

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BEN SHEPPERD (Tape 1)

INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH KADERLI

December 30, 1968

K: This is December 30, 1968. I am Elizabeth Kaderli; I am in the office of Mr. John Ben Shepperd in Odessa, Texas. Mr. Shepperd is the legal counsel for Odessa Natural Gas. Is that correct, Mr. Shepperd?

S: Yes, that's right.

K: I am here principally to talk to you about your interest and participation in conservation, both natural and historical in the State of Texas. But before we get to the main part of the interview, I would appreciate it if you would give me a brief resume of your activities in politics in Texas from about 1941 to about 1964, and anything beyond that that you might consider pertinent. Now I believe that this started about the time you finished law school at Texas, is that correct?

S: Yes, that's correct. I finished in 1941 and even during the time that I was a student at The University of Texas I was very interested in public affairs and in politics, and I had been a county attorney, an assistant district attorney, in Gregg County, Gladewater, my birthplace in the eastern part of the state, and then by appointment by Governor Allan Shivers, I served nearly four years as Secretary of State of Texas. And then I served two elective terms as Attorney General of Texas. I have always been interested in historical preservation; I've liked Texas history; I've been a collector of Texana from during the time I was in the University. I have also had a collection of books that I think became pretty valuable that I started back in those days on the Presidency, books by, of, and about Presidents of the

United States. In 1961 I became by appointment by Governor Price Daniel a member of the Texas State Historical Survey Committee. This is the official state agency for historical preservation and marking. Simultaneous with that I became President affiliate, the Texas Historical Foundation. I have also served as President of the Permian Basin Historical Society; that is an organization that is composed of amateur historians of the Permian Basin of West Texas and of southeastern New Mexico.

K: I understand, Mr. Shepperd, that you also had a good deal to do with the Chamber of Commerce and when you were younger with the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Is that correct?

S: Yes, that's correct. I served, well, just a few months after I got out of school, as President of the Gladewater Junior Chamber of Commerce. I had previously served even during the time I was in school as a state director for that organization; the state director--the representative that attends all the conventions and meetings and then two years later--that would be during the war, it must have been after the war, about 1946 or '47--I served as President of the Gladewater Chamber of Commerce, the senior organization. Then in 1946 I was elected--I'm a little fuzzy on dates here, when you get my age, you know.

K: No, age has nothing to do with it.

S: In 1941, later on--no, it was in 1942 I was elected President of the Texas Junior Chamber of Commerce; that was in the early stages of the war and that was more of a holding action than anything else before I went into the service. Then when I got out of the service in 1946 I was elected a vice president of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce. And then the next year I was elected in 1947 as President of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce. I've also served as one of the founders and the

director of Junior Chamber International which is the international organization of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. I've served as a director of the East Texas Chamber of Commerce, which is a regional organization serving approximately a hundred counties in the eastern part of the state. When I moved to Odessa I served for eleven years as a director of the Odessa Chamber of Commerce; two years as its president; and I've also served one year as president of the West Texas Chamber of Commerce which is the counterpart in West Texas of the regional Chamber concept; it covers some 120 organizations in the western part of the state.

K: You're not currently involved with that? For some reason I thought you were presently representing--or had some office in the West Texas--

S: I'm still a member of the executive committee and the board of directors of that organization. I also founded the Permian Basin Chambers of Commerce which is an organization composed of chambers of commerce in the Permian Basin of West Texas and southeastern New Mexico. I am presently the secretary of that organization.

K: Would you say that these involvements in your chamber of commerce work was the beginning of your political career--it was how you met some of these people? In what way did you actually become involved in politics; in other words, when you were appointed Secretary of State, how did this come about?

S: It possibly came about partially as a result of junior chamber and chamber of commerce activities, because Governor Shivers had wanted someone who could work in the field of industrial development in the state, and who had some contacts; also someone that might be able to represent him at various official functions in that type of thing. It's kind of like chicken and egg; they probably came together. Really I would say that some of the chamber of commerce activity resulted from political involvement instead

or vice versa. I've always been able to keep my civic activities separate from my politics; I think that's necessary for anybody that tries to do any civic work or gets in politics, either one.

K: Then at this time, that would have been--almost the eight-year period that you were in Austin, in government service in Austin. Almost four as Secretary of State and four as Attorney General. Did you during any of this time find yourself involved in this conservation background, or is this still just an offshoot--just one of the things that you were involved in?

S: It was just actually one of the things that I was involved with. And actually I was involved with the historical preservation facet more than in conservation in its general concept.

K: Because this was an early interest of yours, it naturally involved you in it. Now, I think we can come to the central part of the interview which has to do with the help that you gave the governor and Mr. Odom at the time that the LBJ State Park--I believe that's the official title--was under some discussion as to how the monies had been acquired for the purchase of this property. Those of us who read the newspapers--this was what we saw, the difficulties that were involved; and then we read that you were appointed to--well, suppose you tell me what your appointment was.

S: This must have been in 1967--I think the activities actually started in 1964. The Parks and Wildlife Commission had designated an area which joins the LBJ Ranch as the Lyndon B. Johnson State Park; there were no tax monies available for acquisition of property or for the development of it, and as individuals the three members of the Parks and Wildlife Commission--Mr. Will Odom, a very prominent geologist and petroleum engineer from Austin, was chairman of that group; Judge A. W. Moursund

from Johnson City and Blanco, who is a close friend and confidant and is also the trustee of the Lyndon Johnson Foundation and Trust, was another member of it; and the third member was James Dellinger, a very prominent contractor and civic leader from Corpus Christi. In their individual capacity they raised some money to acquire some of this land, and there was a good deal of newspaper criticism of the fact that they raised this money as public officials--in other words, the unjustified charges were made that they had used their positions to pressure people to give money to the projects.

Then in late 1966 or the first part of 1967, I was asked by Governor John Connally and Mr. Odom, and Governor Connally had asked me in behalf of the members of the commission, to take over this project, that is, the custody of the money. Some money had been spent under the setup to acquire some of the basic land and to--

K: Was that state monies?

S: No, it was all individual money. Up until the last year, there has been no state or federal money that had gone into the project--none went into the acquisition of the land.

And I agreed to do this. And I was designated by the commission as administrator of the fund, and I have continued to act since that time in that capacity, and have raised some money to finish the acquisition; and there's still some money left that we eventually plan to put into the development of the park itself.

Let me say--in the first place, I suppose the reason that I was selected for this thing was because I had been very vocal in my support of this whole endeavor, both individually and as president of the Texas State Historical Survey Committee, and as president of the West Texas

Chamber of Commerce because this area is in the region served by the West Texas Chamber of Commerce. Because I think that, first, the site for this proposed park is an excellent one; it goes right along the banks of the Pedernales River; it has got a lot of natural beauty in it; from a botanical standpoint, there are any number of fine specimens there; it's really a showplace for West Texas and for the Edwards Plateau area--a geographic area that crops out very near to this; it's a gateway to West Texas; it has four historical structures on it, all of which have been designated by the State of Texas as recorded historical Texas landmarks worthy of preservation. And I imagine that that was the reason that I was given this dubious honor, because I had publicly come to the assistance of these men who were operating in their individual capacities and pointed out that I thought that it was a very good thing for the State of Texas; and I think that history will vindicate their judgment.

I have made a pretty good study of the homes of the various Presidents of the United States, and you know about 85 percent of them are operated by the federal government; and have noticed particularly in the last ten or fifteen years since the heavy emphasis upon preservation on the part of our national government, the outrageous prices that they've had to pay for land either adjoining the homes or the farms or whatever the case might be. And I think that this effort on the part of Messrs. Odom and Moursund and Dellinger has really been a wonderful thing for the State of Texas, and for the nation. For example, I guess it was session before last of Congress, I believe some \$800,000 was appropriated to acquire additional land around the Eisenhower home in Gettysburg; you know, he has given this to the federal government, that they will get upon his death. Well, Theodore Roosevelt's home at Sagamore, and several other places that there has been

large expenditures of money just to protect the environs from the actual historic site itself. So I think that the LBJ State Park is going to be a good thing for Texas; and of course both the President and Mrs. Johnson have told me on numerous occasions that they plan to leave the LBJ Ranch where the ranch house is located, which directly adjoins this park, either to the State of Texas or to the federal government. And I feel like this intention will be made public shortly after they get out of office; I think they would already have done it if it hadn't been for some of the criticism that has been attendant to this project.

From a political standpoint, this project was very ill-timed because it started shortly after the President's great victory in 1964 and I think that a lot of the public and a lot of the media, particularly some of the people in lower echelons of the media, had chapped under the fact that they had to brag on the President during the 1964 election; and that they seized upon this thing to really be critical of him. It should never have been borne in the controversy that it was borne in, because this project will stand on its own merits; and I have no doubt but that history will vindicate this. Some people have unjustly said, of course, that the President was just trying to get it to protect his own property and personal aggrandizement and that type of thing, but that's absolutely not true. Anybody that goes by there and sees where the main building--or the administration building--of the park is now being constructed--and even without field glasses, you can look over right into the front of the LBJ ranch house and observe the swimming pool and all the other things they have there--would know that if they had acquiesced to any part in this program just to protect their own privacy, certainly that would not have been located there; and no development would actually have materialized as far as the project itself is concerned.

There has been a good deal of controversy, as a matter of fact, as to whether or not the people who gave money to the park fund would be publicized; they will be publicized. Frankly, for the last year I haven't publicized the names because I felt like it wasn't any of the blankety-blank business of the media anyway; and they've been so obnoxious and so unfair about it that I've gotten rather hardheaded about it. But they will be publicized-- put in an attractive donor niche in the new administration building which is in the plan; and actually these plans have been on file in the Park Department for some time where anybody could have gone in and looked at them if they'd wanted to, and actually seen where they were going to be exhibited. In addition to that, we're going to have a big party--a party for all of the donors when we get ready to dedicate the administration building.

K: You're a perfect person to interview because you answer the questions before they're asked, and this is a great help to me. This in particular, of course I had wondered who the critics of this project were; why were people criticizing it? It seemed to me fairly obvious that the things that you have said are so; that we must protect some of our natural resources--natural beauty--and that this simply made sense. Who were the people who were critical of it? Do I understand you to say that they were people who were chafing under this having had to sort of go along with the party, shall we say, and stay behind the President when maybe in some instances they would rather not have? Are these the people who would have been griping about--?

S: I think that's a lot of the basic thing; of course, Jimmy Banks of the Dallas News has been the most vociferous of the critics; Stuart Long, head of the Long News Service in Austin, has been another. Neither one of those

have ever supported except maybe under duress the President in any of his endeavors, either personally, nor have the media they represent ever supported him. I think we all kind of hit these times that I've referred to as a vacuum, where maybe there's a lack of news and there's a misunderstanding of motives, and at times the general public is too prone to criticize and to jump up before they're informed; and I think that this came along about this time. There's no question in my mind but what a lot of it was caused by the fact that Judge Moursund has been so close to the President; I don't think this was Judge Moursund's idea--I think this came from the staff of the Parks and Wildlife Department--that has always been my understanding, at least they claim credit for it in private.

K: Would it have not been true possibly that somebody did complain down the line about having been asked to give money, and complained to the wrong person--say somebody in the news media? In other words, somebody was a little miffed because they'd been asked to give some money; here they thought, 'Well, I've done my all with this political campaign, and darn it, I'm not going to help pay for the park.'

S: I imagine that's so. Of course in any solicitation--of course, all of my solicitation has been by mail, but even then a lot of people just don't like to give money or anything; and they don't like to be asked for money. And even if they turn you down or you never hear from them, a lot of people try to find some justification for not doing it.

K: As far as pressure tactics, they actually said pressure tactics had been applied--

S: Yes, those allegations have been made.

K: How do you feel about this? Obviously you don't feel that it's true, but do you think this is simply an exaggeration of the situation? When a man

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says, "I was pressured into doing this, I had to do it because I'd lose my job,"--do you think there's any truth at all in this kind of nonsense?

S: I don't think there's any truth at all because I have asked the media to give any instances and said that if anybody was pressured in anything, that I'd give them their money back. And never had one instance from anybody who gave money or from the media either who came up with one concrete case.

K: You are a friend of Mr. Odom's. Was it Mr. Odom who called you originally and said, "Would you do this for me?" or was it the governor himself who called you? Was it the President? How were you contacted to actually take over in this sticky situation?

S: Governor Connally. And he made it clear that he was making the request on behalf of Mr. Odom and the other two members of the commission.

K: Did he feel that an outsider--someone who was not actually on the board--?

S: Yes, someone who was not a public official, so to speak.

K: Did you have a title as such? Were you sort of a holder of the funds?

S: I believe it was administrator.

K: Of the collection of the funds.

S: Yes, that's right.

K: You are still serving in that capacity, then?

S: Yes, I sure am.

K: And do you anticipate that this will continue much longer?

S: No, I don't think so. I think as soon as we get the final plans for all of the exhibits and things that we'll put the rest of the money directly into the park, and then my responsibilities will be discharged at that time. And after, of course, the donor list is prepared and the buzzards get a chance at it.

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K: Then probably another year to two years.

S: I would say it wouldn't be that long; I would say it would be later on in 1969. I have, and this has been made available to the press, affidavits from all three members of the commission that no person was ever pressured to give money to this fund; and that no money had been given by anybody who did business with the commission or the State Parks and Wildlife Department, or that had any matters pending before that agency. And I think only two papers have ever published--the San Angelo Standard Times and the Austin Statesman are the only ones that ever published the fact that these affidavits were in my possession. And there's also a statement from the executive director of the Parks and Wildlife Department. The commission as a policy-setting agency appointed by the governor, and then the department in turn is appointed by them; and they actually administer the day-to-day affairs of all the Parks and Wildlife matters in the State of Texas. And the executive director stated that he had examined the list of donors, and no person had any matters pending before either the commission or the department.

K: As we discussed earlier, you no longer are being attacked, you or the Parks Board, about this situation; other issues have come over it and have been more important than it, and so forth. But it would appear that these critics of it have been silenced. Do you think this is--?

S: I'd say that most of them have been silenced; I think Jimmy Banks had a column within the last two or three days and said that I had made a statement that I was too busy to get this list up, and he hoped that I would have more time during the new year to make the list available.

I might say that not one penny has ever been spent out of this fund for the administration of it; that I have paid or my company has paid all

the postage and all of the fees and everything else that has been attendant to it. And the records show that none was spent before I got the money. In other words, we have had court costs; we've had some condemnation suits; and we've had lawyers' fees and that type of thing; but there have been no administrative funds spent--not a telephone call, not a sheet of paper, nor a stamp, has ever been spent out of this fund to take care of the administration of it. And it's a gratis job; and I think that decency demands that I do it at my own good time. I've also told some people who've written a letter about it that if they want to come to Odessa and look over the list, they'll be welcome to it.

K: These condemnation proceedings had to do with the purchase of part of that land, as I recall; now that has been taken care of--the settlement was made with those people?

S: Yes, all the land has been paid for.

K: What you're doing now is for your facilities in the park itself?

S: That's correct.

K: And the development of it--the clearing of it and this kind of thing.

S: Yes.

K: I was thinking that Mr. Odom has said to me something about state bonds had been voted. Now was this since this issue came up? It was for the purchase of park lands and conservation in Texas.

S: Yes. \$75,000,000 worth of bonds were voted last year to purchase new parks.

K: In other words, we may avoid this kind of thing in the future if we have funds that are available for this kind of thing. I wonder if this was more or less an outgrowth of this particular situation?

S: Probably not. Because I think that this was really more of an outgrowth and awareness on the part of people in the state that we needed more and

better parks to take care of growing recreational problems, and to attract travelers.

K: Briefly, you are still with the historical association--?

S: No, my term expired last year--

K: Mr. Latimer's--?

S: No, Mr. [Truett] Latimer is the paid--the executive director.

K: Right. But I mean you were with his organization, and you're no longer serving in that capacity?

S: No.

K: What are your official capacities? You are administrator of this LBJ State Park, and there's another title--Texas Industrial Commission or something?

S: I'm not on the Industrial Commission any more. That term expired on it last year. I'm a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Recreational and Natural Beauty, which is a national advisory council appointed by the President, of which Mr. Laurence Rockefeller of New York is the chairman, and moving light in it. I also serve as chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Guadalupe Mountains National Park, which is a national park about 220 miles west of Odessa. And I've been chairman of that group for some eight years, and have worked to bring about the establishment of this national park.

K: You're on the Texas Fine Arts board?

S: No, I'm not on that any more. I was the first chairman and organizer of that. I also had served as chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Fort Davis National Historic Monument at Fort Davis.

K: Well, it seems to me you certainly were the logical choice to help iron this situation out, both from a businessman's viewpoint and from your personal interest viewpoint. And I think that probably answers most of the questions that I had.

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BEN SHEPPERD (Tape 2)

INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH KADERLI

April 3, 1969

K: This is April 3, 1969, and I am in the office of Mr. John Ben Shepperd in Odessa, Texas. When last I spoke to Mr. Shepperd, it was the last week in December of 1968, at which time he talked to me for some hour about his connection with the LBJ Park project. Since that time, I read an article in the Texas Observer, the date on which was December 13, 1968, which I had not seen previous to my visit here. I wrote Mr. Shepperd to ask if he would see me again to answer some of the issues raised in this particular thing in the paper, and he said yes, he would; and he is going to answer directly now with very few questions from me, because I have sent him a copy of it and he has some things to say with regard to it.

S: The article mentioned brings up the old question as to when the names of donors to the park is going to be issued; and Mr. Ronnie Dugger, the publisher of the Texas Observer, has had a letter from me for some six or eight months in which I told him that the names would be released and would become part of the permanent record of the park itself. The Texas Observer has been a bitter critic of President Johnson's for many years; they actively fought his nomination in 1960, and I do not consider the accusation serious, but prejudiced and done in an effort to excite people; they're full of false accusations and untrue statements.

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By John Ben Shepperd

to the

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11/10/70

Harold W. Linscott - for
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March 3, 1975