

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 8, 1979  
INTERVIEWEE: G. PRESTON SMITH (with comments by Mrs. Smith)  
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE  
PLACE: Mr. Smith's residence, Austin, Texas

### Tape 1 of 1

- G: Mr. Smith, let's begin with your background briefly and how you came to San Marcos, where you were born and how you ended up at San Marcos at the same time Lyndon Johnson was there.
- S: I was born about eight miles west of Georgetown in 1895. My high school work was completed at El Campo, Texas in 1912, at which time El Campo offered only ten grades. However, eleven were required by standard high schools. The result of that shortage was that in 1916 and 1917, I attended the San Marcos Normal--later to be San Marcos Teachers College, later to become Southwest Texas State Teachers College, now Southwest Texas [State] University, I guess--for my eleventh year of high school work.

Then came war. I enrolled in the army December 15, 1917 and remained in the army as a noncommissioned officer for about a year and a half. By that time, war was over and we soon anticipated the return from Europe of hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Accordingly, I accepted a position in the Adjutant General's Department, San Antonio, Texas as an army field clerk, which was not a commissioned office and was not an enlisted office but was an appointive office. After three

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years and seven months, and after having discharged what I considered to be a full-fledged army from Europe, I again sought civilian life and entered the teaching field.

In the years 1925-26-27, I attended San Marcos Teachers College and there met Lyndon Johnson. My association with him was personal and professional and educational, and I held the members of his family very close to my heart. I knew his father before him, I knew his sister Rebekah. I did not know Sam Houston Johnson. I did not know his saintly mother. I did know his Uncle George who taught social science with me in Sam Houston High School in Houston in 1928-29, 1929-30.

G: Do you recall where Lyndon Johnson lived when he was a student at San Marcos?

S: I believe that he lived in Johnson City.

G: But while he was attending school, where in San Marcos?

S: Yes. I believe that he lived in Johnson City. He had long left--

ES: He doesn't hear you. You want to know where he lived in San Marcos? Where did he live in San Marcos? He lived in the President's garage.

S: Well, part of the time, yes. I didn't know what you wanted. I'm sorry.

G: Do you recall who else lived with him there in the President's garage?

S: No.

G: Okay.

S: I never did live with him at all in any rooming arrangements.

G: Yes. Can you recall the first occasion on which you met him?

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S: I feel very sure that my first meeting with Lyndon Johnson was in an English class which gave credit in English, the principal content of which was argumentation and debate.

G: And that was taught by whom? Do you know who taught it?

S: Mr. H. M. Greene. G-R-E-E-N-E.

G: Well, tell me about the debate team.

S: Well, the first year that I debated, which was the spring of 1927, this class was taught in the field of English and yielded credit in English. The instructor was Mr. H. M. Greene. Lyndon, as always, presented a sharp and incisive mind and soon it was recognized that he would be one of those selected to do debating with other institutions. I mention this point because not all members of the class participated in interinstitutional debating. But certain ones were, presumably those who were succeeding best in the field of debating. Probably half of the members did not ever debate at all with another institution. It so happened that Lyndon paired off with William S-C-H-U-P-P, who later became superintendent of schools at Huldezetta [?] and is now deceased. You'll find Bill Schupp's picture in many places in the Pedagog. At the same time, Dudley Dobie, a cousin of J. Frank Dobie, and I became a debating team together. We all studied the same material, presented the same sort of arguments pro and con in practice, but when it came time to represent the college against some other institution, Dudley and I were sent to Denton, and Lyndon and Bill Schupp were sent to either Commerce or Huntsville, and I can't remember which. See, I don't know,

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because that book doesn't tell me. That's my best memory. I think I'm correct on everything I've said.

G: I gather that rather than trying to promote one team of outstanding debaters, the programs was designed to give as many teams a chance to debate as possible.

S: Yes, with the understanding that not everyone would be selected to represent the school in the contests with other colleges. And there was never any rivalry about that, some didn't want to. There were some girls in there that didn't want to. They were fine people, but didn't want to debate in public like that, you see. I would say that probably in the course of the term in which this course was offered that there were five or six different pairs of debaters, and they're in that book.

G: Well, when you went on a debate trip, when you would go on a debating trip such as the one to Commerce or Denton, would a faculty member accompany you?

S: Yes. Mr. Dunn. Mr. D-U-N-N, Dunn was our faculty sponsor, which does not mean at all that Mr. Greene had relinquished his teaching work in connection with our debating at all. But Mr. Dunn was sent. It is highly probable that Mr. Greene may have gone with Lyndon and Bill Schupp. It all happened the same night.

G: I see.

S: And yet I can't find it in the book.

G: Did you have to pay your own expenses--

S: Oh, no. Oh, no.

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G: --or did the school?

S: The college hired a young man, a student of the college, whose father kept a car for rent--a Buick, a nice Buick, too--and they took us up to Denton and we were given a very nice place to stay. It rained like everything that night. In every way in the world we were treated with graciousness and royal feeling in every way.

G: What kind of debater was Lyndon Johnson?

S: Crafty.

G: How so?

S: Now, crafty must not in your thinking assume a negative connotation. He was simply good--that's probably a better word--but he was good by reason of being crafty. His father before him was crafty. His Uncle George wasn't that sort of character at all. Lyndon could pick flaws easily and could, with biting sarcasm, show up the flaws of the opposing speeches.

G: Do you recall any examples of this?

S: No, because I was never present when he debated in an interinstitutional debate.

G: But you would debate him in practice, wouldn't you?

S: In class. In class.

G: Now, I gather that Elmer Graham was also--

S: That was the next year.

G: I see. And you were there then, too, weren't you?

S: No. Elmer Graham--if so, I don't think so.

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- G: My records show that you were. That you were there in 1927 and 1928 as well.
- S: Well, anyhow, I lost the debate the next year with Frank Jordan.
- G: Yes. That's right.
- S: And if Elmer Graham was debating, I don't know. I can't recall that.
- G: Now, there's some indication that the debate team was very popular on campus with the students and that there were big write-ups in the paper when you would win.
- S: I would say that the college was proud of the debate teams, a little too much so.
- G: How?
- S: They had articles in the College Star, the college paper, that we won the state of Texas. Well, we didn't, because the state of Texas wasn't in it entirely. It was just some schools in Texas that were in the contest. We simply came out winner over those schools that were in it by process of elimination. I hope that answers your question. Outside of that, there wasn't any other kind of popularity that we could have had.
- G: Well, did the students, for example, meet your train when you would come back from a victorious debate?
- S: Well, of course, we went in a car and were delivered to our homes and our apartments and our rooming houses. They couldn't have met us, I don't think.
- G: Well, I have a note here that said that a winning team was escorted up the hill by the college band one time.

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- S: That must have been the next year. We were not. If so, I just don't remember that.
- G: I think Professor Dunn went to Iowa for a year.
- S: I believe that's right.
- G: But he returned and I guess, did he coach the following year, do you know?
- S: Mr. Dunn had only a bachelor's degree and didn't teach very long but was selected on the English faculty and was selected to accompany us to Denton. He was a very nice person, the son of a Methodist minister who had been a minister at El Campo, Texas where I grew up.
- G: Were you required to argue both sides of the issue?
- S: Oh, definitely. Definitely, and to argue both sides one day and the other side the next day. Our coaching, I think, was excellent. I say that because following my work as a student at San Marcos, I coached debating at Sam Houston High School and I learned more there than I did when I was a student back in college. I think from my long years of being associated both at the college and high school level that I would arrive at that judgment and that that judgment was correct.
- G: Well, what was Professor Greene's technique as a debate coach? How would he teach debate?
- S: He went to the bottom of any topic that he had anything to do with in history or anywhere else. He was a philosopher. His mind ran deep all the time. He could tell you more about why the Civil War

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happened than any history that I ever read. But he didn't have time nor money to put his thoughts into a book.

G: Well, did he lecture during debate practice?

S: Not too much. He didn't talk too much.

G: What techniques did he use?

S: Socratic method, question and answer, and then enlarge in his answers on the topic. I believe you'd qualify that as Socratic method.

G: Did he try to generate controversy?

S: Yes, of an academic and intelligent character. An intellectual character, I'd say also, which is not the same as academic.

G: Did the debate team also practice after school and was this strictly something that was done in class?

S: Yes, they did. We were dedicated and devoted to what we were trying to do and we were hell-bent for leather, so to speak, to win. Some of that was our own personal bent of mind, some of it was the inspiration given us by Mr. Greene. And we did do that. I was teaching two classes and studying five, and I didn't have too much time to do anything with the extracurricular work, don't you see?

G: What was Professor [M. L.] Arnold's role in the debate team?

S: He was a history teacher, and a very solid academician. Yet his mind didn't run into the field of causations. He picked up history as it was and presented it in a most delightful fashion and everybody loved his courses. And to me, he was a grand person. All the members of his family were my friends. We lived next door,



one to another. I was living in an apartment, he was living in a home next door.

G: Was Professor Greene, on the other hand, a more philosophical type?

S: Yes. He was the most philosophical person in our faculty. He was the person who could have more easily become a highly qualified Ph.D. than anyone on the faculty besides Dr. [A. H.] Nolle. And Dr. Nolle was the dean of the college and was the only person with a Ph.D. degree.

G: What were Professor Greene's politics? Was he a liberal by philosophy or a conservative? Was he an internationalist or an isolationist?

S: He was not an isolationist. I don't even know whether he was a Democrat or a Republican. I would say he was a Democrat. That may not answer your question, but it's part of the answer.

G: Did he seem like a liberal?

S: Yes. I would say he was a liberal. He was liberal in every sense of the word liberal. But the minute your thinking, or the text, or anybody's discussion in a paper or a magazine ran into a thing that wasn't logical, he could catch it and call attention to it. And he never failed. He was wonderful on that score. They don't make them like him anymore. No, sir.

G: I gather he was a very unkempt person as well.

S: Yes, he was.

G: Can you describe his lifestyle?

S: He chewed tobacco and you could tell it. He didn't chew it in class, but you could tell in class that he chewed tobacco. Mrs. Greene

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had several children. She had lots of work to do, and she probably wasn't as careful in keeping her family neatly clothed as she might have, but she was a beautiful woman and a fine person. I hope that's not too personal a remark.

G: No. No, that's fine.

S: I hold her in high respect, as I held him in high respect.

G: Well, is there anything in his philosophy that would give understanding to his, shall we say, informality of life, the fact that he was surrounded by goats and did seem to relish kind of a bucolic existence?

S: I don't believe I can answer that question. I choose not to if I can.

G: Okay.

S: If he shed that influence upon me, I wasn't conscious of the shedding.  
(Interruption)

S: --philosophy. But in a most charming manner.

G: Can you recall any specifics here?

S: I don't think I can now at this fifty-year space from then, or forty, whatever it is.

G: Now, we have the impression that Lyndon Johnson was an advocate of debate at San Marcos and that he attempted to have debate put on a higher scale among the students, getting sweaters and recognized as a student activity just as football and basketball were activities. And that a player could letter in debate.

S: Well, I believe if that is true, the influence of which you speak must have been shed by Lyndon Johnson the year after I left.

G: I see.

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S: He had one more year to go as my article here indicates. You speak of the sweaters. I have my sweater yet.

(Interruption)

G: Is there anything else on the debate team that we haven't talked about that you recall?

S: There at San Marcos?

G: Yes. Or Lyndon Johnson's style of debate?

S: I would say that Lyndon's best efforts in any debate that I ever heard him in, in any controversial approach to the problem of presenting argument, his best technique was that of rebuttal. I think that's a point you might well bear in mind. He was excellent at rebuttal, regardless of what points the other side advanced, he could come back at them with something that sounded better than theirs did. Whether it was or not was quite beyond consideration, it sounded better.

He used that when he was running for Congressman of the Tenth District. Some of the opposition criticized him for having come from a small town. He said, "My mother didn't want me to be born in a big town. If so, she'd have moved in to one before I was born." That's typical Lyndon Johnson rebuttal, see?

G: Let me ask you about the Harris-Blair Literary Society. You were a member of that.

S: Yes, I was.

G: Can you tell me about the organization?

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S: Well, I don't remember any details. I just looked at that today, here. It was a very progressive--we had two literary societies, Harris-Blair and one other that I can't recall the name of at the moment. It had some of the best minds of the school in it, I thought. Some of the nicest people, also. And it was profitable. But I don't remember anything specific that we did. I suppose I neglected my associations with that because I was very deeply involved in this debating, and I was devoted and dedicated to it. I've used that term twice today. I was a devoted student to argumentation, to debate, to speech.

G: Yes. Well, do you recall how membership in that organization was obtained?

S: Well, I believe that you sought membership through a friend who presented your name and you were voted in, and then initiated, sometimes in quite unorthodox fashion, after which everything was all right.

G: Was there hazing in the initiation?

S: No, there wasn't.

G: Well, how was the initiation unorthodox?  
(Interruption)

S: That's what I called it, a ceremony of initiation.

G: Do you recall how Lyndon Johnson got in that organization? Who sponsored him?

S: I do not know. I do not know. Lyndon was welcome anywhere. He was well-liked. He didn't have much time, because he devoted a lot

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of his time to writing and he was learning to be quite excellent at the time. For instance, he and I edited the paper. He was getting to be quite a good critic. And he would, in a fine fashion, criticize faculty members, criticize college policy, criticize the board of regents, criticize laws that had been proposed up here at Austin, but could always do it with a sort of grace and finesse that kept him out of trouble. And that's a tribute to a politician in the making.

ES: Didn't grades have something to do with it, too?

G: Was there a grade requirement for getting into Harris-Blair?

ES: I think there was.

S: I don't remember it, if so. I don't remember. I never had that problem.

G: Was the organization really a social club?

S: No, no. I would say that the social aspects of club membership were of far less importance than the academic aspects.

G: Really?

S: Oh, very much so. That old college was a pretty wonderful institution.

G: Yes. Can you tell me about each meeting? What would go on at a Harris-Blair club meeting?

S: We met and discussed events of the day sometimes and that kept us abreast of those times. I think we did some debating, not a great deal, but some. We also had speakers come before our club and speak to us on topics of the day.

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G: I gather Miss Brogdon--

ES: Mary Brogdon.

G: --would come and speak on occasion.

S: Yes, she was the dean of the women, and of course what she talked about was the dean of women's job in the college and how we should support that and so forth. I can't remember it too well but she was that sort of a person. A very fine woman.

G: Was there a sister organization?

S: Yes, and I just as well find it right now. Are you talking about Harris-Blair?

G: Yes.

S: Well, I'll hunt for the other one, then.

ES: Do you have any record of where Lyndon was made a member of Pi Gamma Mu?

G: Yes. Now, that was a journalism [club], is that right?

ES: That was history and social sciences. He was a member of that, too. And I believe that kind of the two went together. Ask him about that, but I think that it did.

S: Here's a good picture of Lyndon way back here. You have these books though, haven't you?

G: Yes. What year is that, though? 1927? 1928?

S: 1926?

G: No, that can't be 1926. Let's see. No, that's 1928.

S: I'll find it in just another minute. Ellen, what was the name of the other organization like Harris-Blair but not--it was a literary society?

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ES: I'm trying to think.

S: I told you today I'd remember everything, and I don't remember that.

G: Well, what I was really wondering was, was there a sister organization of women? How about the Allie Evans?

S: I don't believe so. I don't believe so.

G: That was just a girls'--

S: Well, but that wasn't exactly our--we didn't have the same goals, I don't think. Maybe it was. Wait till I find something here.

ES: It was more of an English, cultural club, I believe.

G: I see.

S: There was a press club.

(Interruption)

G: Lyndon Johnson held several jobs while he was there as a student. Do you recall any of his jobs?

S: Yes. The first job that I recall Lyndon's performing was that of picking up paper with a long stick with a nail in the end of it that may have, the paper, gotten loose around the campus. Then he attracted the attention of the President and was sort of an office boy and assistant in that office, in the President's office.

G: Did he work for Tom Nichols there?

S: A little bit. Also Bryan Wildenthal a little bit. And Dr. Evans, I have a long letter from Dr. Evans about him in here, right here in this stack of stuff. Dr. Evans wrote to everybody asking them to vote for Lyndon when he was running for senator.

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Then after that, he got to be editor of the College Star. He was always good in English. His mother was good at English. His mother was the sterling part of the family. His father--and I don't seek to be disrespectful--his father had a politician's mind. Lyndon had a politician's mind. He inherited that from his father and then he improved upon it. His mother was a lady of grace, culture, refinement, education, as far as she went, and everything that you would expect a woman to be. She was one of the most perfect characters I've ever known about in my life.

G: Did you ever meet her? Did you ever know her?

S: No, I didn't. But I had contact with her through Lyndon and through Rebekah and letters and things of that sort.

G: Do you recall what he did in that job working for President Evans, what his responsibilities were?

S: I think he just ran errands. But he probably--in everything he did, he worked into something higher right away. And I can't be specific, but I'm sure he worked into something with greater responsibility to it than just running errands.

ES: Dr. Evans was very, very fond of him. The president of the college.

G: Was he in a position then to be influential, say, on behalf of other students or even faculty members?

S: I don't think so, up until at least I left there. As his star rose higher in the firmament, it may be that his light shone farther. But he left as soon as he got through school. I finished in 1928 and he finished in 1929. He went to Pearsall and was down there



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teaching. Of course, Lyndon was a poor boy, and when he tried to get back some of the money that he had spent going to school because his mother and father didn't have any. His father was not a very good provider. I don't know whether he became influential with other students or not.

G: Let me ask you about the Press Club.

S: I was not a member of the Press Club.

G: Oh, you weren't? Well, I have that down that you were.

S: Well, now, maybe--I was, too. I was. My business was--yes, I read it just today. I was an inactive member, and I've given you the reason, because I put my mind on that debate.

G: Sure.

S: But I did write things for the paper and in fact, I won a college prize once for something. I don't remember what it was now. I can't remember.

ES: Here's your picture in the College Star.

S: I wrote articles of an editorial character and put them in the Star. I didn't go out and get news; I wasn't a newshound, don't you see?

G: Yes.

Now, in 1928 there was a drive to improve Evans Field.

S: Yes.

G: Do you recall that?

S: Very much. Do you have any questions on Emmett Shelton?

G: No, I don't.

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S: Well, the drive to get a different field from the crowded area where the football team had so far performed became rather intensive and the entire college student body was alerted to the problem and the immensity of the task of getting additional land at a different site, perhaps. And we made pledges of money for future contributions. I think I did not make a pledge for future contributions because I didn't think I could make it. I was teaching, working and supporting her at the same time. But I was chosen to represent the movement to acquire land and establish a different and better field and I spoke before the college assembly. I was one of two principal speakers. The other one was a boy on the athletic team by the name of Emmett Shelton, who lived out his life as a lawyer here and real estate developer. And he had a good deal to do with Lyndon Johnson. But Emmett was an athlete, and came up to the University [of Texas] and got his law degree later, and their ways parted, you see. Emmett was a member of the numerous and far-flung Shelton family. There were many different Sheltons.

G: Polk Shelton was one of those.

S: Polk Shelton and Polk had a brother by the name of Horace, and Horace's widow lives across the street from my sister-in-law now and was in this room here two weeks ago, Horace Shelton's widow was.

G: Now, Lyndon Johnson worked on this drive, also.

S: I do not recall any part that he had. But my not doing so isn't to be given any consideration. I just don't recall. If he had any part, it wasn't in a speech, it was in articles in the paper.

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Lyndon put everything he had to say, nearly, in writing. If he was called upon to make a speech, he did it.

G: Do you recall the outcome of the drive?

S: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We bought additional land across the river in its present location of Evans Field. With the money that we pledged and the money that we took in later from future gifts of generous people and also savings from gate receipts, we were able to establish a very nice, but uncovered seat area, a nice athletic field. Have you been there?

G: Yes.

S: Well, you know what I'm talking about then.

G: Well, how much later than this drive in 1928 was the field constructed?

S: I don't know. I'm sorry, I don't know.

G: Okay.

S: I don't believe that I ever saw a game there until later years when I went back as a visitor.

G: Was Dean [H. E.] Speck active in promoting this cause?

S: Very much so. And Dean Speck was much beloved by the student body. He was a most outstanding person, and he was active in influencing minds in the way that he thought they ought to go.

G: Yes. Well, do you recall who actually set the movement in motion?

S: I don't.

ES: I bet Emmett Shelton--

S: I'm sure there were many persons.

ES: Emmett Shelton would be a good source.

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S: I don't think any answer that would have been one person did it or so-and-so. I think there were many persons, leaders in the college and leading students who were very active and who represented certain committees, don't you see? I was not a member of any of those committees.

G: Now, I gather in 1928 Lyndon Johnson went to the Democratic National Convention in Houston. Do you have any knowledge of that at all?

S: I do not.

G: That may have been after you graduated and left.

S: I graduated in the spring of 1928 and went to Houston.

G: You didn't see him while he was there?

S: I just didn't see much of Lyndon later at all.

G: Okay. Also in that spring and early summer of 1928, Governor Dan Moody came to San Marcos and spoke. Do you recall any--?

S: I recall his coming and that's all.

G: Let me ask you about student politics at San Marcos.

S: I don't believe I can comment on politics. I wouldn't say that we were a very political institution in terms of our student body.

G: Yes. Well, you mentioned that Lyndon Johnson would write about the legislature and was actively interested in legislative action concerning the school, let's say, or things like this. Well, did he ever go to Austin?

S: I don't know.

G: Did President Evans ever go to Austin?

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S: Oh, yes.

G: Really?

S: Oh, yes. He was a frequent visitor, certainly when time came for appropriations. And Dr. Evans, I had several letters from him. He was my superior officer in every way but my personal friend. He was a good daddy to me and I'll love him as long as I live.

G: Well, Mrs. Smith mentioned earlier that LBJ, Lyndon Johnson, in the years while he was at San Marcos gave an indication of being a successful politician. Would you agree with that and can you elaborate on it?

S: As I look back on it now, I interpret his life as being a potential politician, but I never thought of it then.

G: Was he well-liked by the other students?

S: By most of them. Some didn't because, for instance, the athletes weren't too fond of anyone who was too much of an academician. You can understand that. And he fell in that category of misfortune.

G: Anything else on Lyndon Johnson as a student that you recall? Have we left anything out that you recall?

S: Back in those days?

G: Yes.

S: I don't recall that we have.

G: Anything else about his teachers that you feel is important? Were you in any other classes with him besides that debate class?

S: I was in no class with him other than the one which was a junior class, which I've already discussed, that yielded credit in English

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and credit in debating. Yes, I was in a class with him in history with Dr. Greene.

G: Was he a favorite of Dr. Greene in the class?

S: Yes, he was. But favoritism didn't matter with Dr. Greene.

G: But how was this manifest? How did you know he was a favorite?

S: I didn't in the class. I did in the debating later, because Mr. Greene began to exhibit evidence that he respected Lyndon's ability as a debater. I was more mature than most of them and I was old enough to agree with Mr. Greene and it was easier for me to catch Mr. Greene's viewpoint than it might have been for some younger person to try to catch that viewpoint.

G: Well, did the other students on the team regard Lyndon Johnson as a good debater?

S: Yes, they did.

G: On that last year that you were on the debate team, how would you rank the members of the team. I have a list of them here.

S: The second year I debated when I lost?

G: Yes.

S: With Frank Jordan?

G: Yes, you and Frank Jordan and there was, I think, Clarence Boatwright--

S: Well, you see, the class no longer existed. So I had no contact with the members of the debating team unless they were just working with me, and there wasn't much of that at all.

G: Really?

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- S: One of the reasons I think we lost was that we hadn't had enough drill in the job we were doing, and I don't offer that as an excuse, it's just an explanation of fact.
- G: Well, now, was that because you had different coaches that year?
- S: Yes, we didn't have any coaches at all. That's the trouble. And I should have been able to carry--they depended on me to carry the thing on, and I did the best I could, but I was teaching two classes, don't you see? I think that year that I finished I was taking six and teaching two.
- G: Well, now, this was the year that Mr. Dunn was away in Iowa, is that right?
- S: Probably. I don't remember that. I can't verify that at that point.
- G: Well, now, after you graduated, you came to Houston, is that right?
- S: Right.
- G: And taught in Sam Houston High School. And Lyndon Johnson, after he graduated--and he graduated in August of 1930--
- S: Yes.
- G: --he went to Pearsall.
- S: In August of 1930.
- G: Yes, that's right. And he went to Pearsall and taught. Do you want to recount from your perspective how Lyndon Johnson got that teaching job in Houston?
- S: Well, of course, I've given you my part of it that I helped him all I could with a glad heart by going out there on that February afternoon--now, you see, I don't want to get my years mixed up.

I taught in Sam Houston High School two years. In the spring--February--of the second year, 1928-29, 1929-30, in the spring of 1930 is when I went out to Dr. Oberholtzer's home--and already I had carried his gun on a hunting trip and I felt very free socially with him--and talked to him about Lyndon and advanced Lyndon's cause. And that I read to you a while ago.

G: Yes.

S: That's in my story.

G: Yes.

S: He got the job. Now, this is in the spring of 1930. And he got the job beginning September, 1931, I guess.

G: No, he started in the fall of 1930 down there. He was just in Pearsall for a period of weeks. Then he heard that this job had opened up in Houston--your job--that you were leaving. He was excused from his commitment at Pearsall and went to Houston to fill that position. So he didn't hear about it, or he was not offered the job in Houston until the fall of 1930, according to my records.

S: Well, of course I can't tell you what Dr. Oberholtzer did. My article that I read to you just says I did what I did and Lyndon did get the job and then I hurried up and said he had excellent credentials from San Marcos Teachers College and would probably have been able to get the job without any interference on my part or any attempt to aid.

G: Well, did you know that Lyndon Johnson was in the market for a teaching job?



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- S: No, but I knew that he ought to be, because I knew the sort of a job he had.
- G: Yes. Had you talked to his Uncle George about this at all?
- S: No, no. I got it through San Marcos. I don't know how. I expect I got it through Boody Johnson.
- G: I see. Good.
- S: I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I got it through--I didn't hear it from Lyndon, I'll tell you that. It wasn't Lyndon. It was somebody that was a friend of his and a friend of mine, either faculty or students, I don't know. I wish I could be more definite, but I can't.
- G: Well, in any event, you recommended him to Dr. Oberholtzer.
- S: Very wholeheartedly.
- G: And what did you say about him? Do you recall?
- S: Well, pretty much what I've said to you. A lot of things about his personal qualities, his excellent command of English, his very fine handling of the problem of speech and debating. Since I was doing debating, I felt like that was what Dr. Oberholtzer would want to hear, and he listened most attentively. I expect we talked two hours, two hours and a half. It was a warm February afternoon. We were on a south slope of some grass opposite his home in River Oaks, Houston, you know. He's dead now. I just extolled his virtues as a person, as a student in English and as a performer in debating and public speaking.
- G: Well, now, he came and succeeded you. What problems would he encounter as a high school debate coach?

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S: Well, I don't know that he had any. We had been very successful. I had taken my students on a tour with nineteen debates through North Central, Northeast Central Texas and East Texas. We won seventeen of them. Now, that doesn't prove anything except that we just had a lot of good luck, I guess. But I think he stepped into a job where the students at least had had one year of training. They didn't have much before I got there--and that's no criticism of anybody back of me--they just hadn't paid much attention to it, don't you see? I came in full of a lot of vim, vigor and vitality, you know, that I still carried over from my San Marcos days. And I don't know that he had any problems at all. I've talked to some of the students, talked to one within a year, whether or not that's wrong. I talked to some just before he died, and they all wanted to try to get him to meet all of us over here and have a meeting, and then pretty soon he died.

G: Well, did you have enough money to make these trips? Was the administration able--?

S: I never had a problem with money.

G: Really?

S: No, I never had a problem with money. Personally, yes, in our own life, but not institutional support of my efforts.

G: Would they fund these debate trips, these trips around the state?

S: Yes, we just had funds for that in Sam Houston High School. Do you know where Sam Houston High School was?

G: Well, it's kind of downtown, isn't it?

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- S: Right downtown. They later made a sort of a business office out of it, and it was right down there not more than two blocks from the Rice Hotel, east I would say from the Rice Hotel.
- ES: Across the street from the post office, wasn't it?
- S: Yes. Right across from the post office, right close.
- G: Well, what about publicity? Did you get sufficient publicity?
- S: Very poor publicity.
- ES: Lyndon did, though.
- S: Lyndon got perfect. I'm not a publicist. He is. That's why he became president. I don't think I'd have become president if I'd been a publicist, understand. But I'm not turned that way nor gifted that way.
- G: Did he develop a rapport with Mefo Foster--
- S: I don't know.
- G: --of the Houston Press? I gather he was able to interest some people in the debate program.
- S: I remember the comment that one student made to me, a student that I had when I was there in debating and who went under Lyndon when Lyndon went there, and we were talking about him and he likes Lyndon, oh, boy, he did. He laughed and he said, "One thing about it, within thirty minutes of the time we found out we won, Mr. Johnson had it in the paper." Of course, that was an exaggeration, but it was a very meaningful thing to me.
- G: Well, I just have an impression that his style of coaching may have been a little different from yours, too, that he may have challenged

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his students more in terms of arguing with them. Do you think that was the case?

S: Might have done it. Might have done it. I don't know. I don't know. See, I wasn't around his classes any, and any comments I ever received from his students were all complimentary, had a little humor like that one did, you see. That was a kid from Corpus, Gene Latimer.

G: L. E. Jones? No. Oh, Gene Latimer.

S: Gene Latimer. Do you have his name?

G: Yes.

S: Gene Latimer was the boy that said that to me. Gene came in as a sort of a junior member toward the end of our--I don't know how he got in. He wasn't there a whole term. He was in school, but not under my tutelage. But then next year he was under Lyndon, and he was a very good debater and a very nice boy.

G: Did the other faculty members cooperate with the debate program?

S: Yes. I think the faculty members were very, very fine, and I'm not trying to be effusive at all, but I'm merely trying to be explanatory. I think, as I said to you, there hadn't been much debating till I got there. That's not a tribute to me, we just put on a program under the administration's approval. And I think the faculty members who were ordinarily fine faculty members, they were good people, I think they realized that we were doing something worthwhile, so they had a good deal of respect for our program.

G: But wouldn't their practice in debate after school, or doing research in the library, detract from their other studies?

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S: Well, I never heard about it if it did. I don't know. It sounds reasonable that it would have. I'm sure it did in San Marcos Teachers College, because we thrashed clear to the bottom of the barrel.

G: Well, let me ask you to characterize LBJ's uncle, George Johnson. What do you remember about him?

S: Quiet, mannerly, not very expressive, oh, in terms of extrovert versus introvert, fifty-fifty. Very nice person. We had lunch together at the noon hour frequently and would talk and he was just a nice person.

G: Was he retiring? Was he quiet?

S: Yes. More than anybody. He was not at all like his brother Sam. He was scholarly, he had a master's degree, not a doctor's. I don't think anybody at Sam Houston High School did have a doctor's degree. I don't recall too much about him except that we were good friends and remained good friends as long as I knew him, but I was just there two years, you see?

G: Sure. I wonder if he and Lyndon Johnson were close.

S: I heard nothing to the contrary, but I couldn't support that by any affirmative statement.

G: Sure. You didn't see them together?

S: No. I don't even think Lyndon was ever there while I was there while his Uncle George was there. I don't think Lyndon was ever there until he came there to get that job. I don't think Dr. Oberholtzer ever saw Lyndon until he gave him the job, but I'm not sure about that.

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G: Did Dr. Oberholtzer ever report back to you that he had given Lyndon the job after he gave it to him?

S: No, he didn't. Actually, he didn't need to, because the papers had something about it every other day.

G: Is there anything else on Lyndon Johnson during these years that we've left out?

S: No, not during those years.

G: Well, thank you so much. You've been very helpful.

S: Not during those years. Cut that machine off and I'll tell you a thing or two.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

My Friend, Lyndon Johnson

by

G. Preston Smith

In September, 1935, both Ellen and I were given positions in the Hungerford, Texas schools. She had attended San Marcos [Southwest Texas State] Teachers College in 1924-25. It was her first venture as a teacher, and, of course, I was given the job of superintendent. We were given a free home, nothing fine, but liveable. After one year of that, I had saved some money and I went off to school to San Marcos Teachers College. She continued that year in Hungerford and continued there for another year and then joined me at San Marcos, where we both spent a winter and two summers. I continued work toward my first college degree.

While at San Marcos Teachers College, I was elected to membership in Alpha Chi, a chapter in Scholarship Societies of the South, and also Pi Gamma Mu, Honorary Scholarship Society in the Social Sciences.

In 1928, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from San Marcos in May and was accepted in the position of Public Speaking and Social Science in the Independent School District of Houston, Texas. I remained there two years and Ellen taught one of those years. Following two years in the Houston schools, I accepted a position as superintendent of schools at Galena Park, which was a common school district where Ellen had taught, and whose funds had been stolen by a trusted school board member, who supposedly had been drowned or at least could no longer be found. We reorganized the school district into an independent school district,

cleared up all the debts, paid the teachers who had not been paid for four months, and launched the school on a [new basis].

I knew Lyndon's father, Sam Johnson, who visited with me in San Marcos and who knew of my friendship with his boy. Rebekah Johnson, Lyndon's sister, visited with us in our apartment, a very sweet and attractive girl. I had taught social science for two years with his Uncle George Johnson in Sam Houston High School in 1928-30.

Lyndon and I both had been members of the debating team at San Marcos Teachers College in the spring of 1927; we had both won our debates. In the long session of 1927-28 we had become editor and assistant editor of the College Star, our college weekly. When I accepted the position of Public Speaking and Social Science in Sam Houston High School, Lyndon still had one more year ahead of him in San Marcos Teachers College.

When I resigned from my post in Sam Houston High School, I was in a very fortunate position to help Lyndon become my successor. It had so happened that Dr. E. E. Oberholzer, Houston superintendent of schools, and I shared a very happy occasion as co-guests on the J. D. Hudgins' Ranch at Hungerford, Texas, as duck hunters--I had taught at Hungerford in 1925-26. Our search for ducks took us into some good duck country in the area known as Lissie Prairie. We soon saw a very fine flock of ducks settle on a pond a mile or so away. It was necessary to crawl quite some distance through tall weeds. Dr. Oberholzer, fiftyish and fat and unaccustomed to exertion, began to breathe heavily, and I offered to carry his gun, my gun in one hand and his in the other. When we reached the weedless area at the water's edge, the ducks had drifted, with the wind, to the far side of



the pond out of reach. We lost the ducks, but I felt that I had gained a better friend. And so it was that on a warm February afternoon in 1930 I lay out on the grass of his lawn with Dr. Oberholzer and talked about Lyndon, who was then teaching in a small ward school in Pearsall, Texas. I think he was the only teacher over five or six grades, his students being largely or entirely from Spanish-speaking homes.

Lyndon, who no doubt had from the San Marcos Teachers College faculty most excellent credentials, got the position I was leaving. And he did well; and by nature and training an excellent publicist, he kept the newspapers well informed about his successes.

From the Houston position he went to Washington as secretary to Congressman [Richard] Kleberg from South Texas. Then followed his being appointed state director of the National Youth Administration, where he made a fine record, with his watchful eye on the Tenth Congressional District--Austin and Central Texas area. When Congressman [James] Buchanan of the Tenth District died, he campaigned for that office and won. He then won his race against Coke Stevenson for United States senator and won. His meteoric rise after that is well known.

When I think back over all those years of Lyndon's career, I can't help believing that his move to Houston was very important. Perhaps it was easier to go to Washington from Houston than from a Pearsall ward school. It's an old adage that "A ladder's second rung is easier reached if you start from a firm first rung." If my small efforts helped Lyndon, I'm glad.

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