

INTERVIEW I

DATE: December 12, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: Richard Spinn

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Washington County State Park, Brenham, Texas

[Tape 1 of 1, Side 1]

G: Let's start with your background briefly. Tell me how you got to San Marcos.

S: I was born on a farm on Yegua Creek, the north boundary of Washington County. [I] made about a seven-mile move when I was about three and lived in what was the Cedar Hill community of Washington County, about eight miles north of Brenham. I attended the rural school there and finished the seventh grade. At that time one of my teachers was M. H. Ehlert, who became county superintendent, and he was also a student and perhaps a graduate of San Marcos, then called Teachers College.

I enrolled in September of 1922 in Brenham High School. They decided that, coming from a rural school, I couldn't start my eighth grade; I'd have to take the whole seventh grade over. They didn't think I would perhaps have enough background to do it.

They left me in this low seventh for about one month and then the superintendent said, "You gotta get out of this; we got you in the wrong place." [They] put me in the high seventh. Anyhow, before the year was up I finished the eighth grade with them.

And so then I finished high school. Those were the days when we didn't have automobiles. I was riding a paint horse eight miles a day to get in here to Brenham.

Except maybe December and January [when] I would board with somebody. Those were

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good old days. As I recall, for about five days we'd pay about three dollars a week. But of course, I'd go home on weekends. I was fortunate enough to be the valedictorian of my class.

And in one of those years--perhaps my junior year in Brenham High School--I again was staying at the house with my friend, M. H. Ehlert, who was then county superintendent, and he got me interested in San Marcos. He knew that I'd have to find work and he said he felt I could. But it was through his influence that I went over to San Marcos a week before school opened, with sixty dollars I'd earned picking cotton. And of course, in those days they gave us free tuition for four years.

About the first thing I did: the Old Bobcat was open in those days; Booty Coors and Leland Coors were operating it. And while I was doing that one day I met the Dean of Women, Miss Mary Brogdon. And for some reason . . . Someone had told me about these dormitories . . . I was looking for work, so I went to see Miss Brogdon and sure enough she gave me the job of firing the girls' dormitory, the teacherage, and then she talked to her good friend, Miss Myrtle Head[?], who gave me a job firing the cafeteria. All this was early. You'd get up at four o'clock in the morning and by eight o'clock I'd be through, except during the day I would check the girls' dormitory to keep those furnaces going.

With all that work I don't think I did anything but applied myself to my studies the first year. I didn't go out for athletics. Then I went to school in the summer. The first summer I may have come home, but after that I know I went to school in summer till I finished. I didn't start any athletics till my sophomore year. Finally I did receive a letter in track and football. And I was interested in the Harris-Blairs, having served as

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president somewhere like the sophomore or junior year. My debating--appears to me I might have started that in my sophomore year and junior year; and my senior year I doubt whether I did. I might have dropped that. [I] even participated in playing a part in a play. I'd try anything to see how I liked it.

G: Do you recall your first impressions of Lyndon Johnson?

S: And then Lyndon appeared on the campus sometime in 1927 about. I started in September of 1926 and he would have appeared in 1937.

G: 1927.

S: Yeah. I'm wrong in my dates. 1927. Lyndon was a tall chap, not very heavy. But he was another fellow that always liked to get acquainted and he began getting acquainted with people, whether they were freshmen or seniors. And I'd say that Lyndon Johnson established his name with the student body pretty quick. I remember in the beginning, it seemed like that Lyndon did a little campus work on the campus with a wheelbarrow. So it seemed like he worked for the highway department, he told me, when he was growing up in school; high school that was. Then Lyndon, it wasn't too long, he was serving as private secretary for President [Cecil Eugene] Evans.

G: Do you know what he did in that capacity?

S: No, I couldn't really say, except he would be doing it. When he was not in class he would be having to carry papers and stuff to other faculty members--kind of a runner, almost in the beginning. He would be doing those things. Wasn't he a member of the Harris-Blairs? I think he was.

G: Tell me about that organization.

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S: Well, it was--Harris-Blairs was supposed to be literary. And we would have people talk to us and we would discuss current events. Somebody would conduct a discussion. We would have--if I recall correctly, we would choose officers for each term. We would usually have one banquet. And I remember during my time, the Dean of Women, Miss Mary C. Brogdon, was my guest. I used to enjoy introducing the Dean of Women.

In those days, if Lucy Jones was going to have a date with a young man she had to go up and report to the Dean of Women, give his name. And if for some reason the Dean of Women thought this young man was not the proper party for her to have a date with, she would tell her so. (Laughter) But all girls had to clear their dates ahead of time in those days. And as far as taking a young lady out in an automobile, that wasn't even heard of. You'd probably get--both the boy and the girl would get kicked out if you did.

Lyndon, in due time, began . . . He served on the student council--I never did--but he was active in student council work and did some work on the college paper. What was it called?

G: *The [College] Star.*

S: *The Star.*

G: Was he popular with other students?

S: Yeah, I would say that. Because he was friendly. He was a outgoing chap. Did anybody tell you that at one time he carried a nickname for awhile, when he was in school there.

G: No.

S: We had [Alfred] "Booty" Johnson, and they called him "Bull" Johnson, because he talked so much. (Laughter) That was in the beginning there. Because I believe Booty and--and

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I believe Lyndon also--were down in some garage apartments of President Evans'. Did you get any of that information?

G: Yes. Well, I gather with the Harris-Blairs that there was an attempt to make it more of a parliamentary procedure study group, that would learn parliamentary procedure and practice debates and that sort of thing.

S: That's right.

G: But that it would often degenerate into just kind of a social [inaudible].

S: Just a session of . . . If there was some campus issue, that might be the main topic of discussion sometimes.

G: When did it meet? How often, and where? What time of day?

S: We met in--during the time it was in what is known as the Library Building, which is off, if you're coming out of the main building there, it was immediately off to the right. But I haven't been over to that campus in so long, I guess. I believe, all that's been taken down and something else put. But we called it the Library Building because the library was in there, too.

G: How'd you get to--meet how often? Say, once a week?

S: No. We didn't meet once a week. It seemed to me like we'd meet about twice a month.

G: How did one gain membership in the group?

S: Usually *The Star*, the college paper, would carry accounts of the Harris-Blairs. It was an invite, invitation; of course, anybody was eligible. Someone invited me and I liked it and stayed with them. I in turn would invite someone else. And, of course, there'd be a turnover in membership because in those days many of our students, they'd go to school a year or so and then go out and teach.

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G: Well, you mentioned before we turned on the tape that you and Lyndon Johnson traveled in different social circles. Would you elaborate on that?

S: Well, I for one, was rather a bashful country boy. I don't think I had a date till I was probably about the end of my sophomore year. I roomed at this dormitory for two boys--Dave Brant was my roommate--while Lyndon, I think he stayed in some of the boys' boarding houses and all. I'd say that he had more contacts with the girls than I did. Because Lyndon, he's fairly popular with the girls.

G: Well, but on the other hand, the image that I have received from talking to people is that he was handicapped by not being an athlete, that the athletes were more often socially popular than the non-athlete.

S: Well, I would hardly classify myself as an athlete; about the only thing I did was sit on the football team (laughter) and did some track work. Of course, you take fellows who are the athletes who work together every afternoon and all and made their trips and so forth. There would be a closeness among them; I would see that. But outside, there were certainly more men students who were not on these particular athletic teams. And I'd say that Lyndon Johnson was as popular with them as anyone else. Now, he might not have been on the inside group, clique, you might say, with the athletic group, since his participation was in other fields. But as far as I can recall he had a good rapport with them, too.

G: Do you recall his interest in athletics--if he had--? I know that he didn't seem to like P.E. for one thing.

S: Well, I was never in a--well, I didn't take any Physical Ed. since I went out for athletics. I was trying to think: did anybody ever mention that he played tennis?

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G: No.

S: Didn't? Babe Kennedy used to play tennis and I was thinking of a tall fellow. I don't recall his interest in tennis either.

G: I know that there was a drive to improve Evans Field, and I believe you worked on that drive. And I know he did. Do you recall anything about that?

S: Well, let's see. Evans Field. They improved the turf, improved the seating arrangements. The occurred because back in those days you played all your football out on what I knew as Evans Field, and that was just down the hill to the left. The athletic field is now out on a highway after you cross the river going toward Austin. What do they call that now? That's where all that athletic--did they rename that Evans Field?

G: I think they did. No, I'm not sure. I think it carries another name.

S: I wonder. You know, you get tied up in the community with all your family and things. I got rather busy; I was busy down here. For instance, when I was in law school I was working just as much as I was in San Marcos. I went back to law school. I appeared on the campus the first two years maybe once or twice for, you know, reunions, but that was about it. Because I got interested in my law class. We were a close-knit law class of sixty-five of us in 1934. We have had our annual get-together every year at the bar association. We have never missed a year.

G: Well, let me ask you about the debate team. You were a member of the debate team.

S: Yeah, and those fellows you mentioned we talked about here awhile ago.

G: Who were the coaches?

S: (Pause) Anybody give you the name of them?

G: Well, I've had several of--

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S: Did somebody mention a fellow by the name of Dunn?

G: Yes.

S: --as a debate coach? Now, you know I told you awhile ago, one of the profs, Mr. Dunn was one. Now [H. M.] Greene taught History there, but I don't recall whether he did.

G: I have Greene and [M. L.] Arnold listed as debate [inaudible].

S: Well, Mr. Arnold was a history teacher. And Dunn--somebody mentioned Dunn.

G: Yes.

S: Seems like my particular coach was Mr. Dunn. Then you would--Mr. Arnold--Professor Arnold--and Greene. Those are about three, if my memory's correct.

G: Was the debate team a class or was it an extracurricular activity?

S: It was an extracurricular activity.

G: And how often--

S: As far as I was concerned, because that's . . .

G: You were not enrolled in a class?

S: --class, that I recall.

G: And how often did you practice, and when?

S: Well, we'd be given our material and then we would have practice sessions that most of the time would be at night. You know, I couldn't tell you whether I competed one or two years. (Laughter)

G: Do you recall Lyndon Johnson as a debater?

S: Yes.

G: What sort of debater was he?

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- S: Well, I listened to Lyndon debate with some co-debater--at San Marcos, you know. Naturally, when we had a debate I went. That's the reason I say Lyndon was among our top debaters, in my opinion. I wouldn't say he was the best, but I'd say he was among the top.
- G: What was his style as a debater?
- S: [long pause] Well, he handled his side of the particular topic that he was discussing with a pretty logical arrangement of his presentation. And then, you know, you had a rebuttal. And we would answer that, under the instructions of the way we'd been taught. Now, when you ask me his style, what do you have mind?
- G: Well, was he strong on refutation? Was he good at attacking the opponent? Or was he more or less someone who would take the affirmative and build a case?
- S: Well, whether he took the affirmative or negative, he worked it up rather good in presenting it. And when it came to refutation--refuting the other side in your rebuttal--his explanations of it would be logical, the conclusions he would draw.
- G: I notice that one year you went to Huntsville and won a debate there against Sam Houston College. Do you remember that at all?
- S: I have no independent recollection of that, no.
- G: What did the debate team represent to the school? Was it an important part of the school? Did students follow the debate team? Did they regard it as . . . ?
- S: I don't think the debate teams had too much prominence as a school function.
- G: Debates were not as well attended as football?

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S: (Laughter) Not by any means, no. It was something that some of us were interested in and it was available. But I'll say this: I don't recall that you ever had to get any extra chairs to seat anybody.

G: Now in 1928, in June, Governor Dan Moody and Senator [Alvin J.] Wirtz came and spoke at San Marcos at Riverside. Do you recall that at all?

S: No I don't. What time of year was that?

G: I think it was June, early June.

S: That was in 1928?

G: Yeah.

S: 1928. Well, I don't have any recollection of that.

G: How about Lyndon Johnson attending the Democratic National Convention in Houston that year? Do you remember that?

S: What year?

G: 1928.

S: No, I don't.

G: LBJ went down to Houston.

S: No, I don't. Let's see, LBJ's father--wasn't he a state representative, [in the] Texas legislature? So Lyndon had a better background of politics, let's say, than those of us who had never been exposed to it as he had.

G: Did he talk politics much?

S: As I recall, Lyndon was interested even then in politics. Understand, I didn't sit around and talk *too* much with him but there'd be times that I'd be, say on campus or in between classes or we had . . . In those days we used to have about a thirty-minute break there in

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the mornings when we'd all gather in the auditorium kind of like you did in high school in those days. Yes, Lyndon would take an interest in politics of that day--of candidates, even then.

G: Do you recall his supporting anyone in particular?

S: No, not at this point.

G: Would you have characterized him as a liberal or conservative?

S: I wouldn't say on the liberal side.

G: Now, you were a member of one political fraternity or club, the Black Stars, and he became a member of another. Can you recall how you gained admission to the Black Stars?

S: Yes, I'll say, two of the fellows who were members of the Black Stars came and told me that their organization had voted to accept me as a member. I couldn't even tell you who those two were, either. And then we would have meetings some place.

G: How many members were in it when you were in?

S: Well, the organization, as I recall, had been in existence since before my time and some of the fellows--like you mentioned a while ago: it was primarily athletes that they [admitted]. That's the reason I said I don't know why I ever was accepted; I wasn't any athlete. I think I probably better--I enjoyed wrestling, (laughter) but that wasn't even part of the sport [inaudible]. Who the past members [were], they had their records and all that. But the ones that'd be in attendance then, let's say about the most that I could say: maybe twenty-eight to thirty? Something like that.

G: Where would you generally meet?

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S: See, there were some local San Marcos boys and they met themselves in some building in San Marcos. Then, seems like . . . We had a good many . . . We met at night. A lot of times we'd go out to a pasture. How about some of the fellows that you talked to? Seems like there was a Barney Kaniscle[?]-did you ever hear of his name? I think that Barney--we'd drive out to Barney's ranch. Barney Kaniscle's. And there somebody'd have a campfire and they'd transact whatever business they had. They'd discuss having another party.

G: Then how did you take in members? Did you have a secret ballot or something?

S: Well, as I recall, if a name was submitted you would vote for ballot "yes" or "no." I think you'd--you had to have a perfect "yes;" one "no" would throw you out, as I remember it. Did some others give you the same information? Am I right about it? Because, like I said, my memory's bad. As I recall, it was secret, by reason of fact; you just dropped your piece of paper in a hat. So it'd be secret.

G: Okay. Well now, were you aware that there was a rival group in existence?

S: The Black Stars were in existence, as I understood it. And I don't know how long; I can't tell you anything. But I think the White Stars were organized about the time that I was there. They didn't get organized until somewhere in that four-year period. Is that the information you got?

G: The best indication I have is the fall of 1929.

S: Well, somewhere--that's the way I understood it. They organized and called theirs White Stars.

G: Did you know that it existed, though, after--

S: Oh, yes.

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G: Well, now, it was secret.

S: You mean the existence of it?

G: Yeah.

S: How you gonna keep the existence of their group . . . (Laughter) They were known as Black Stars; their group White Stars. Both sides would have supervised parties. And, of course, you invited the girlfriend or something, but you'd be supervised by faculty members. The *faculty* knew it. Some of them did. You see, it was just a student organization. They didn't have--the colleges in those days didn't have fraternities and sororities.

G: Well, what was the purpose of the Black Stars?

S: As I understood it, it was just a good get-together group; that's all.

G: It wasn't to control the campus politics?

S: No. It was just a get-together group, as far as . . . Because they didn't have meetings too regular. And sometimes I couldn't go because I'd be busy with things. But, generally speaking, it was a just a kind of get-together group.

G: Did the Black Stars support you when you were elected as senior class president?

S: I would think so.

G: But, was it an organized campaign? I mean, could you depend on them to really get out and [inaudible]?

S: No, as far as my election, there wasn't any . . . I never bothered about any organization. Some of the folks said, "Dick, why don't you run for president?" And they put my name on and I said, "All right." But I never--even the first semester--I don't know who--several of us ran the first time, I think. Personally, I know I never bothered about making any

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concentrated drive to be elected. Either I was or I wasn't. It wasn't like running for politics down here in Washington County later on. (Laughter) No, it was just good-natured with me. I never saw any particular effort made.

G: Well, let me ask you to recount what you recall about the senior class election when Willard Deason was elected over you.

S: The only thing I can recall was that . . . I know Willard was a candidate; was there another candidate? You said something about John Gazelle?

G: Yes.

S: About the only I can remember about--I have no recollection except that there was a certain time given for holding it. Say you had two hours in the afternoon or morning; it seems like it was afternoon. The only thing I can recall, someone made a request, did I have any objections to the polls staying open another fifteen minutes. And I remember I said, "No, go ahead. Let them--give them time, if they haven't got up here, why, let them vote."

G: And did they round up some more votes?

S: Whatever I was doing I didn't see--I have no recollection of who went up to vote. Seems like it was in some classroom the voting took place. Maybe Willard would remember that. But some of them were kidding me about the extension of time resulted in Willard winning the election. And I can't remember how close he was.

G: Well, now, before we turned on the tape you gave me an indication that winning that office is really a mixed blessing because senior rings and things. Could you explain that?

S: I was a candidate but also realizing that I was working pretty hard to get set for my job I had down here at Brenham, taking this shorthand and typing. I was brushing up on it.

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And I recall remembering about the on-coming president would be responsible for working up the orders on senior rings and getting all that tended to. It was going to entail more work than it did the first time. Willard Deason and I were good friends. I liked Willard. I knew that he was a member of the White Stars, but I for one never . . . I don't know how you would express it. It certainly--I felt no . . . To me they're just another group of fellows; that was all.

G: Do you recall if leaflets were ever used in those campaigns by the White Stars? Leaflets, say, that talked about the Black Stars?

S: I don't have any knowledge of that, remembrance of it.

G: Let me turn off the machine. Since we're done with San Marcos, let's move up to 1937 when he ran in that special election to replace the deceased Buchanan.

S: Lyndon and I wasn't, in school, what you call *close* friends. But I liked Lyndon and when the special election came up to replace Congressman--.

G: Buchanan.

S: --Max Buchanan, I immediately started talking to friends of mine about Lyndon. Among those who really gave him a lot of assistance was [Caesar] Dutch Hohn, H-O-H-N, who was a county agent here in Washington County and had been for years a most very popular man who was quite an Aggie football player in his day. And the other fellow was Reese B. Lockett who was Mayor of Brenham, maybe not at that time but soon thereafter; I believe about then he was, perhaps.

At least the three of us, just in our own way, we began working for Lyndon Johnson. I was talking to my friends. I would go out with Dutch Hohn to meetings. And Washington County carried Lyndon Johnson in that thing. Then thereafter, of course, we

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supported Lyndon. In the year that John F. Kennedy and Lyndon were nominated by the Democratic Party for president and vice-president--that had to be . . .

G: 1960.

S: 1960--we had another gathering of citizens here in Brenham. That was before the nominations and at that time there was a boosting of Lyndon as the nominee for president. I remember that we had it out at the athletic grounds of Brenham High School. I have a picture of my arm around Lyndon as I introduced him as the next president of the United States. He was here on the occasion there. Then, of course, when the convention was held, why he was selected as the vice-president.

G: Well--

S: And--excuse me.

G: I was going to say, you also helped him in that Armistice Day barbecue that they had here in 1939.

S: Yeah.

G: Do you recall his visit here then?

S: Yeah. On that, in 1939, Lyndon had, during the time when--as soon as he was elected congressman in the special election he worked very hard. [He] came down to Washington County--and did likewise in other counties of his district--in helping organize a rural electrification program. He was always very anxious to reply to any requests that we made. We had this affair in 1939 and if--I'm reminded by reason of the article in the newspaper to honor Congressman Johnson on that occasion.

G: Well, was REA [Rural Electrification Administration] an issue of concern to the people here in Washington County?

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S: Not a political issue, no. But it took a selling job to get us to decide we were going to quit burning that oil lamp and pay for the light. We'd been used to having this cheap, economical oil. Of course we didn't know about the price of the energy going up like it is today. But it was a selling job and you had to have--we felt that it was the thing for real progress in your community, because of the many uses. But it still took a job of explaining to people about it and all. And he came down here and made meetings with us and helped explain. See, there was the REA Act where the government made it available. And he would explain that. Dutch Hohn here was the county agent who helped real much when Lyndon was elected in the special election who continued this thing and would have Lyndon come down. Of course, while he was a congressman we made it a point to kind of let him come down here and meet the folks, because he had a pretty strong following in Washington County.

G: Was he opposed by the power companies in his selling job?

S: No sir, not that I--I have no recollection of that, but--

G: How about the newspaper here in Brenham?

S: They supported him, yes. They supported him.

G: Well, now, he also ran on a platform supporting President Roosevelt's effort to pack the Supreme Court, as it was called in 1937.

S: That brought a--that was a little opposition on that point, yes.

G: How did you get around--in supporting him here, how did you deal with that issue?

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S: By not mentioning it very often. (Laughter) Talking about the other good points.

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G: Do you think he foresaw the threat of war? Before World War II? I noticed he visited Brenham here several times before World War II, and I just wondered if he expressed a thought that . . .

S: Yes, what you're driving at, whether or not he expressed it, could I say . . . In those days, let's see, I was county judge starting in--I was county attorney; in 1939 I started as county judge. We, of course, as an individual, were seeing things on the horizon, but I don't recall that I heard any specific comments from Lyndon on it.

G: Is there anything else that we've left out of your association with him in the early years?

S: No, the . . . (Long pause) If Lyndon gave you a promise as a young congressman, he followed up on it. Now I'll say that for him.

G: Are you thinking of something in particular?

S: No, but we would say--around here, you know, you have little various things. And maybe I'd write a letter or maybe we'd phone him. But when he told you he--after he had the facts . . . And of course, if your facts were such as to justify affirmative action then Lyndon would work, he would . . . Whatever agencies and so forth it took, he went to work for it. Whether it was us or it was the city. I'm sorry, Mayor Reese Lockett, of course, got to be mayor and he and Lyndon--he would call on Lyndon a lot. But Reese died about two years ago. That's about it.

G: Well, I certainly thank you.

S: Well, I've enjoyed--

[End Tape 1 Side 2]

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