

LBJ As I Knew Him

By

Mildred Stegall

Lyndon Johnson was one of the greatest men I have ever known and my life was greatly enriched by my association with him. I just wish the whole world could have known the Lyndon Johnson that I knew.

LBJ and I went back a long way. In fact, had he lived six more months it would have been forty years, even longer than Mrs. Johnson knew him. He was a man of many moods. It was as though he was several people rolled into one. At times he could be as hard as nails. Yet, at other times he was as gentle as a lamb.

Glynn and I were married in June, 1933 and immediately went to Washington with Congressman W. D. McFarlane of the 13th District of Texas. Our office was just two doors down from Congressman Dick Kleberg's office where LBJ worked as his administrative assistant. He was a real prankster in those days and Glynn was a good target as he had a tendency to believe everything anyone told him as being true. For example, Glynn had a brand new car and he was very proud of it as the country had just gone through a deep depression and money was in short supply.

One day the telephone rang and it was LBJ. He said: "Glynn, don't you have a new car?" Glynn said that he did. "Where is it parked?" he wanted to know. Glynn told him it was parked right under our window. LBJ replied "Well, I just saw someone get in and drive off." Glynn ran out of the office like the building was on fire. Of course, the car was still there. When he came back by LBJ's office he was reared back in his chair with his feet on the desk laughing heartily. I often wondered why Glynn didn't just look out the window to check on his car but I guess he was

too excited. Over the years LBJ seemed to get pleasure out of telling tales on Glynn. Mrs. Johnson remarked one time she almost got embarrassed as his teasing was so hard.

During those early years there was an organization know as Little Congress made up of assistants to the various Congressmen and Senators. They argued the same issues as the ones before Congress. Sometimes the conclusions reached made far more sense than the ones passed by Congress. LBJ was one of the main leaders and as usual had everything under control. He showed the same leadership back then that he demonstrated throughout his lifetime.

After Congressman McFarlane was defeated in 1938 both Glynn and I went to work for Senator Morris Sheppard, one of the two Senators representing Texas. After his death Glynn went to work for Senator Johnson early in 1942. He wanted me to join his staff at the same time but I had been offered a position with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation with a much better salary so I turned him down.

From time to time Senator Johnson would call me asking me when I was coming to work for him. The answer was always the same = not yet. Finally, I told him if the RFC ever went out of business I would then come. This happened in 1956 and true to my word I joined his staff. I guess I am one of the few people that kept saying no and got away with it.

One day when I was still working for the RFC I got a call from Senator Johnson asking me if I could arrange to take off a few days and come up and help out as they were just swamped with work. I reported to Walter Jenkins the next morning. When I walked in Walter said: "What are you doing up here?" I told him of the Senator's call. He laughed and said: "That is just his way of trying to make us work harder. Go on back to your own job," which I did.

I think I saw a side of Lyndon Johnson that some people never saw. At times he could be one of the most compassionate people I have ever known. People often asked me if LBJ wasn't

hard to work for. I would always answer "not if you were willing to work." It seemed as though he never ran out of steam = work, work, work. At times he did use means to make his staff work harder. When he would think there might be some unanswered mail left over from the day before he would go in early the next morning, dictate the mail which he had found by going through the desk drawers. He would then leave the dictated mail on top of the desks hoping that would make his staff work harder.

Earlier I mentioned at times LBJ would show great compassion. In 1952 Glynn suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Just as soon as he heard of Glynn's illness he called me immediately to express his great concern. He then asked me if I needed any money. "If you do, tell me how much you need and it's yours." Fortunately, I did not have to take him up on his offer but I appreciated his thoughtfulness in offering.

Just as soon as Glynn became ill I called Dr. [Alan] Kreglow, my doctor who had a very fine reputation. He had both men and women patients. I mention this because of a statement LBJ made later. My doctor immediately realized that Glynn's illness was out of his field so called in a well known neurosurgeon. We knew of him because he had operated on the wife of a man we knew and she had a complete recovery so I felt he was qualified.

A couple of days after Glynn went to the hospital my phone rang at three o'clock in the morning. It was Walter Jenkins. He told me Senator Johnson had just called and wanted us to come out to the Wardman Park [hotel] right away. Mrs. Johnson was in Texas at the time. I said: "Walter, what on earth could he want at this hour of the morning?" "I don't know" Walter said "but I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

When we arrived LBJ was sitting on the side of the bed in his pajamas and he was barefooted. He motioned us to sit down. He said: "I haven't been able to sleep all night

thinking about Glynn. You two are letting that boy lie over there and die because Mildred has put his life in the hands of a woman doctor. Mildred, the first thing in the morning I want you to call your doctor and fire both doctors and I will get you two good doctors. The next morning I called Dr. Kreglow, explained the situation and took both doctors off the case. They seemed to understand my predicament. True to his word, Senator Johnson picked two outstanding physicians, Dr. Lawn Thompson and Dr. Edward Fries [Freis], a renowned authority on high blood pressure. Glynn had suffered from high blood pressure for years. Due to the wonderful care Glynn received from his doctors he was back on the job in four months.

As to Senator Johnson's thoughtfulness he expressed it in different ways. I was still at the RFC when Stuart Symington was appointed head of the RFC. He was a close friend of Senator Johnson. He no sooner took office than he received a call from Senator Johnson saying he had a friend working at the RFC and he wanted him to look after me. I got a call from Mr. Symington and was summoned to his office. He told me of Senator Johnson's call and wanted me to know if I ever needed anything, feel free to call him. I assured him everything was OK and I was very happy in my job. I was amazed that LBJ would take time from his busy schedule to call on my behalf.

The RFC closed in 1956. I kept my word and went to work for Senator Johnson. I had about two months accumulated leave which I lost as you cannot be on two government payrolls at the same time. I did ask if I could take off a week or two before reporting for duty in order to finish up my work at the RFC and have a few days rest. The answer was a resounding no, "I need you now" so I reported to Walter Jenkins on Monday morning as we were going to work together. I had been on the job for about a week when Walter got a call from the Senator asking when Mildred was going to report for work. Needless to say I had murder in my heart.

Glynn and Arthur Perry handled Veterans Affairs and Walter and I did anything and everything the Senator wanted done. Walter took shorthand and would take notes on all of LBJ's calls which usually were eight or ten a day. Then Walter and I would try to get everything done. We would never get to our mail until late in the afternoon. When it came to regular working hours that certainly did not apply to us.

One of the rules in the office was each person was to write a minimum of fifty letters a day, something LBJ had picked up from Senator Sheppard who had the same rule. At the end of the day someone would come around and collect the letter count and give it to the Senator. Needless to say I never made the grade but fortunately he never complained. I am sure he understood the reason why.

One of the Senator's favorite stories on Glynn was that he answered the phone one day. He asked the party on the line "may I tell the Senator who is calling?" The answer came back Franklin Roosevelt and Glynn dropped the telephone. Glynn said he did not remember dropping the phone but LBJ was getting such a kick out of telling the story it would have been a shame to deny it and ruin his fun.

In 1960 the Governors Conference was to be held in Hawaii and LBJ planned to attend. The night before leaving Walter and Marge were visiting him when he asked Walter "Do you think Mildred and Glynn would like to go to Hawaii with me, not as employees but as my guests? I want them to go everywhere I go, along with Bill Daniel and his wife." Bill was governor of Guam at the time. Walter told him he was sure we would be delighted and he was correct. The call came in around midnight and the departure time was 10 AM the next morning. Glynn and I hurriedly went to the office to clear our desks. We arrived home around 3 AM to

pack and get ready for the trip. We made the deadline. When we arrived LBJ showered us with gifts such as watches, scarves, cufflinks, charms, etc.

Just as he had told Walter, the Senator took us everywhere he went. One night around 11 PM and thinking the Senator might be asleep Colonel [Benjamin] Vandervort [Vandervoort], Glynn and I decided to go out on the town. Colonel Vandervort was in charge of many of the arrangements. Well, we were dead wrong. LBJ was not asleep. The next morning our phone rang and it was LBJ and a bellowing voice came over the telephone "Where in the hell were you last night? I tried over and over to reach you. I wanted to invite you to an early breakfast." Needless to say after that we kept him posted as to our whereabouts. That trip was one of the highlights of our lives.

The Senator called me one day and said he wanted me to get in touch with Dr. Fries and tell him to take Zephyr on as a patient as she had high blood pressure. Zephyr Wright was the Johnsons cook for many years. This conversation took place several years after Glynn had become a patient of Dr. Fries.

Back to our conversation. I told Senator Johnson that Dr. Fries would no longer take patients as he was spending all of his time lecturing on high blood pressure and writing articles for various medical publications. In fact, he had just returned from a trip to Russia.

Just as though he had not heard a word I said he repeated "Mildred, the first thing in the morning I want you to get in touch with Dr. Fries and tell him I want him to take Zephyr on as a patient." You notice he did not say ask him to take Zephyr on as a patient but said tell him. Early the next morning I called Dr. Fries for an appointment and he graciously agreed to see me. I told him what the Senator had said and he repeated exactly what I had told the Senator = that he no longer took any patients, that he was devoting all of his time lecturing and writing. He said

"I'm sorry Mildred. I just can't do it. The answer will have to be no." I sat there for a few moments wondering what my fate would be if I had to go back and tell LBJ the answer was no. I finally got up the courage to say: "Dr. Fries, I simply cannot go back and tell the Senator that you cannot take Zephyr on as a patient. I just can't." I guess he noticed the desperation in my voice because he looked at me and said "Tell her to be in my office at ten o'clock in the morning." I took a long sigh of relief and hurriedly went back to report to LBJ.

I think the most embarrassing moment of my entire life was after LBJ had his heart attack in Virginia and had been ordered by his doctor to return to Texas to recuperate. On the morning he was to leave for Texas we got a call shortly before 2 o'clock saying LBJ wanted us to bring out some stuff to put on the plane before it took off but we would have to hurry as the plane was scheduled to take off at 8 AM and the plane was at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. We felt we had been given an impossible task but we hurriedly got dressed. I grabbed a dress that I would never have worn to the office, had no time to put on any makeup and I'm not even sure I took time to comb my hair as every moment was precious.

We picked up the stuff to put on the plane and drove as fast as we could to Andrews Air Force Base. After we got everything loaded on the plane Glynn and I stood back at the edge of the crowd who had gathered to see LBJ off because the last thing I wanted was to see anyone I knew. When we arrived LBJ was standing on the top step of the plane. My luck ran out as he spotted me from his vantage point and motioned for me to come to him. Reluctantly I made my way through the crowd and climbed the steps to where he was standing. He gave me a big hug and kiss. I had almost reached the bottom step when a photographer asked LBJ to please call me back as he had failed to get the picture. LBJ told me to come back. I again climbed the steps and he gave me another big hug and kiss. Glynn was still standing at the back of the crowd

where I had left him. A reporter was standing next to Glynn. He asked Glynn "who is that woman he is kissing? Glynn said "I don't know who she is." So much for a loyal husband. I understand LBJ looked at that tape a number of times. I saw it once and that was one time too many. I looked even worse than I had even thought I did.

Glynn died of a heart attack on August 10, 1963. He had worked for LBJ at the time of his death for over twenty years. I heard that the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson were planning to come to Glynn's funeral in Graham, Texas. Knowing how busy he was I suggested he not try to come but they came anyway.

When LBJ arrived they needed a car to use while they were in Graham so he sent the Secret Service over to the Cadillac Agency to borrow one. To their surprise the owner refused. He said if the car was driven he would have to sell it as a used car. When I was told of the incident I could not help but laugh. I told them I had heard the owner was the biggest Republican in Young County. He was not about to do a favor for a Democrat, especially not the Vice President. The Secret Service had no trouble finding a car elsewhere.

One of Glynn's great nephews, Bill Balch, who was around eight at the time, went back to school and told his teacher that he had met the Vice President. She did not know whether to believe him or not so she called his mother, Wanda Balch, and she confirmed he had indeed met the Vice President at Glynn's funeral.

A short time after Glynn died the Vice President sent word for me to pack my bags as I was going with him on his trip to the Scandinavian Countries. I protested as I was in no mood for any trip but I lost. He did not give me any work to do and all he wanted to do was talk about Glynn which was upsetting to me. Whenever I could slip away I would go on field trips with Mrs. Johnson out in the countryside. When I would return he would invariably ask me where I

had been. When I told him he would ask "Are you working for me or for Lady Bird?" At heart I am sure he was glad to see me get away for awhile.

After LBJ became President he said many times "wouldn't Glynn have been proud of me being President," and indeed he would have been as Glynn loved that man with all his heart.

One of the saddest days of the President and my lives was the day President Johnson asked for Walter's resignation due to reported misconduct. It was a tremendous loss because Walter was like the President's right arm and the most valuable member of the staff and I think the most capable. I can't begin to count the times the President asked me "what do you think happened?" My answer was always the same. "I simply do not know." I do know that Walter had been ill with the flu for several days but came on to work anyway. He was to meet me back at the office as we were going to work that night. First though he stopped off at a cocktail party. My memory is that it was given by News Week although I may be wrong. He had a little too much to drink. This was very unusual for Walter. Maybe being ill had something to do with it. Anyway, he told the FBI when they interviewed him in the hospital that he had no memory of the incident. The President wanted me to be present when the FBI interviewed Walter but they refused.

I have always thought that Walter's resignation was asked for too quickly. Had he stayed in the hospital for several weeks with a reported nervous breakdown the matter might have blown over, but there is no way to know and the President took the only course he thought he could take. This is strictly my opinion and I guess you can't dwell on things that might have been.

After Walter's departure I became an assistant to the President although I am not sure it is recorded that way on the records. LBJ told me that was my title. He had a buzzer installed

between his desk and mine and I might add he used it frequently. My duties changed drastically after I took over much of the work Walter had done but thank goodness I did not receive all of the numerous telephone calls Walter used to receive. They were turned over to other assistants. I served as liaison between the White House and the FBI. This took up a great deal of my time. I would receive the reports on people being considered for employment, those that were scheduled to see the President if he did not know them personally and those that were invited to functions of the White House. The last category was handled over the telephone with Deke DeLoach, Mr. [J. Edgar] Hoover's assistant. It was not unusual for us to talk several times a day.

The President wanted to see only those reports that might be derogatory or were controversial although he was kept informed as to what the others contained unless they were routine. It was my job to keep those confidential files in my office under lock and key and I was the only one that had a key. I also had charge of the confidential files Walter and I had maintained. I was to show nothing to anyone without the President's approval and it had to come directly from him.

One day my buzzer rang and the President told me to get in touch with Abe Fortas right away and for us to come to the Oval Office immediately. I called Mr. Fortas who was a close friend and advisor to LBJ. The President often discussed matters with him to get his views. He knew Abe could be trusted. He wanted to know what the President wanted. I told him I had no idea but that he had said we were to come to his office as soon as possible.

When we arrived the President was holding on to the unfavorable FBI reports in his hand. The President said the man had gotten wind of what was in the report. LBJ said: "Only the three of us knew what that report contained. Now which of you talked?" I looked at Abe and he looked at me. I said: "Mr. President, I haven't told anyone." Abe said the same thing. We both

felt we knew who was guilty, that he had probably discussed the report with someone who turned out to be not so trustworthy. However, we had not pointed an accusing finger at anyone. We both left the office saying not guilty.

Once a week I reported to the Oval Office at 6 PM to relieve LBJ's secretaries. A number of the President's Assistants like Walt Rostow brought in confidential material for LBJ to go over at night. It was known as night reading and that was exactly what it was. The President spent many hours I was told going over this material before going to sleep.

Sometimes it was late when we left the office and on those nights we would go over to the Mansion and have dinner. Invariably the subject of discussion was Walter. Neither of us seemed to be willing to let go of the unanswered question as to what happened and why. The truth of the matter was neither of us was willing to face up to the fact he might have been guilty as charged.

I do not wish to leave the impression that LBJ was somewhat of a saint = far from it. There was only one person who ever lived who was perfect and it wasn't you, nor me, nor Lyndon Johnson. He had his hang ups just like everybody else. He was only human and would get upset when things did not go his way. Sometimes he would just yell to show his displeasure. Other times he would take his anger out on one of the most loyal employees when he knew full well that his anger had nothing to do with anything they had done. I cannot recall LBJ ever saying "I am sorry. I know it was not your fault." Instead, he would try to make amends in other ways.

I remember one instance when Willie Day Taylor, who joined his staff in 1942 and one of his most loyal employees, told me about a time when LBJ had the Press in his office and he was very upset over some bad publicity. Willie Day worked in the Press Office and was present

at the meeting. He took his anger out on Willie Day who had nothing to do with the reason that he was angry. She said it took her so by surprise and embarrassed her so that tears came in her eyes and LBJ noticed it. She said even the Press seemed embarrassed. When the meeting broke up and she went back to her office the phone rang and it was LBJ. No, he did not apologize for his actions. What he did say was "honey, you know I love you." That was his way of saying I'm sorry.

One other time LBJ was meeting with a Foreign Dignitary and the meeting had not gone at all well. However, when the meeting broke up he buzzed one of the Secretaries to bring him some gifts for the man. He told her what he wanted and she brought him exactly what he had asked for. After the man left he fussed at her for bringing him the wrong things. Again, he did not apologize but a couple of days later he sent her and two other girls to New York on a shopping spree and he picked up the tab. In the long run she was the winner. I only mention these two instances to prove we all have our good days and our bad days and that we all are only human, even Presidents.

During LBJ's Presidency we from time to time flew to the [LBJ] ranch on weekends and worked there. We normally did not work on Sunday as we would usually fly back to D.C. on Sunday afternoon. The President had one secretary, Marie Fehmer, who was Catholic and she always went to mass on Sunday morning. Not wanting Marie to go alone, LBJ would come through the house telling us to get ready as we were going to mass with Marie. There were usually six or seven of us, including the Secret Service. LBJ would lead us down the aisle and we would follow one by one like little ducks all in a row. We would all sit on the same pew. After mass was over we would return to the ranch for breakfast. We would relax until about ten thirty. Then LBJ would come through the house again saying "OK all of you get ready. We are

all going to the 11 o'clock service over at the Lutheran Church" Which was near the ranch = and that is how our Sunday mornings were spent.

After Walter left things were so different for the President and me. He seemed to have mellowed a lot, especially in our relationship.

When Walter was there he and I had a very choice office = one of the largest in the White House and right down the hall from the Oval Office. It used to be Sherman Adams office. Soon after Walter's departure the President called me and said: "Mildred, I want you to know that is your office as long as I am president or until one of us dies."

Not long after that Bill Moyers called me and said the President wanted him to take over that office and I was to move into the small adjoining office with his secretary. Bill moved in the next morning but I had not yet moved. I kept thinking about the President's words "This is your office as long as I am president or until one of us dies." I buzzed him and told him of Bill's conversation. I made it clear that I was willing to do anything he wanted me to do. Next morning Bill was back in his own office. Later on Paul Popple, one of LBJ's Assistants, and his Secretary moved in and also Doris Kearns. There was plenty of room for all. True to his word, that was my office until we returned to Texas on Air Force 1 on January 20, 1969.

Walter and I had a number of files the President did not want in the regular files and he turned them over to me for safe keeping. As in the case of the FBI files I was the only one who had access to the files. I had so many top secret clearances for handling secret papers I didn't even know what some of them were for.

The President caused me a little trouble with some of his Assistants. He would tell them "give those Confidential reports to Mildred for safe keeping as she doesn't talk." That didn't sit very well with some of the others.

My other main duty in the White House was to transcribe the tapes that the President secretly recorded in the Cabinet Room during Cabinet meetings. He told the men who removed the tapes after the meetings broke up to give them to me and nobody else. I doubt if recording the meetings was very secret as the men would bring the tapes down the hall to my office and made no attempt to conceal them.

I was given strict orders by the President that I was the only one to transcribe the tapes and that took quite awhile. As the war in Viet Nam escalated more meetings were held and more tapes so it was absolutely impossible for me to get them transcribed as quickly as the President wanted the transcripts back. I had to make the decision whether it was more important to get someone to help me or make the President wait which he didn't like.

Helen Markovich had helped me on other things so I asked her to move in with me to transcribe some of the tapes. Since she had worked for me before I knew she was very trustworthy. I did not clear it with the President for fear he would say no and I was desperate. Later someone mentioned Mildred and Helen to the President and he said "who in the hell is Helen?" I thought I was done for right then and there. Surprising enough he never even mentioned it. I think he realized it was impossible for me to handle the tapes alone.

It was my job to keep the tapes securely backed up. They were under my care even after the President died. I turned them over to Harry Middleton, Director of the LBJ Library, when I retired in 1975. Even then they were to be kept sealed for a number of years. It was only last year that some were opened to the public under a new law.

For many years Walter and I handled LBJ's accounts. Walter was the accountant and I wrote down what he told me to. After Walter left I continued to handle his accounts but with the help of an IRS agent. I couldn't have done it without him because as I said I was no accountant.

One day the President buzzed me and said he and a man in Arkansas had bought a fine registered bull for \$15,000 and he wanted me to figure the depreciation on that bull. I told him "Mr. President, I do not know how to figure depreciation on a bull." In fact, I didn't even know you could take depreciation on a bull. That is the only time I ever remember his yelling at me in a loud voice. He said: "well find out." Then in a low voice he mumbled "you always did let Walter do your thinking." He was absolutely right when it came to figures.

I was so relieved that this one time he called me during office hours because that gave me a chance to reach our friend in the IRS. I started off by saying "help! The President wants me to figure the depreciation on a \$15,000 registered bull and I don't know how." He laughed and said he would be back in touch. Fortunately I got his answer in just a few minutes and I was able to pass the information on to the President very quickly and then everything was calm again. The bad part was that in a few months that darn bull lay down and died.

During the White House days President and Mrs. Johnson saw to it that I was invited to many things at the White House as well as other activities. I remember one time the President invited me to sail down the Potomac River with him and others on the boat he had at his command. After we had set sail someone happened to mention it was my birthday. He immediately sent someone back to town for a Birthday Cake. There were always other boats close by. I insisted that his birthday wishes would be sufficient but he did it his way as usual. It was those little unexpected kindnesses that made his friendship mean so much.

After we returned to Texas I worked for LBJ at the LBJ Library. After his death all of the spark went out of working as he was the one that made things interesting. I retired in 1975 and immediately Mrs. Johnson asked me to handle her accounts which I did for the next sixteen years. All in all I worked for LBJ and Mrs. Johnson for over 32 years. I truly enjoyed every bit

of it. How could you help but enjoy it when there were so much a part of my life. I'm still fortunate to have that lovely lady, Lady Bird Johnson, as a close personal friend.

The world does not give Lyndon Johnson the credit he deserves. Oh if they could have known the true Lyndon Johnson. It makes me sick at heart to see so many of his great programs being shoved aside.

Through the years there were hundreds of people who worked for LBJ and most were loyal workers but they came and went. However, there were a few who had worked for him for many, many years and their loyalty knew no bounds. They were the Old Guard. There was Dorothy Nichols, his first secretary, Walter Jenkins, Willie Day Taylor, Mary Rather, Arthur Perry and Glynn. They are all gone now, along with LBJ, but we who are still left have many precious memories.

I sometimes look up at the heavens and wonder if they all aren't up there together discussing old times. It could happen, couldn't it?

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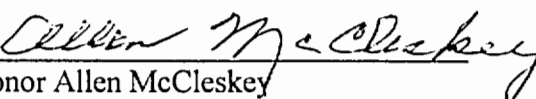
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11. The Archivist may enter into agreements for the temporary deposit of the Materials in any depository administered by NARA and or other qualified depository.

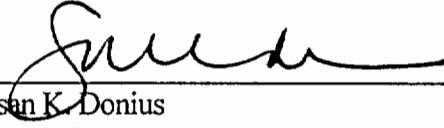
12. In the event that the Donor may from time to time hereafter give, donate, and convey to the United States of America, for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, additional papers and other historical materials, title to such additional papers and other historical materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist, and all of the foregoing provisions of this instrument of gift shall be applicable to such additional papers and other historical materials. An Appendix shall be prepared and attached hereto that references this deed of gift and that describes the additional papers and other historical materials being donated and delivered. Any Appendix shall be properly executed by being dated and signed by the Donor and the Archivist.

Signed: 
Donor Allen McCleskey

Dated: March 27, 2013

Pursuant to the authority of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, the foregoing gift of the papers and other historical materials of the Donor is determined to be in the public interest and is accepted on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth herein.

Signed: _____


Susan K. Donius
Director for Presidential Libraries

Dated: _____

5/23/13

APPENDIX A

(Attached to and forming part of instrument of gift of papers and other historical materials, executed by Allen McCleskey on March 27, 2013, and accepted by the Director for Presidential Libraries on 5/23/13.)

Description of the Materials:

Mildred Stegall's handwritten reminiscences regarding her association with, and work for, Lyndon Johnson, entitled "LBJ As I Knew Him." Not dated.