INTERVIEWEE: CLARK W. THOMPSON AND MRS. CLARK W. (LIBBIE MOODY) THOMPSON

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. McCOMB

October 10, 1968, 10:00 a.m., 220 Cotton Exchange Building, Galveston, Texas

M: Mr. Thompson, according to my data, you were born in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, in 1896.

T: That's correct.

M: You had at least a few years of education at the University of Oregon, and then you went into the United States Marine Corps.

T: That's right, in 1917.

M: And served in World War I.

T: That's right.

M: And also you served in World War II.

T: That's right, and in the Reserve between the wars.

M: Yes, sir. You married Miss Libbie Moody, is that correct, in 1918. And apparently the Marine Corps brought you to Galveston, and here you met under rather unusual circumstances. Didn't you meet at a dance or something like this?

T: Yes; that in itself is not unusual, but in the regiment that brought me to Galveston in 1917, there were a great many university men. In the first flush of the war fever, they enlisted in great droves. And a great many men in the Eighth Marines were from universities around and about. The girls in the town, who belonged to sororities, decided to give a matinee dance for the fraternity men in the regiment. I was one of them, but the man who was arranging for the fraternity men in our company left me out, for some reason; and I went to this dance largely to spite him.

When I got there, I met this Libbie Moody girl. And that in itself is an interesting story if you want any of my stuff.

M: Sure.

T: When I came into the hall where the dance was to be held, I met a hostess who asked me what my fraternity was and I told her Phi Delta Theta. So, some time later, in the course of the afternoon--I didn't intend to stay any more than just to make certain that I could get in there if I wanted to--I was on the way out when I met this hostess lady bringing with her Libbie Moody. And she said, "Aren't you the one from Phi Delta Theta?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "Well, here's another Phi Delta Theta." Well, this girl was wearing her father's fraternity pin. He was a member of the fraternity from VMI a great many years ago. And it occurred to me that any girl who was that interested in her father's old fraternity pin might be interested in a newer member of the fraternity, so I took a long chance and asked her for a date. I got it and so here we are now more than fifty years later.

M: That's rather an unusual meeting.

T: Very unusual.

M: Were you in a sorority?

MT: No, I didn't go to college. I was on the young side and married.

T: Married later, not at this stage of the game. I was her first husband.

MT: This was my first husband, but I mean I was young and I was through high school, but I didn't go to college. I married Clark I guess a year after I met him.

M: Been about a year out of high school at least?

MT: A little over that, because I made my debut, and in those days you didn't go to school and make your debut at the same time.

M: I think it's kind of hard to do that, isn't it--to go to school and to make your debut.

MT: Well, I think so because the way that I see it these children making their debuts have to just go so hard during the Christmas holidays, and people who'd like to entertain can't get all the parties in.

M: Well, you grew up then in Galveston?

MT: Yes.

M: And it was just by the circumstance of the Marine Corps that you met your husband then?

MT: Yes, it is definitely. I did go to school in Washington, but I was only there a matter of about two months. I went to Holton Arms for a couple of months, and that was all out of high school.

M: And your father was Mr. W. L. Moody, Jr., is that correct?

MT: That's right.

M: Now, to get back to you, Mr. Thompson, now that I've got your wife introduced into your story, according to the data I have, you worked at several jobs during 1919-1920. You were the treasurer of American National Insurance Company in Galveston.

T: That's correct.

M: And in 1920-1932, you were Secretary-Treasurer of the Cedarlawn Company.

T: Yes, this was a little later in the 1920's. In 1919, right after the war, I became treasurer of American National Insurance Company. Later on, this real estate development was a sideline, so to speak.

M: The Cedarlawn Company was a real estate--

T: Yes.

M: You were also public relations counsel for American National Insurance--

T: Oh, that came later if you want it in sequence. I was in the dry goods

business until the depression came along and upset the apple cart.

M: Was that the Clark W. Thompson Company?

T: That's right. After going out of that business I did whatever I could get to do during the depression years--I worked for a dredging company principally and put a lot of time in on the real estate development. Then came, very unexpectedly, the political episode.

M: Tell me about this. Go ahead and tell me about that.

T: I had been talked to about going into politics by the Reserve officers of the community. The then-Congressman was an awfully good man and an awfully good friend of mine whose name was Clay Stone Briggs. I said I would not under any circumstances oppose him, that I knew nothing about politics anyway, that I was not a lawyer. And I just sort of pooh-poohed it. The first time it was discussed was one weekend when the Reserve officers were in camp out at Fort Crockett, which was within the city limits of Galveston. Older officers cautioned me, "Now, don't laugh this off, because there may be something to it. You don't know what's going to happen before the next election, and so forth and so on. So give it some thought and maybe it's a good idea." That's good sound advice and I took it. Talked to Libbie about it, of course. And talked to one or two friends, but very few. None of them had any particular thoughts on it. If she had them, she kept them quiet.

One week later the incumbent Congressman dropped dead. That called for a special election and in the old district that Galveston County was then part of, the old Seventh District--Trinity River District--there were I think nine counties. There were either nine counties and ten candidates, or ten counties and nine candidates, and without counting them up on my fingers I can't tell you which is which. The high man would be elected in

that kind of a general election. And I just figured in my innocence that having more people in Galveston County, I might get more votes. That, strangely enough, is the way it worked out.

So, quite unexpectedly, a month or so after it all started, I found myself in the Congress. That was in June of 1933.

M: Did you serve one term then?

T: The state had recently been redistricted, and Galveston County put in an entirely different district which was largely served by an incumbent Congressman--a very fine old gentleman by the name of Joe Mansfield. So I knew when I ran that I would not seek reelection, but I did see it as a year and a half or so job, which might possibly lead into another job. During those depression years, we were grasping at straws. You wouldn't remember that, and I hope you never have to go through it, but that was the way it was.

M: Well, then you served a year and a half in the House.

T: Approximately, yes.

M: From about 1933 to '35?

T: '33 and '34--went out at the beginning of 1935.

M: Then what did you do after that?

T: That's when the public relations feature came in. I went to work first for the Chamber of Commerce.

Incidentally, I think, since I do seem to have a part in this history, it might be well to tell you this: that quite unexpectedly Libbie and I proved to be a very capable political team. We were successful in the affairs of Washington and were successful in our district. Judge Mansfield was very old, and his friends appreciated the fact that I had not attempted to be elected in the new district.

M: You were saying that you were a successful team. What do you mean by that?

T: I mean that we were able to get the Congressional job done; that we were able to work--

MT: We worked together.

T: We were able to please our customers. Our constituents seemed to be happy with us. And they told us that when we came home, "Well, you just piece out the next couple of years, and the judge will be ready to quit." He was past seventy-five then. "And then we'll send you back up there."

So, the Chamber of Commerce job was just to fill an interlude to give me a base from which to run for office a couple of years hence. So, that's how that all came about.

Then, Libbie's brother, who was involved very heavily in the American National Insurance Company management, died. Her father asked me to go back with the American National again, and I became their public relations director. So that is the sequence.

M: And then you reentered the House in--

T: Then the war came along. I had organized a battalion of Marines in 1936, the same year I went back to work for the American National. In 1940, war was apparently coming pretty fast and we were called on active duty for a year's training. Six and a half years later I came home to stay.

Very shortly after that, Judge Mansfield died. He had lived on and on and on. And although he was in a wheel chair and badly disabled, the old gentleman had continued to serve. Perhaps for me, it was a happy thing that he did because I finished my military service, and then after he died I ran and succeeded him.

M: This was in 1947?

T: '47.

M: And you served then in the House from 1947 to 1966, is that right?

T: Yes, that's right.

M: And while in the House, you were a member of the Agriculture Committee?

T: I started out as a member of the Merchant Marine Committee, where I served very happily, but mine was an agricultural district, and I had told them that when I could, I would go on that committee. So when the opportunity afforded itself a few years later I did go on the Agriculture Committee, and there I served until--it must have been 1961. It was just after the Kennedy election that I went on the Ways and Means Committee.

M: Then you were a member of that committee until you retired.

T: '66, that's right.

M: And then after this--you are now, I suppose, a consultant?

T: Well, at the moment, I'm director of the Washington operation of Tenneco, which is a conglomerate involving gas transmission, chemicals, oil production, manufacturing, and quite recently, shipbuilding. So I've returned now to my old first love, the Merchant Marine, to a considerable extent. Tenneco has acquired control of the Newport News shipbuilding people.

But, however, I should say that you're right. I became a consultant, and I was a consultant for a number of different people during the first year of my retirement. The Tenneco thing came about quite unexpectedly and to fill what we hope is a more or less temporary need. It goes without saying I'm not starting a new life's work at age seventy-two.

M: Well, let me ask you now about Lyndon Johnson. Do you recall when your first meeting with that man occurred?

T: No, I can't say that I do. I can pinpoint it pretty well this way. The Texas delegation has always been a rather close-knit group. The

Congressman from Corpus Christi was Dick Kleberg; he came up just a little before I did.

M: This is in the 1930's?

T: Yes, I would say he came possibly in '32, and I came in '33. He may have come at the beginning of '33. Without looking it up, I'm not sure. We were quite congenial, perhaps even more than most of the members, because his district adjoined mine--or very close to it--and we were from the coast and so forth. Our wives knew and liked each other, too. I just remember Lyndon Johnson as a very energetic and active assistant in his office. But, to say that I remember I shook hands with him and told him, "Young man, I think you're going to be President," I can't do that.

M: Well, then, when did you have your first political connection?

T: I watched from a distance when he finally ran for a place that had been occupied by Mr. Buchanan who was the incumbent from up here in Brenham who died in office. I remember watching and seeing how he got elected in sort of the same way that I did.

M: This was in 1937?

T: Was that when it was? Then, shortly after he was elected, President Roosevelt came down here to Galveston. He went fishing down in the Gulf. And we took note that when his ship came in here and docked and he transferred to a train that Lyndon Johnson went aboard to greet him and later appeared with him--evidently a protégé, which interested us all very much. FDR was a pretty good judge of political matterial and of young men generally. So we thought, well, maybe there really is something to this man.

Then, of course, he was in the House when I went back in 1947, and very, very active. Ver energetic, and a very effective member of the House.

After that--very soon after that, wasn't it in '48 that he ran for the Senate? Then we were interested in his candidacy and worked for him as best we could.

M: Do you remember the 1948 Senate race that he was in?

T: Oh, very well.

M: Did you help him campaign?

T: Oh, yes, sure we did. We helped him especially here in Galveston where he never was very strong.

M: What did you do for him here in Galveston? Did you give speeches for him, or introduce him around?

T: Well, no, this is not too good a town for making speeches for somebody else. A candidate has to make them for himself. He did that, too. I remember one night--he used to speak of this himself--he came into Galveston under the wrong sponsorship--in the hands of a good man and a very good friend--but the kind that can't get up a crowd to save his soul! Well, we wondered how it would be, and we went to this meeting. There were about 125 people there, which is a very small crowd. Of course, he, as any politician learns to do, he looked over the crowd and saw Libbie and me sitting there; he realized that it was not a popular thing for us to do at all, and he always appreciated it, or said he did. But I certainly did go around the Ninth District and talked to the influential politicians the best I could. I don't remember just how he did in that district. But you remember that was the one where he had such a close race, but we got in by, I think it was sixty-seven votes, which gave him the title of "Landslide Lyndon."

MT: May I say something about this that I think is real funny. The then-Senator laughed many times and said that Clark and I were the ones who got him

elected, because when he arrived in his helicopter, he said that we got him a big crowd of people, all thirty-five people, delivered to him.

Then there was another little thing, very small, but, you see, his not being popular down here at all, the papers were against him, both Texas City and Galveston News. My father happened to own the two. And the Galveston News wasn't so bad, but the Texas City paper was just terrible. My father wasn't in town at the time; he was at his summer home at Mountain Lake, and I phoned him. And I asked him, "How about stopping the Texas City paper in particular from saying all of these terrible things that they said about him?" and he said he didn't interfere with his editors. And I said, "Well, if you won't do that, will you just ask them just don't say anything about him. That won't be for him, and it won't hurt him though, really." And so that took place. That was, as far as I can see it, my greatest contribution, if it was one.

T: That was a very important contribution.

M: Why was he unpopular?

MT: Well, I just don't know. They just didn't like him down here.

T: Well, they didn't know him for one thing. He represented the liberal element, and this has always been a very conservative town. That requires just a little bit of explanation. We have a strong labor constituency here.

M: Is that due to the port?

T: Yes, largely. Well, not altogether--due to the industrial background of the town. Of course, the port is very strongly unionized. You would think that labor would go with the liberal candidate, but in this case he had just voted for the Taft-Hartley Act, and that was not popular with labor at all. So, they were not for him, and the old conservatives were not. I think he lived it down as time went by.

M: Did he win in Galveston in that election, do you recall?

T: Let's look up the record. I don't think so. I don't believe he did, but if you can get that background from someone--

M: But he did appreciate your support.

MT: He used to say that we got him elected to the Senate, all thirty-odd votes.

T: When you're elected by sixty-odd votes, everybody got you elected.

M: While in Congress, did Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn seem to work closely together?

T: Oh, very much so.

M: Between the Senate and the House?

T: Yes. And Sam Rayburn had more influence over Lyndon Johnson than any man I ever knew. Sam could tell him what was what, and not too many people can tell Lyndon Johnson what's what. He tells them. I think the greatest tragedy in Lyndon Johnson's presidency was the fact that he didn't have Sam Rayburn. If he had had him, I think his story now--in the latter part of 1968--might be very, very different.

M: In Congress, while you were working on the Ways and Means Committee, seemingly you would have a good viewpoint of Lyndon Johnson as a politician after he became President and how he operated. According to the story that's going around now, John F. Kennedy could not get legislation passed, but Lyndon Johnson could, even though it was much the same legislation. Now, from your viewpoint in the House, is the story true, or is it false, or what?

T: I would never have described it just as you have. Now, let me give you a case in point. John Kennedy was very anxious to have Medicare passed. Shortly before I went on the Ways and Means Committee, they passed what was called the Kerr-Mills Bill--Kerr being the Senator who sponsored it,

and Wilbur Mills in the House. That brought the states into the Medicare picture very largely and left a great deal of the administration of the act to the different states. Our State of Texas had taken the necessary steps to implement that legislation. In this first year of mine on the Ways and Means Committee, I was asked --President Kennedy was one who asked if I could go along with the new Medicare Bill, which is the one now in the books virtually. I said, "I can't do it, Mr. President, because I've got to give Texas a chance to make the Kerr-Mills Bill Act work." He said, "Well, I understand that. We can't get it passed this year anyhow." So, I said, "Well, if it doesn't work, then I am going to support the bill that you're interested in." There was a great deal more to the discussion than that, of course.

But when President Johnson became President, I was pledged to John Kennedy to support the legislation. I think that may have been true of a good many others; it's, I think, not being critical of those who want to give the full credit to Lyndon Johnson now, but I think he himself would say that John Kennedy laid a lot of the groundwork for the legislation that he then came along a year, or two or three years later and succeeded in passing. I do think, though, that as a master politician and as one who could negotiate with the Congress, both House and Senate, that probably Lyndon Johnson was better, certainly at the beginning of his term of office, better than John Kennedy had been.

M: How would a President talk to a member of, say, the Ways and Means Committee in trying to persuade him--say on something like Medicare?

T: Just call him up and talk to him, or get him down to the White House and talk to him.

M: Did you support Medicare the next time around?

T: Yes, the next time around I did.

M: And you did this on the basis that Texas was now ready to try it?

T: The old Kerr-Mills Act was not working, it was not broad enough, and was not being participated in broadly enough by the state. We had to do something else.

M: So, then, in your case, it was a matter of timing? That the first Medicare Bill you were not in favor of because of this previous Kerr-Mills Bill?

T: That's right.

M: But then when it didn't work, you were ready for Medicare?

T: Yes, I had supported the Kerr-Mills Bill on the floor of the House. I was not in the committee then, but I was in the House.

M: What about some of the other legislation from that time section? The Educational Act that came out in 1965?

T: Well, what do you mean?

M: Do you recall about the federal aid to elementary and secondary schools?

T: Well, you mean, did I vote for that because of Lyndon Johnson?

M: Yes.

T: No, I didn't, and I don't remember that he ever put the slightest bit of pressure on. I don't remember any pressure from him except on one matter, and that was to bring something on the floor of the House to have it acted on. It must have been one of the civil rights bills; it was being bottled up in the District Committee. You'd better check on that.

M: The District of Columbia Committee?

T: Yes. But the question of civil rights was mixed up in it, and he wanted it acted on. He talked to me when I was here in Galveston; he talked to me on the phone. And he said, "If you can, sign the discharge petition--to bring it out for action, and I'll appreciate it very much. How you vote on it is something else--I won't ask you."

Well, that's a pretty reasonable request to give the Congress a chance to work its will. So I did it, although I'm very reluctant to--I was always very reluctant to sign the discharge petitions. I seldom ever did it. I don't remember but two, and that was one of them.

Now if that's arm-twisting, well, that's arm-twisting, but I never considered it so. He just put it to me in a perfectly straightforward manner and told me why he would appreciate my help on it. I think that was the way that he was generally doing those things.

M: Well, he has a reputation of being rather forceful at times, or arm-twisting when he desired something from Congress or from his own assistants, and apparently you didn't have any direct experience with this, even this one incident.

T: Well, that's not arm-twisting. It was persuasion and it was reasoning together, as he used to describe it, but I never got mixed up in any arm-twisting. It may have been because I was an older man, or it may have been for--he'd have to be the one to tell you. I don't know. Maybe he figured I wouldn't yield to it, I don't know.

M: Well, do you consider the legislation that came out under Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and 1965 to be comparable in scope and in importance to that that came out under FDR when you first served?

T: Oh, that's a very difficult comparison to make. It was, to a considerable extent, legislation that followed in the footsteps of FDR, and such legislation as he himself might have finally tried to pass had he lived so long. So I don't see how you can compare which was more important. It's something like trying to compare the relative importance of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. George Washington laid the foundation, and probably what Lincoln did in his time is about what George Washington would have done had he been in Lincoln's shoes.

M: On this same line, there is some speculation that this span of time between FDR and Lyndon Johnson is a political era, and that we are at an end of an era of great change in American politics and in American relationships of government to the people. Do you see this?

T: Yes, I do. I think that may be true. I don't know whether your final typescript of this talk is going to reflect the date, but I think it's important to note that it is October 1968. And this strange groundswell of Wallace's popularity means something very profound in the political aspect of this country. It certainly indicates that they do want a change. And they want to get away from some of the liberal tendencies of recent years. I think whoever is elected President--I don't mean to say that I think it will be Wallace because I don't--but whoever it may be, Mr. Nixon or Mr. Humphrey, I think he's going to put the brakes on some of our liberal tendencies of the past few years.

M: So, it may well be the end of a political era.

T: It may well be the end of an era.

M: Apparently, at the end of 1965, or at the end of that Congressional session, Lyndon Johnson as President ran afoul of a lot of the people in Congress, especially over closing down some of the hospitals. Do you remember anything about that?

T: Oh, sure. We had one right here in Galveston. He was simply, let us say, he was just listening to the wrong people, and we straightened it out. It almost took an act of Congress to do it. But I discussed it with him and told him, "I cannot permit that. We've got to fight this one out, and you're going to get all bloodied up, and I wish you'd be reasonable." But he took the other course, and he did get bloodied up, so to speak. But he didn't know what was going on. He was just, as I say, listening

to the wrong people. After all, with the need for hospitalization space and so forth, you don't close hospitals when they're running full-tilt.

M: Was this a veterans' hospital?

T: No, it was public health. It was what they used to call the Marine Hospital to take care of the seafaring men, who traditionally have always been taken care of in hospitals of their own. It became a part of the Public Health Service in due time, but we still call it, even today, the Marine Hospital. It was running far beyond capacity, and they were having to turn away patients, which is a very unhappy situation.

In the plan that was finally sold to poor LBJ, they would have closed this hospital down and taken the people who would have gone there fifty miles inland to a veterans' hospital which couldn't take them either. It was as crazy a thing as that. However, before we got through, the Public Health Service was given the authority to move that hospital to become a part of The University of Texas medical complex here on Galveston Island. Those plans are now progressing. So far as we know, in due time there will be a new building out there adequate in size and a part of this medical complex.

M: Is it true that you all donated a building out there?

T: No, when you say "you all," you're talking about Mrs. Thompson, and I think she should tell you that herself.

MT: Well, we lost our daughter a few years ago. And it so happened that Clark and I wanted to give a memorial to her. In the meantime the president of The University of Texas Medical Branch was very anxious, had been before she died, to name a building for me, which was more than generous. So, to make a long story short, it ended up that the new basic science building

that is under construction now will be named the Libbie Moody Thompson Basic Sciences Building. So, I gave a million dollars to them. I might add it was not inherited money. It was money I made, and I'm kind of proud of that. And that is the memorial to my daughter and in the--I guess one of the auditoriums. I believe, is where it's going to be, they will put a memorial plaque to her in there.

M: Well, you donated to the medical facilities here and you, through your Congressional work, apparently have helped a great deal for Galveston and its port; and some of the channel work in the area, is that correct?

T: Oh, yes. Otherwise, I couldn't have stayed in office for twenty years.

M: Did Lyndon Johnson help you out on any of these--

T: Always. I never asked him for help, but when I was in the Congress and trying to do some of the things you've just described, he did help as best he could, and that was right much. He was always very cooperative. The only thing where he ever got fouled up was on the hospital deal that you just mentioned. But as a member of the Senate, he was tremendously helpful always.

M: Was there any appropriation, or item in particular, that he was useful on for the area?

T: Oh, I think all of them. You may have in your mind an appropriation for a channel from the Gulf of Mexico up to Bay City, Texas. Is that what you had in mind?

M: Well, that's one of them.

T: Yes. Well, he was helpful in all of them. But that one--he got some money in after it was too late to get money in. After it got over in the Senate in the Appropriations Bill, he put enough money in to start it. Now, once such a project has begun construction, you just don't need to worry any

further. It's going to continue to completion. I can't recall the government project that did not go through completion once started.

M: And did this develop the port of Bay City?

T: Yes. Of course, it's an inland port, but that had a great deal to do with the development of it. We just celebrated the opening of one to Victoria a few weeks ago--completed and in operation now. That came up the Guadalupe River. That was another one. And then there was the very important Deep Seaport--not far from there that came in at Port Lavaca--Point Comfort area that brings ore vessels in to the aluminum refinery there. That refinery--what do you call it? Anyway, where they make aluminum--smelter, of course. I'm glad I married you now.

M: Well, you must have been in on the dedication of these places.

T: Yes. We never dedicated the Point Comfort one, or I don't think we have. I wasn't there. I've been in on all the others, and I'll tell you, I was always there when they turned the first ground.

M: You also have been interested in hurricane protection for the coast, have you not?

T: Oh, definitely. I live here.

M: What did you do after Hurricane Carla hit?

T: Well, as soon as it was possible to land airplanes in Houston and get into this coast country, I came down to Houston and went over the entire area with the Division Engineer from Dallas. Flew over the whole thing just to see the extent of the damage. Then went back to Washington, went to the White House and, also, to the Vice President. By that time, Lyndon was the Vice President, and I said, "This is far worse than anybody has any idea; and it's going to take an awful lot of government help and help from all of us. I think we ought to go down there and look it over quite formally." The President agreed and LBJ agreed.

So, we flew down to Houston--with LBJ heading the delegation, so to speak--and we covered this entire coast country, landing in helicopters where necessary, and in smaller planes where it was feasible, where there was a place to land them. Inspected the whole thing on the ground and came on back and made our report. The government agencies were represented on this trip; the Red Cross was there, and Small Business and so forth, the Corps of Engineers, of course.

So, from that springboard we found it comparatively easy to go ahead with such protective devices as the Texas City Sea Wall, which is almost complete now, and which already gives great protection to that industrial complex. There is another very important one at Freeport. That is being extended and is about to be completed. That was almost completely as a result of Hurricane Carla and this visit that we all made down there right afterwards.

This seems to be my story you're getting and not the story of LBJ.

M: Your story is important, too.

T: Well, may be.

M: Well, do you think the next time a hurricane comes ripping through here that the area will be better protected?

T: Oh, there isn't any question about that. We were building in Freeport--projecting, not just building, a ring levy so-called, and that's just what the name implies. It goes all the way around an area; water that gets in there from any cause, rain or washing in from the sea or coming up through the storm sewers, is pumped back out and the property itself is kept dry.

I was flying over Freeport on the first trip with the Division Engineer and after we had flown over it, I said--oh, it was under water;

it was a pitiful looking place. I said, "Now, let's go down the coast thirty or forty or fifty miles to the town of Matagorda," a much smaller community, but I had heard that the ring levy that we had only just completed had protected it in entirety. The town was virtually not damaged, certainly not by the water. I said, "Let's fly over that," and we did. I said, "Now, General, you see that's protected." I said, "That's what we're trying to do with Freeport and that area. On your desk there is a program for such a protective device." He said, "What's it doing on my desk?" He was a comparatively new man. I said, "It's awaiting action in your office. It keeps going up to your office and then coming back for some small change. Will you please, when you go back, get action on it?" He said, "I promise you, Congressman, it'll be off my desk and on the way to Washington within a week." And it was. Now, it's almost completed.

M: I'd like to know something about, as a Congressman, your political base here in Galveston. Where did you get your strength? Who voted for you, for example?

T: Well, that's very, very hard to say. I've always had a very strong support among working people. The rank and file of labor has always been for me. I got the business people very generally, too. I seem to have something to please both sides, and that's a very fortunate thing for a politician. But I was a conservative--I don't like that term because it has been usurped by some people who are anything but conservative. But I think the term of moderate would describe me better. I was very much interested in agriculture starting with the family farm, and worked a great deal on it.

M: Agriculture meaning especially rice, or--?

T: Well, it was especially rice because this was the principal rice-producing district in the United States. Rice is a very nice commodity to work with

because it's comparatively small, and it's handled by comparatively few people. They're a very high-type, intelligent farmer, too, and they know what they want. You can serve them without getting into a lot of inter-family conflicts, so that was the secret of my strength there. I was able to do what they wanted.

M: Did you support selling rice to Russia?

T: I don't remember that Russia ever applied for it.

M: I was just curious.

T: I don't remember that they ever applied. After all is said and done, the United States only grew, when I was active, I think it was 3 percent of the rice consumed in the world.

M: So you had the support of the farming group and the laborers, as well as the businessmen?

T: Yes.

M: That just about covers--

T: That gets me pretty good strength.

M: I understand that you were a fairly hard-working Congressman.

T: You'd better ask her.

MT: He was a very hard-working one. He was, and he still does work for his former constituents. Well, it seems to me that our life when we're home is just like it used to be. The phone rings all the time. "Would you please help me with this and that and the other?" and he does.

T: Well, if you don't want to help people, if you're not willing to give of yourself to help get something that they couldn't otherwise get, you sure better stay out of politics because that is the base satisfaction. It's as big a satisfaction now as it was when I was actually the member of Congress. Naturally, you either like that sort of thing, or you don't.

M: Is hard work and helping your constituents the key to a successful political career?

T: I subscribe to this doctrine of Sam Rayburn who said that it's 95 percent hard work and about 5 percent whatever else you could give to it. He said that "hoss" sense makes a lot of difference, too. I think that's the case with Lyndon Johnson. He was the most prodigious worker I ever did know in public life, I believe, all day and all night.

M: Well, he was also helpful to his constituents apparently.

T: Oh, he sure was.

M: Are there any other reasons, you think, that Lyndon Johnson has been a successful politician other than hard work--is that enough?

T: Well, it certainly has been in his case. Of course, naturally a man who is successful at it has a certain capability that not everyone has--a political savvy, an understanding of how the other fellow is going to feel about something that you say or do.

M: Is Lyndon Johnson an expert on that?

T: Well, he certainly was in the Congress. Of course, he's surrounded himself with some people since he has been President who have shielded him from the knowledge of exactly what his old friends were thinking and feeling. And since he didn't know, he couldn't very well act accordingly.

M: And this is what would get him into trouble, like the hospital situation in 1965?

T: Exactly, and in the political situation of 1968.

M: When he threatened to shut down hospitals, did this make you mad at him, or did you just feel that he had bad advice?

T: Well, of course, I suppose it was a mixture of both. I never was one to get mad at the President of the United States, but rather to excuse his--

when he'd do something I didn't like, I'd go and reason with him on it and see what in the world he was thinking about.

M: You say this, you think, is what got him into trouble in 1968? You mean out of touch with people?

T: He must have been. He must have felt that he was in deep political trouble, or he would never have retired from office. At least, I can't believe he would have.

M: Well, do you think he would be a man who preferred to stay in the presidency?

T: I would think so.

M: If possible.

T: I would think so.

M: Why is that?

T: It's just what he sought. It's what he wanted, what he had shaped his whole life for--to be the President. And I think he is particularly anxious to have history say that he was a great President, whatever contemporary historians may say today.

M: What is it that motivates a man to be President of the United States?

T: I don't know.

M: It must be a horrible job. It must be a very difficult job.

T: Why, it's the hardest job in the world.

M: Why would anybody want to have a job like that?

T: Well, don't you think that in the mind of most any man there's the desire to show the way, to lead other people--I'm not talking about driving, but I'm talking about lead them. You see that there's a job to be done and you say to yourself, "Well, I believe that I can fill that job. I believe I can do better at that than Joe Doakes can do."

M: Do you think this is the case of Lyndon Johnson?

T: Right. I would think so, wouldn't you, dear?

MT: Well, I think he always has been a tremendously ambitious man.

T: Oh, yes.

MT: And I think that had a lot to do with it, too. His great ambition, his drive, and his work, I think, were all because of his great ambition. That's the way I would figure it.

M: Well, you two supported him for the presidency in 1960, is that right?

MT: In Los Angeles?

M: Yes.

MT: Oh, yes, I've given parties for him. [pause]

M: You were about to say something about Mrs. Johnson.

MT: Well, yes, Bird and I have been--well, I call her Bird, probably because of Lady Bird, but I always call her Bird. We have been friends for many years, and very good friends. Naturally, I don't see too much of the President's wife, but she has been very generous about inviting us to the White House. She has asked me to small things; she has asked us to large things, such as State dinners and also to the diplomatic reception one year; and then, we have been upstairs in the private quarters to dinner and to a tea when I think they were--I always called it "Little Lyn's Debut." It was the first time he was in Washington, and she asked some of her close friends in to see the baby.

Of course, I met Bird 'way back when Senator Shepherd died. We happened to be in Washington at that time on business in connection with the purchase of the National Hotel Company of the Hotel Washington. And the Senator died, and naturally Clark and I went right over to the house. And Bird was there opening the door for the people who were calling and introduced herself, and that was when I first met her.

M: Do you remember when that was?

MT: No, frankly I don't. It was a long time ago. Her husband was not in the Senate. He probably still was with Dick Kleberg, but I am not sure. I'd have to look up that date.

M: I have heard that Mrs. Johnson is one of the most intelligent people in Washington, D. C. Do you agree with that?

MT: That's sort of hard to say, because there are a lot of intelligent people there. But I do think that she is intelligent, and I think that she worked very, very hard to help her husband. She is a very dedicated, as well as devoted, wife and a help-mate.

M: How does a wife of a politician help her husband, such as in her case, or in your case?

MT: Oh, you can in just many ways. The phone answering and when he is out of pocket, for instance, he is in one town and somebody is desperate for something here, if you are able to handle it without him. Now, I go into myself again, but there was a child dying and Clark was 'way off on committee meetings when he was on the Agriculture Committee, and the only way the child's life could be saved was if the child could get to, I believe--is it Brooke Hospital? Anyway, the hospital in San Antonio which is an Army hospital. They had the only machine that could possibly save that child. Well, I couldn't get hold of Clark so I made the arrangements for the child to be cared for and the child survived. Well, I am sure that Bird Johnson probably does many things like that. And that's just one sample.

Of course, I think that to be able to go either with, or for, your husband to places--oh, there's a Labor Day picnic, you go with him--they all like to meet the wives, and they think that you're interested--which you are, or you wouldn't be there. And they like that. And then, of course,

there are the people who write to the wives and ask them--which seems funny in a way--about parties, entertainments, all sorts of things--how it is to sit in the gallery of the House or the Senate and listen to a certain debate. You get a letter, "Did you hear such-and-such a debate?" And things of that kind. And all have got to be able to answer those things. When they say that, if you can answer in the affirmative, I don't think that hurts your husband at all.

T: I should say not.

MT: And so I think that Bird has always done a lot of those things. I have, and she and I together have been on platforms and places together, you know, with our husbands. In fact, when you're speaking of her being one of the most intelligent, I think that she very carefully prepared herself to be the President's wife. And I think she is very smart to do it. There's a lot to being smart enough to take care of things that you think you're going to need if your husband reaches a certain place. I suppose, especially, the President's wife.

M: Did you ever have to make a speech?

MT: Well, unfortunately, I made some very poor ones--I made some, yes.

M: In campaigns?

MT: Yes. One time when Clark had a very hard campaign and Congress managed to stay in session until the very end, he took the hard part and the faraway places for the rallies, and I took the near places that were easier, but I have to admit--always going to them--I'd shake the entire time. And then I would get there and would find his opponent never where he was; they knew he could beat them, they always showed up at the rallies where I was.

T: I'd like to interpolate there that she carried every precinct where she went in my behalf.

M: That's quite a record.

T: I have always said, and she pooh-poohs it, but, nevertheless, I say it, meaning exactly what I say, that she got a lot more votes for me than I ever got for myself.

MT: No, I can't--but those are the ways that you can help your husband, and those are the ways that I think that Bird has done a great deal.

T: Where we're talking about her, let me tell you what happened when I went to work for Tenneco, which is my present employer.

The president of it told me that he had this place that he was very anxious for me to fill, and would I do it. I said, "Well, now, I've got some other clients that I'll have to consult with and see how they feel about it, because I do owe them something. And, of course, there's Libbie." He said, "Well, now, you go see Libbie first because I want you to know that we're just as anxious to have Libbie as we are you and if she doesn't go along with this, it's out." I said, "Well, it certainly is as far as I'm concerned." They're old friends, and he said, "This is a package deal, and if Libbie doesn't want to do it, well, we're not going to do it." But she did. She has always managed to want to do whatever came along for me to do.

M: Well, back a little ways, before you had to go feed your parking meter--did you get a ticket?

T: No. It was only just overparked.

M: I was about to ask you about a party that you gave for the Johnsons in 1959, I believe it was, to promote him for the Presidency--the Presidential race in 1960. According to the information I have, you gave a rather large party as a send-off for him, 400 to 500 people.

MT: Yes, we gave a reception for the Johnsons, and it was rather large.

T: But it was before that, wasn't it?

MT: It was before that. I think it was when he became the Senate Majority Leader. I believe that's when it was.

T: It was 'way back yonder.

MT: We did have this large party, and I think it was when he was Senate Majority Leader. But it could have been when he was first in the Senate. I don't remember.

T: I think it was when he was first in the Senate. Of course, he was Minority Leader first; and this, as I recall it, was when Sam Rayburn was not the Speaker. We used to give him the Speaker's party at the beginning of each of his Speakerships, at the time when he was reelected to Speaker. And that's my recollection of it. We could look back in some of her old scrapbooks and tell you exactly.

M: Well, did you support Lyndon Johnson for the Presidency in 1960 before the Los Angeles convention?

T: Oh, yes, sure.

M: Were you disappointed when he took the vice presidential position?

T: Oh, no, not a bit. I was a little surprised, because I never dreamed of such a thing.

M: Why were you surprised?

T: Just never thought of it. That particular thing never occurred to me--that he might do it.

MT: It was a strange thing, though, because, you see, the Kennedys were friends of ours, also.

M: So you had to support both couples?

MT: Well, it was fine to support the ticket. It made it very simple.

T: Oh, yes. But the Kennedys understood the feeling behind our support of

Lyndon Johnson against John Kennedy. They wouldn't have expected anything else. They never had any feeling about that.

M: Do you have any opinion about the transition period after John Kennedy's death--tragic death in Dallas--and Lyndon Johnson taking over? According to the current interpretations, the takeover by Lyndon Johnson was a masterful program.

T: I thought so.

M: You were in Congress at that time?

T: Yes, I was in Congress at the time, and I had been quite close to John Kennedy and had been very close to Lyndon Johnson. I was close enough to John Kennedy that his people consulted with me before he made the trip to Texas and said, "How do you feel about it? Do you think he ought to go to Dallas?" And I said, "No, I do not." Of course, I didn't think of him being assassinated. I had never dreamed of such a thing. If I had, of course, I would have been a lot more emphatic about it. But I just thought they would insult him and subject him to a lot of embarrassment that he shouldn't have as President of the United States, so I said, "No, I wouldn't let him go." But that didn't prevail.

M: Why did he go then?

T: Oh, there's so much told about it. I think, in part, to try to sell himself to Texas, which he did very successfully. In part, I think he was trying to draw together the dissident factors in the Democratic Party here, the squabbles between our beloved Senator Yarborough and the Governor which he hoped to heal, and I think perhaps did heal just before he was killed.

M: Did you travel with him?

T: We were with him in Houston and we were going up to be with him in Austin. We didn't make the Fort Worth-Dallas trips.

MT: He had one of his people call me--I had not planned to go to Austin, and the day before we left Washington, the White House called me and asked me as a--she said the President wanted me as a special favor to him, for both of us to go to Austin. And I said, "Well, I'll do the best I can, but for personal reasons I am not sure. Then, too, he might ask us to go to Fort Worth and Dallas," to which I will never forget her reply, "No, he isn't going to be in either place but a few minutes. He needs you in Austin." And it turned out, of course, Dallas was a few minutes.

M: This must have come as a great shock to you, then, the events in Dallas.

MT: Oh, yes. We were having lunch just headed for a friend's plane in Houston--he was going to take us there and bring us back that same night. At that time was when my daughter was so ill, and that's why I didn't want to be gone long. So, we were going to do that, and thirty minutes later, we would have been on our way to Houston on the plane. Of course, everything changed.

M: Did Lyndon Johnson have any contact with you immediately after that, when he became President?

T: Not that I recall. It was very soon after that that we ran into what resulted in my signing the discharge petition. That was just before Christmas of the same year. But I had a great many contacts with, usually with Walter Jenkins. Sometimes with Cliff Carter, and others in the establishment, and I was quite close to the holdovers from President Kennedy, people like Hank Wilson, Larry O'Brien, and Mike Manatos, and I still am quite close to these people.

M: Walter Jenkins must have been a very efficient assistant.

T: Oh, yes. And he was the kind--I think the loss of Walter Jenkins was second only to the loss of Sam Rayburn in the adverse

effect on the Johnson Administration. The reason is said to be this: that Walter Jenkins would go in and sit down with the President comparatively early in the day, or the Vice President; the Vice President is known for his short temper. He'd raise the devil and storm about whatever it may happen to be, and Walter would pick up his papers and say, "All right, Mr. President," and go on about his business.

Then, late in the afternoon when things would be quieted down, he'd come in and say, "Now, Mr. President, here is this case that you told me to handle, so-and-so; I haven't done it yet, but don't you want to let me write him this, that, or the other," and quietly do it the way it should have been done. And the President would say, "All right, do it your way."

But after Walter left, there didn't seem to be anyone to fill that void. And if it's true that no one did, that would account for a great many of the President's heartaches in those later days.

M: Were you shocked at the troubles of Walter Jenkins?

T: Oh, yes.

M: Did you all consider this a tragedy, or--

T: A great tragedy for him and for the President both.

M: In the current difficulties that the President finds himself in, apparently one of the greatest is the Viet Nam problem. In his escalation of the Viet Nam war, did he have any contact with Congress over this? Did he consult with you or--?

T: He did not with me, but there's no reason why he should have. I would assume that he consulted with the chairmen of the appropriate committees in both House and Senate. I would certainly think so, and with other leaders in Congress. I think, perhaps, his closest advisers were McNamara and Rusk, but certainly there was Congressional consultation and advice.

M: But you had nothing--?

T: Oh, no. But I was not on a committee that would require that.

M: I see. Well, then, to sum up his current difficulties, how did he get into this mess? You mentioned--

T: Well, he inherited--you mean Viet Nam?

M: Well, all of his current difficulties that would lead to his decision to retire.

T: Oh, I don't know. I think I'd rather not try to cover that ground. It would be too easy to say something that shouldn't be said without careful study and without knowing a lot more than I do know. With me, it's hard to surmise.

M: Do you consider his decision to retire an act of courage on his part?

T: Well, certainly it was an act of wisdom on his part. I hadn't thought of it particularly as an act of courage; perhaps it was. On the other hand, when you face retirement with your colors flying, even though it be under the circumstances that surrounded this case--when you decide to retire, I suppose you have to weigh your full ambitions, which have gone overboard, as against the cost to you if you're defeated. Now, it may have been that he thought he'd be defeated; it may well have been. If he had half-way good advice, then he would know that he would have been defeated as sure as the world. We were going to have a lot of trouble carrying Texas for him. But it used to be that you could talk to him about the adverse things that were going on and give him a chance to plug up the holes, so to speak. I don't know. That's a very interesting thought. And I'll turn it over in my mind, but not--I won't come to conclusions in time for this particular session--just whether it was an act of courage. Certainly, it was an act of wisdom.

It didn't take any courage for me to retire.

M: You were ready for that?

T: I had planned it. I had set seventy as the terminal age for me in active competitive politics. And I reached that, and I retired and that was that.

M: Well, that brings up my last question. Upon your retirement, Perle Mesta gave you a party, according to the reports. What was a Mesta party like?

T: Well, it wasn't quite the sequence, though. Dear, you'd better tell it.

MT: The way this was--a lot of the chambers of commerce of this district were going to give a big retirement dinner for Clark. A long-time friend said, "Wouldn't you like to have the use of a plane to bring down some of your Washington friends for this retirement dinner?" So, naturally, we accepted, and we brought down a plane--well, it was just the big plane loaded with friends, who were our guests for the whole time--several days--and we had the retirement dinner and the next night, had a barbecue for them, and we had really quite a great time.

The night of the barbecue Perle told me that she had decided that for the barbecue in Texas that she should wear pants. So she wore stretch pants she'd had specially made because I don't think they just exactly made them in all the sizes. And when we got back to Washington--the first day I guess it was--we were there, Perle phoned me and said, "Libbie, I want to give a party for you and Clark. And I want to invite everybody that you had at the retirement dinner. It'll be a dinner party with dancing, and it will be in my apartment, and I'm going to use all of my very best things. But I want it to be a pants party on account of my stretch pants. Everybody must wear pants." So, we all did with the exception of one Ambassador's wife; he wouldn't let her. But we all went

to Perle's party in our slacks, and she had her vermeil and her finest crystal and china--she had a most beautiful party with everybody instead of in their lovely evening clothes, just sitting there in their sport shirts and pants.

T: It was barbecue clothes.

M: Did she serve barbecue?

MT: No, she had a most gorgeous formal dinner with us all dressed in barbecue clothes. And so she had the dancing, music, and she had photographers; she just gave a perfectly marvelous party except for the dress of the guests. It was a little unusual. So that was the party that Perle gave us.

M: Well, she must be a very charming hostess.

MT: Oh, she is. She's a very close friend of ours, and she is a wonderful hostess, and we have certainly enjoyed her fabulous parties.

M: What makes her success as a hostess? She has a national reputation.

T: Let me throw in two cents worth. It's a tremendous great big heart, and the love of people, and the desire to be with them and do things for them that they like to have done.

M: Natural love of people?

T: Just a natural love for people.

MT: And speaking of the big heart, at this beautiful dinner she had for us, she gave me a gorgeous sterling silver heart. And on it was engraved, "To Libbie, with a heartful of love, Perle Mesta," and then the dates. Perle just loves people, and she's very good to many people. She's very generous.

When she was in Luxembourg, she did wonderful things for the people over there and, also, for our soldiers who were in Europe. Perle's quite a person.

M: Well, that must have been a nice party.

T: Oh, it was, it was a good party. Let me tell you a little sidelight--

MT: She was at most of ours and we were at most of hers.

T: --a little sidelight on our barbecue here that was the original pants party. An associate of mine came in from Washington that day, a future associate, and he mentioned Perle, and he said, "Did you know that today is her birthday?" I said, "Didn't have any idea of it." And he said, "Well, it is. I keep a tickler on prominent birthdays." And so I said, "Well, we'll stop on the way by the bakery and get a cake and a candle or two, and so forth," which we did. And at the barbecue, at the appropriate time, the music played "Happy Birthday," and we gave Perle Mesta her birthday cake. She seemed very much moved, very much touched by the whole thing. And later she told us that that was her first birthday cake. That's incredible, but it may well be true. I think that as a child her mother had died, and, perhaps, fathers don't think of those things. But she told us that.

MT: And they moved around the country a great deal when she was young. She even lived here once.

T: Here in Galveston.

M: Well, that's all the questions I have, and I wish to thank you--

T: This is not a story of Lyndon B. Johnson; it's a story of the Thompsons.

M: Well, it's both.

T: Well, if that's what you wanted, you're most welcome to it.

M: That's what we're after, and I thank you very much for your time.

T: Well, thank you.

MT: It was very nice being able to be here and be on.

* * * * *

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By Mr. and Mrs. Clark W. Thompson

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