

INTERVIEW III

DATE: May 2, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mrs. Valenti's residence, Washington, D.C.

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G: Let's begin with that, and then we'll just follow it up with—

V: Well, I remember walking into the hospital with him and some members of his family, I don't recall who. I remember they went upstairs to her room. I went in the ladies room. When I came back out, he and his sisters were there, and he was annoyed with me because he couldn't find me, and his mother had died. He was very much affected. He had been crying.

G: He had anticipated this though, hadn't he?

V: Well, I suppose so, because she was in the hospital. I think Mrs. Johnson came down the next day I believe, his wife, I mean. I remember being at the house that they had—

G: Harris Boulevard?

V: Yes. I remember Mrs. Johnson walking over to me and saying something, "So good of you to be here," or something to that effect.

G: Did he talk about his mother during that period? Is there anything about his relationship with his mother that you found significant that he discussed?

V: I don't know that during that particular period particularly.

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- G: Did you feel that she had been very important in his—?
- V: Oh, yes, always. I've heard him more than once I think list the people who were the most influential people in his life, and she would always be one of those.
- G: Who were the others?
- V: His wife, Senator [Alvin J.] Wirtz, Speaker Rayburn I think; the Speaker—Mrs. Sam Johnson—I can't think of a fifth one right now.
- G: Would it have been FDR or Senator [Richard] Russell?
- V: Perhaps. I was going to say perhaps President Roosevelt, but I'm not certain.
- G: Okay. Well, did he make the funeral arrangements himself or did someone else do that?
- V: I don't recall that. I would have guessed his wife would be more responsible for that, but I don't know that I'm right about that.
- G: The note indicates that he met with his [brother] Sam Houston and the sisters after that to discuss her estate. Do you remember any of that?
- V: No.
- G: Okay. Let me ask you to go back and talk about the experience that you had living in Austin, finishing your degree, and getting to know his mother. This was in 1957, is that right?
- V: Right, in the last summer term of the University of Texas in 1957.
- G: Well, describe how that came about.
- V: About how I was there, why I was there?
- G: Yes.
- V: Well, when I went to work in Washington I lacked a few hours for my degree, maybe ten or so. One of my professors made

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it possible for me to write a paper on my experience in Washington, my job, and he gave me three hours credit for that. But Senator Johnson thought it was a pity that I only lacked I think about seven hours then toward getting my degree, and so he suggested that I come down to Austin the last summer semester and finish it, and so I did. I took Spanish and barely squeaked through that, and something else, I can't remember what.

So I did that. And he wanted me to help his mother some. She collected antique glass, pressed glass I suppose it's called, and I think I sort of helped her a bit in cataloguing it. I'm really not exactly sure what I did. And perhaps I ran some errands for her. I remember asking her some questions. It was interesting to hear her talk a little bit about her life. I remember her telling me the story about when Senator Johnson was born. He wasn't named for several weeks or months I guess it was. She one morning refused to get out of bed, told her husband she would not get out of bed until they had named this child. Surely you've heard this story? You haven't? I think this is written someplace.

G: Go ahead.

V: But to Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Sam Johnson, I gathered that she placed importance—she wanted his name to be euphonious. I think they had known a Judge [W. C.] Linden. I think he spelled it like L-I-N-D-E-N perhaps, and she thought the spelling L-Y-N-D-O-N was better. Apparently she and her husband agreed that morning on what the baby's name would be. But I think he was about three months old before that happened. There

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are better sources than I on that, but I think that's right, something close to that before he was named.

G: Why didn't they name him after his father, I wonder, since that seemed to have been a tradition?

V: I don't know.

G: Well, did she talk about any other aspects of her life, living in Johnson City or raising that family?

V: No, she didn't. She was not an easy woman to know, I think. I sensed that she would have liked to talk about herself or her life a little bit, and so I—I remember driving from the Ranch into town with her one day, so that day I asked her some questions about herself. I don't remember now what all I asked her. It was on that occasion that she did tell me about the naming of the President. I do remember hearing President Johnson talk about how, when he was born out on the Pedernales River, he said—I think this is correct—that he weighed about twelve pounds. But of course, there were no scales around and I think it was not uncommon for a doctor or a midwife, or whatever, to just guess the size of a baby. You don't have any way to measure a baby or any kind of scales. So I think that twelve pounds would have been a bit much.

(Laughter)

G: That's great.

Let me ask you to describe his mother. What was she like?

V: Formidable.

G: Really? How so?

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V: Well, she was tall and a large woman. She was not cozy and warm.

G: Really? Was she exacting or sort of a taskmaster in her own way?

V: My impression—perhaps it was just because I was very young and I was maybe a little bit intimidated by her, but I can't elaborate very much except for an imposing figure of a woman. I don't recall a lot of smiles or any sort of attempt to put me at ease.

G: She was not chatty?

V: No.

G: What was her relationship like with him?

V: I always thought it was close. Obviously she was very proud of him, I think. I thought that she leaned on him a lot and that his brother and sisters did. I thought she expected a lot of him in that way, and I think he wanted to give what he could. He had a deep sense of family. I think family obligations he took very seriously.

G: You would write letters to his mother, wouldn't you, in some of his—?

V: I probably did. (Laughter)

G: I'm sure everybody on the staff did at one time.

V: Right.

G: Was that a routine?

V: At the moment I don't recall writing letters to his mother. I very well may have. I can recall writing letters to Luci when she was at camp. Sometimes he dictated family letters, but he was frequently so busy you'd do the best you could and write something and give it to him to sign. I guess if he wanted to change it he would.

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- G: Well, anything else on his mother that is relevant? Did she talk about his father, LBJ's father, and what he was like?
- V: No. The President said once that the only people in the world his mother cared about were her children.
- G: Does that, do you think, indicate that she and her husband were not really close?
- V: No, I think he meant currently. This was long after her husband's death.
- G: Oh, I see. What qualities do you think he got from his mother?
- V: Although I never knew his father, I always imagined he probably was more like his father, but that he had great respect for his mother and that she had a kind of interest in perhaps books, history, and perhaps if you can call it this, she had a certain quality of gentility that he thought ladies, women, should have.
- G: This is something I really wonder about. Was she cultured?
- V: Not in the sense—at least in my view she was not.
- G: I mean, this is a woman that spent her whole life I guess, or her adult life, there in Johnson City. I'm sure she had to—raised five children—do a lot of manual labor.
- V: I think by most standards today we would not consider her cultured, and perhaps that quality may have been exaggerated to some extent. Maybe it was in comparison to her husband [that she was considered cultured].
- G: Okay. Now before we turned on the tape we had talked about the trip to New York and going to the make-up artist. Let me ask you to tell how that tradition began.
- V: Well, let's see. I was reading a current issue of *Vogue* magazine, the ladies' magazine. There was an article done on several make-up artists in New York, and one of them was

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Eddie Senz. I think a trip had already been planned to New York, and I decided that I would like to go to Eddie Senz for a make-up. I made an appointment for myself, and I remember one evening telling Senator and Mrs. Johnson about this, and right away Senator Johnson told his wife that he would like for her to do the same thing. Well, by the end of this, all of us were scheduled to go see Eddie Senz, Eloise Thornberry and Marjorie Jenkins also. So just a tradition began. We all began a friendship with Eddie Senz.

G: Was he the one that you would go to each time or did you change?

V: Oh, there may have been other people in his shop. I don't recall this, but I don't think he possibly could have handled everyone who came to him.

G: He really wanted the people on his staff to be well groomed, didn't he?

V: Yes.

G: Why was this, do you remember?

V: I don't know. I think, ever since I knew him, as I understand, I remember Mrs. Johnson saying things like he always wanted her to have her lipstick on. I remember her saying once something to the effect that this came naturally to Luci, but she and Lynda could barely comb their own hair or something to that effect. And he always liked—oh, one thing, I know that very early when I started to work there, I remember Juanita Roberts saying something about he had complimented her one day when he saw that she had on high heels and not a lower, more comfortable shoe. But I think that was—he liked high heels and he liked lipstick, and he didn't want your slip showing. I think it was sort of in that order.

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G: My impression is that he would also make suggestions to the men on how to dress and how to comb their hair and things like that. Do you remember that?

V: I don't know about that. (Laughter)

G: Okay.

(Interruption)

Let me ask you to tell that.

V: It's not a very good story if I don't have—maybe on the next trip. It's not a very good story because I can't remember the name of the man who was running for Congress. Vance Hartke was running for the Senate. I suppose Senator Johnson must have been there to speak for the Democratic ticket, and in his speech, which was sort of a rousing speech, he wanted to ask people to vote for Vance Hartke for the Senate and this other man for the House, and he apparently forgot the man's name. He would tell this story on himself. Somebody supplied him with the name, the man who was running for the House. That's really about all I can tell you.

G: During the speech?

V: Yes.

G: Do you know who supplied him with the name?

V: I don't. Maybe even somebody in the audience. It was obvious that the name maybe was probably on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn't say it, he didn't know this man at all.

G: Had you started tape recording his speeches yet? Didn't you have a little machine or—?

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V: Yes, I did, but I think that came later. I don't remember when we started with that. That was a nightmare.

G: I bet it was. Whatever happened to the tapes, do you know?

V: Oh, gosh only knows. It was not a very good machine. It really was a terrible way to try to record speeches, and to try to get up close enough where I could pick speeches up. I don't know what we did with the tapes, and I don't know whether the idea was maybe to transcribe them onto paper. But the machine was an inexpensive little machine. I remember being someplace and Bob Waldron was with me, and we were trying to record his speech, and the tape didn't pick up. All this tape just came out like spaghetti.

(Laughter) And I got on the bus afterwards, and Bob and I were just in stitches. We were just holding our sides. We had just this armful of spaghetti that we were trying to get that back on. And then sometimes you'd see that it wasn't picking up again, and so I would try to pull it up—it was such a simple kind of tape that it would scratch it, it would be inaudible. But I didn't like it. It was too heavy for me to carry around very well, and finally Bob Waldron took it over. I was glad to give it to him.

G: Did LBJ ever want to listen to the tapes later to see how they sounded?

V: I don't specifically recall a time when he asked. It would have been a waste if he never wanted to hear any of them, but I can't recall.

G: Tell me how that process began. Do you know why he did it?

V: Well, I think it began because it was just impossible to take down his speeches in shorthand and that he felt that the tape recorder was more reliable.

G: And he bought the recorder?

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V: I don't know where it came from.

G: That's good. Okay.

(Interruption)

V: I don't remember that much. I remember some of us learning to water ski.

G: Was this your first trip to Acapulco?

V: I guess it was. I was trying to remember if I had been there, otherwise—I suppose it was.

G: I guess this was the beginning of his relationship with Miguel Alemán, wasn't it?

V: I don't know whether he had known him before or not. I can't answer that. I had thought he had known him, since we stayed at his house, I had assumed I guess that they had been friends, but I don't know. Wouldn't—no, it was [Adolfo] Lopez Mateos who came to the Ranch. I don't know.

G: Well, describe the trip.

V: This was the beginning of his friendship I believe with—I'm trying to think of his name—Miguel—

G: Mike and Marion Guajardo?

V: Yes. And I remember we came into Acapulco and the Guajardos were standing out there, and she's very beautiful. We met them and spent a good many evenings with them. I think we had dinner at their house once and I know that the Johnsons had them to the Alemán house probably more than once. But I think it was a relaxing vacation, sun and some swimming. But my memory of it is that it was very pleasant for him.

G: Did he transact much business while he was there or was he—?

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- V: I don't recall that. I don't think he ever went anywhere that he that he wasn't on the phone some, but I don't recall that he worked a lot.
- G: Did he bring his own food and water and everything?
- V: I think maybe he brought some. He was always watching his diet. I have a vague, dim recollection that he brought like some canned soups perhaps, I think perhaps to watch his diet as much as to avoid getting sick.
- G: Okay, now another topic that we talked about before the recorder was on was his discussing whether he should resign as majority leader, which seems to show up in some of the memoranda, and also deciding or thinking about perhaps not running for reelection in 1960. Let me ask you to just recall what you can about this question.
- V: I don't recall his discussing specifically resigning the leadership. I do recall there was some discussion prior to 1960 that he might resign, that he might not run again, and I remember one night at the Scharnhorst Mrs. Johnson making the remark that she would not look forward to his retiring.
- G: Did she say why?
- V: No, she'd be the best source of that. But I thought at the time that it was just that, as young as he was, she didn't think he'd be happy not working, not being involved in politics. I don't know that a great many people took it seriously that he might retire.
- G: Well, he does seem to have been under a lot of pressure at this time. It seems that he was not appreciated as much as he had been earlier as majority leader. Do you think that he felt that it had lost some of its glow, being in the Senate had? Did he ever express that? Do you think he ever felt that he was beginning to tire of it?

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V: I would just be speculating. I don't know how he felt.

G: He never talked about it with you?

V: No. I'm trying to think. It seems to me that one of the things that I heard him say at the 1960 convention was the possibility that, prior to the convention—I suppose now that I'm thinking back that he had discussed retiring, but I don't think I had thought that that's what he would do. I know that when he was debating that day whether or not to accept Senator Kennedy's offer to go on the ticket with him, I remember thinking, well, if he goes on the ticket obviously he's not going to retire, as he had been discussing.

(Interruption)

Oh, yes, I had heard something about it, because I remember very well thinking, well, if you go on the ticket obviously you're not going to retire.

G: Do you think he, during this period, ever felt a desire to go into business or go into—not necessarily losing interest in the Senate but more interested in, say, going into business or something of this nature?

V: I don't recall thinking that.

G: He didn't talk about it?

V: I can't recall anything.

G: Okay.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III

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