R: Yes. I think it was after that that he met him in Galveston, wasn't it?

G: No, this was before.

R: I've forgotten.

G: I think he rode to Fort Worth.

R: We must have been down there before he met Roosevelt. I've forgotten.
It's been a long time ago.

G: You don't recall anything on the planning of that Roosevelt meeting in Galveston?

R: No. I believe Governor Jimmy Allred made the arrangements.

G: Let's try to sum up Lyndon Johnson and the NYA. Let me get more of your general impressions, how he worked as an administrator, anything that you feel is significant.

R: Well, I think Lyndon was very sincere, and I think he was interested in helping the unfortunate, whether they were a minority or otherwise. He was a hard worker. In fact, he was a driver in a lot of respects. He didn't expect anyone to do any more than he did, but there were times when he'd almost drive you to the breaking point on hours of work in a day and in a week. As far as I know, everybody in the organization liked him and respected him. I never heard any of them criticize him. In fact, I've never heard anybody that worked for NYA that was critical of Lyndon. Most of the criticism that I've heard from people he knew in college were the ones that didn't get to work for NYA--maybe I shouldn't say "didn't get to," but didn't work for NYA. Sometimes it makes you think that they were jealous. I think a lot of the criticism

Roth -- III -- 29

that has come has been people who were jealous of him rather than who were dissatisfied with his actions or what he did.

G: To your knowledge, did he have pretty good relations with Congressman Kleberg during this time, while he was NYA director?

R: I doubt it.

G: What do you think happened there?

R: I don't know. I shouldn't say he got mad because Lyndon left as his secretary, because he gave Sam Houston the job. Unless Kleberg was opposed to those types of programs. Maybe he opposed WPA, and the NYA. I don't know. I do know that there was a feeling of ill will after Lyndon got elected to Congress.

G: Anything else on the NYA period?

R: Well, I think NYA is one of the greatest programs that the Roosevelt Administration put into effect. In the first place, it took lots of youth off of the streets and gave them some money. It furnished them food and taught them a trade, and it prepared this country for World War II. I really and truly think we would have had a lot harder time building the equipment and armaments that we finally put together had it not been for NYA teaching the youth how to weld, to build ships, to build and repair radios, TVs and airplanes. I just don't think there's any way in the world that you could put a money value on it, but I do think that it really helped win the war and shorten the time that it lasted.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson continue to take an active interest in the Texas NYA after he was elected to Congress?

Roth -- III -- 30

R: Yes. I can't tell you how much because he and I never discussed that part of it. But after I moved to the regional office--Texas finally became a regional office and Kellam was the regional director, I went up there as administrative assistant--Lyndon was very active and was very helpful, I know, in getting money for us and getting projects approved. If anything came up where there was any controversy, I feel quite sure it was discussed with Lyndon, and he helped iron it out.

G: Are you aware of him trying to keep up with what was going on and the progress of various things?

R: He knew about the projects, yes. Now, how well he kept up with the progress I can't say, but he knew about the projects.

G: Shall we move to your work in OPA? Is there anything that we've missed along the way?

R: No, not that I know of. I enjoyed my work with the NYA very, very much. It beat teaching school in many ways, though I didn't mind teaching school. I liked the youth, but back in those days it wasn't a very good paying job.

G: How did the La Villita project evolve? Do you remember who thought that up and how it [came about]?

R: I have an idea that Maury Maverick dreamed up this project with Dave Williams' help, who was a Texan and an architect under Aubrey Williams in Washington. I think that Maury is the one that dreamed it up, as he was very interested in Texas history and especially San Antonio's history and restoration. About the time I went to San Antonio, he

Roth -- III -- 31

was talking to Kellam about the project. Later on, I took over the responsibility of that project. Of course, I didn't build it, but it was under my supervision.

G: Was there much opposition to it?

R: No, except when Maury's term of office was up as mayor of San Antonio and he was running for re-election, C. K. Quinn, who was a district judge, resigned as a judge--I don't know whether he resigned or not, maybe you didn't have to resign in those days, but anyway, he ran against Maury for mayor. He made La Villita a campaign issue about how money was being wasted, and if elected he was going to tear it down. Of course the day after the election he called me up and said, "I guess you understand that was just politics, don't you?" I said, "Well, I assumed it was. Since those were federal funds, I didn't think you'd tear it down."

But Maury and I got to be real close friends as a result of the project. I learned to really like him and admire him, in spite of some of his shooting from the hip at times.

G: Would you say he was not as cautious or discreet as Lyndon Johnson?

R: Oh, by no means was he, discreet or cautious.

G: How did they get along together?

R: You know, I don't know. I don't know that I ever saw them together. I guess they got along all right. They were on the same side politically and I'm assuming they did. But I never heard Maury criticize Lyndon or Lyndon, Maury.

G: We always hear that they were mutual admirers.

Roth -- III -- 32

R: Mutual admiration society, huh? I wouldn't doubt it. I know I had no trouble with Maury whatsoever. I feel sure that Lyndon was helping guide this project through in Washington, because Maury was then mayor and no longer in Washington and wasn't up there to handle it.

G: Did you do any work for LBJ during that 1941 Senate race, the first one, where he lost to W. Lee O'Daniel?

R: No. I was with the OPA. Again, the Hatch Act had me.

G: Did you have much contact with him while you were in OPA?

R: Yes, quite a bit.

G: Do you want to talk about that?

R: Well, of course everybody in OPA knew that Lyndon and I were friends. In fact, I could see the handwriting on the wall for NYA back in about late 1940. So I wrote Lyndon and told him I felt like NYA was going to be abandoned, and I'd applied for a commission in the Navy and been turned down, and I'd like to stay in government work. So he wrote me back and told me that they were setting up an OPA office in San Antonio, and that Frank "Cootz" Covert who was a Buick dealer in Austin was going to be the district director of OPA, and he'd come around to see me. He showed up the next day and hired me as his assistant. So I moved to San Antonio. He had never worked for the government in his life, so he left all the government red tape for me to handle. I hired all employees through Civil Service and organized the office for seventy-five counties.

G: What sort of involvement did you have with LBJ here?

Roth -- III -- 33

R: Well, from time to time, of course, some person would complain about a food stamp, a gasoline rationing, rent control, et cetera, or something. and we'd get letters from Lyndon requesting information on the case.

G: Shall we go into 1948 or is there something here in the interim that we need to pick up?

R: Well, no. I stayed with OPA for four years, and after the war was over in October of 1945, I resigned and took on a dealership for Friedrich Refrigeration.

G: And you worked in Corpus Christi then?

R: Yes.

G: What did you do in the 1948 campaign?

R: Well, I managed his campaign for the Fourteenth Congressional District. I'd only been in Corpus Christi about a year and a half, and Lyndon called me in wanting to know if I'd manage his campaign. I told him I was new in Corpus Christi, and I just got in business. "I don't even know whether my partner"--who was Horace Richards--"[would like it]. I'll have to discuss it with him. I'll also have to see what Friedrich thinks about it," because I knew the Friedrichs were Republicans. He said, "Okay, call me back and let me know." Horace said yes; he didn't care. I called the Friedrichs and they said no, no politics. So I called Lyndon and said, "No, they said I couldn't do it." He said, "Well, let me see what I can do." Well, the story is that he went over and talked to them the first day, and they said no. He went back the next day and talked to them, and they said yes. So he called me

Roth -- III -- 34

and he said, "The Friedrichs have agreed for you to go ahead." I said, "Okay." That was about February or March. Of course, the election, the first primary was in June in those days, and in July the second one was held, and that usually ended it. Well, we got in that big hassle and that election work thing lasted until November. I didn't get in that business from March until November. Of course, [we] didn't have any money, because Coke Stevenson and George Peddy from Houston, the oil man had tied up all the available money. We didn't have any money, so it was just a door-to-door thing and getting what few people I could to help me. [We] passed out literature. I did get some good help from Ed Linkenhoger of Corpus Christi, who owned Texas Transport, and Burt Potter, who was an attorney, Neal Marriott, who was an attorney. I guess that was about the extent of people that really stuck their neck out for him. I went to some other people around there that I knew had money, and they all said, "We've already promised Peddy. He's in the oil business and we're in the oil business. But we'll sure help you if he gets in the run-off." Well, when the run-off came you couldn't find them; they had gone. They left town, because they felt that Coke Stevenson was going to win it. He had such a lead in the first primary.

It was real interesting. I had, I believe, twenty-one counties. I appointed a chairman in each county and visited them from time to time. There was a couple of counties that I didn't work in, Jim Wells and Duval. I knew Mr. [George] Parr. I went over and talked to him

Roth -- III -- 35

and told him that Lyndon had asked me to be a campaign manager. He said, "I'm not going to give you any money, and I don't want you to give me any money. You don't come to Duval County or Jim Wells County. I'll handle those counties, and you handle the rest of them." Thank goodness that's the way it worked out, because I didn't get involved.

G: I guess the animosity between Parr and Coke Stevenson stemmed from some appointment.

R: I don't know.

G: Do you recall the history of that?

R: No, I don't. I don't think it was Coke Stevenson. I think it was, oh, Allan Shivers, that's who Parr fell out with over an appointment.

G: What happened there?

R: Well, there was a man by the name of Luther Jones who had been on Lyndon's debate team in Houston. He went to school--I don't know where, I think Harvard, but I'm not sure--and later on I think he worked as a clerk in the Supreme Court. Then he came back to Corpus Christi and started practicing law. According to the rumor, Allan Shivers had promised George Parr that he would appoint Luther Jones to a district judgeship in the district that had a vacancy, and he changed his mind or appointed someone else. George got mad, and according to rumor, Governor Shivers told Parr to pick someone else, and Parr refused to do so.

G: Jones had been an attorney?

R: Yes. He was a well-known attorney, a very brilliant lawyer, still down there. I imagine he's got a wonderful practice.

Roth -- III -- 36

G: Did Mr. Parr say anything about LBJ in that meeting? Did he talk about why he was willing to deliver these counties?

R: No, I'm sure he and Lyndon were good friends. They've known each other in other political battles, and that part wasn't discussed. He just told me that he'd handle those two counties and for me to handle the rest of it. And we gave him a good lead in the other counties, too, a real good one.

G: Do you recall any of the details of the aftermath of the election and the adjusted totals and all of that?

R: Oh, all I know is what I read in the paper. That county is about the only one that was contested down there. Of course there were other counties contested--Galveston, Dallas, parts of east Texas--but those were Coke Stevenson deals, and they didn't seem to get upset about any miscounting in those.

G: The allegation, of course, has been made by Luis Salas that LBJ went down there himself.

R: Yes, I read that. I don't believe that, never did believe it, still don't believe it. I think that was just an elderly person being led along the primrose path by a Republican lawyer who had been fighting Lyndon since the day that election was held. That attorney was the one that represented Coke Stevenson.

G: Anything else on that campaign?

R: No. It was long, like I say, a long campaign. Then we had this state convention in Fort Worth where the State Democratic Committee voted by one vote to name Lyndon the winner.

Roth -- III -- 37

G: I want to ask you about that, but during the campaign, President Truman's train went through there. I believe LBJ met it at Corpus, didn't he? Remember that, the 1948 Campaign Whistlestop? You weren't part of that?

R: No.

G: Did you travel with LBJ when he was down there speaking?

R: Yes. I went to all those county seats in the Fourteenth District with him.

G: He must have done particularly well in that area, since it was his old district.

R: Oh, yes.

G: What did you do about the King Ranch?

R: Well, I had a campaign manager in Kingsville by the name of Harold Brown and we carried Kleberg County. Of course, I didn't go to the King Ranch and solicit any help.

G: Let's talk about the Fort Worth convention. Were you there?

R: Yes.

G: Just recount that as you remember it.

R: Well, the only thing that I remember is that night when the committee, around this big table, were voting for Coke Stevenson or Lyndon Johnson to certify them as the candidate of the Democratic Party. There was a lawyer from Alice--Ed Lloyd--[who] made one of the best speeches I ever heard in my life in favor of Lyndon. Then this San Antonio attorney who dragged this poor man up the primrose path was there talking for Coke. They voted, and as well as I recall, it seemed like to me there were

Roth -- III -- 38

twenty-one districts. I may be wrong about that. But anyway, when they got through voting, it was tied and there was one person missing. Now who went and got him out of the men's restroom I don't know. Everybody I've ever talked to claims they were the one, from John Connally on up and down. But anyway, somebody found him in the men's restroom, and he came up and voted for Lyndon. Of course, bedlam broke loose then with Lyndon's supporters.

G: LBJ had gotten some pretty powerful legal talent there, didn't he?

R: Yes.

G: Did you witness any of that?

R: No. I just read about that. He had some lawyers out of Washington who were helping him. No, I wasn't in on any of that. I'm sure Senator Wirtz had a lot to do with it, too.

G: Who ran that 1948 campaign? Do you remember?

R: I guess John [Connally] did.

G: Really?

R: Yes. Probably Lyndon ran it, but John was known as the state campaign manager.

G: What about Senator Wirtz? What role did he play in it I wonder.

R: I don't know. I'm sure he was helpful. I'm not sure whether he was still under secretary of the interior at that time or not.

G: Anything else on the campaign?

R: No. Of course, I got a lot of help out of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. Bob Jackson, who was editor at that time, was an old friend

Roth -- III -- 39

of Lyndon's, had roomed with him in Washington. Bob was secretary to the congressman from west Texas when Lyndon was secretary to Kleberg, and they had become good friends. He gave me lots and lots of help, and lots of advice, good publicity.

G: How about Roy Miller? Was he still around then?

R: No, he was in Washington. He was a lobbyist. In fact, I don't know that he ever lived in Corpus Christi. He represented Corpus Christi as a lobbyist.

G: Anything else on the 1948 campaign?

R: Not that I can think of offhand. You've got to ask me the questions, I can't think of them.

G: Did you have much contact with Lyndon Johnson after he went into the Senate?

R: Yes. When Lyndon would come back to Texas, which was quite frequently, and he would usually invite me if he was in San Antonio or, of course, if he came to Corpus Christi, to be with him. Yes, I had quite a bit of contact with him. Probably had less when he was vice president than any time.

G: Do you want to talk about the subsequent contacts? Any visits to the Ranch or the White House?

R: Well, I went to the Ranch quite a few times. He'd call meetings up there of people he considered his district people, like me in Corpus Christi and somebody else from somewhere else and so forth. We'd go up there and spend the night and talk. I was in Washington several

Roth -- III -- 40

times and saw him up there. I was with him not long before he died. He was over at San Marcos and set up a program of picking the outstanding athlete at San Marcos College every year in the name of Jesse Kellam. We raised quite a bit of money for that. Then I went on up to the Ranch with him that night, he and Bill and I, and spent the night. It wasn't long after that he died.

You know, there was one thing that impressed me. When we were leaving San Marcos, he was flying in an army helicopter. And this just goes to show you that a person, when he gets to be president, probably never gets it out of his mind that somebody's trying to kill him or might kill him. There was a man standing off to the side that had a long beard, his hair wasn't taken care of, his appearance was not good. The minute Lyndon saw that man he asked the Secret Service if they'd checked him out. That was the first time that I realized that a person could be scared. And he wasn't president then; he was out. I guess fear is instilled in you.

G: Did he reminisce about old days at San Marcos that time?

R: Oh, yes. But you know, he never did discuss much about when he was president. He very seldom ever brought that up. The last time I was with him, we were riding around the Ranch and he was talking more about what good public relations Nixon had with the press and how well he was doing. That was his first term, before he got in the hassle with Congress. But he said, "I just can't understand how he's getting all that good publicity." And he was, at first.

Roth -- III -- 41

G: Sure. What do you think he regarded as his happiest years, Lyndon Johnson?

R: Oh, I don't know. I couldn't say about that. I would think that his happiest days would probably have been when he was a senator, because he was really at the zenith of his ability to get things done with Congress.

G: Anything else about that last time you were together?

R: No. We just rode around the Ranch and looked at the cattle and the deer. He asked me if I wanted to kill a deer, and I said, "No. I wouldn't know what to do with it if I did." He carried me over to a day school they had there for minority children. He had to go through that and give them some candy and pat them all on the back. Then we rode up to Fredericksburg and back out to the school where he first went to school. Of course, he was reminiscing about things that happened when he was in grammar school out there.

G: Anything else you want to add?

R: No, not that I can think of.

G: I certainly do thank you.

R: You're welcome.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Fenner Roth

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Fenner Roth of Lufkin, Texas do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on October 11, 1978 at Lufkin, Texas and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

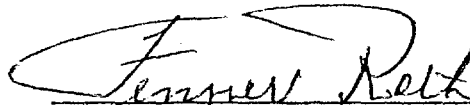
(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.



Donor

6-5-1980

Date

Acting



Archivist of the United States

June 18, 1980

Date