

INTERVIEWEE: Louis Walter

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

February 18, 1969, San Diego, California

F: This is an interview with Mr. Louis F. Walter at his home in San Diego, California, on February 18, 1969.

Mr. Walter, tell us a little bit about yourself. You are a native of Gillespie County, Texas?

W: Yes. I was born in Gillespie County, 16 miles north of Fredericksburg, near Enchanted Rock, January 6, 1881.

F: Where did you know the Johnsons? In Fredericksburg?

W: Well, I met them in Fredericksburg while I was working in the Bank. The old Bank of Fredericksburg.

F: What was the name of that bank, do you remember?

W: The Bank of Fredericksburg.

F: When did you work there?

W: I worked there from 1897 to 1903.

F: Did Mr. Johnson's--did the President's father bank there?

W: Yes.

F: And did you know the President's grandfather also?

W: Yes. I remember him well.

F: Do you remember when you first met the grandfather?

W: I met him there in the bank about the turn of the century.

F: Do you have any particular reminiscences, any particular memories of the President's grandfather or father? What size men were they?

W: Well his father was about 6 feet tall or close to it. His grandfather was over six feet, probably six feet three or four. They were both jocular, good natured, very polite.

F: Generally recognized as good citizens?

W: Oh, yes.

F: Good people to bank with?

W: Yes.

F: Did you ever lend them any money?

W: Yes, I remember the father had a loan there one time. Small loan.

F: On his crops, or do you remember?

W: Oh, there was no mortgage on it, he got it on his own signature.

F: Just a personal loan, and his signature was good. So they had good credit in the area?

W: Good credit. They were small operators, but their credit was good.

F: Now then, did you go to church there in Fredericksburg, at the old St. Barnabas Church?

W: No. St. Barnabas Church was organized oh probably fifteen or twenty years ago, I don't remember exactly.

F: Who were the uncle and aunt you lived with in Fredericksburg?

W: They were William Walter and Sophia Walter. My uncle was about six years old when the first immigrants came to Fredericksburg. He came with them, with my grandfather. And he remembers when my grandfather, Peter Walter, built the old house which later became the St. Barbabas Church. Of course, there has been a new church erected on the same lot.

F: Do you remember when the county seat was moved from Blanco to Johnson City?

W: Yes. I was a small boy, I guess 14 or 15 about, at home on the ranch. And I remember the county seat of Blanco County had been moved from Blanco to Johnson City.

F: Did it cause much excitement, much interest?

W: Not there. It probably did in Blanco County.

F: You mentioned in a letter that when you were a student at the University of Texas in 1904, that you met Mr. [Sam Ealy] Johnson again.

W: Yes. He was a member of the legislature at that time representing Blanco, Gillespie, and Llano counties, and one afternoon I happened to be walking through the rotunda of the Capitol when the Legislature was in recess and he saw me, and he hurried over to where I was, took me by the arm and escorted me over to his desk in the legislative hall. We sat there and talked awhile about conditions at home, and while there he played a little joke on a member who had his desk right next to him. He [the other member] kept a big alarm clock on his desk and no doubt it had been a nuisance many a time, so he [Johnson] stepped over while the representative, Mr. Blont, was away, and set the alarm a few minutes--five minutes ahead, and in a few minutes Mr. Blont came back, sat down, propped his feet upon his desk and was looking through his papers when his alarm went off. He jumped to his feet and said, "It's time to go to work! What are we here for?" And then a few minutes later the presiding officer rapped for order to resume business and I left. Mr. Blont never found out who played that joke.

F: It was Mr. Blont's alarm clock that went off? Do you know of any other incidences of a practical joke like that by Representative Johnson?

W: No, I don't remember any others right now. The President's grandfather too had a great sense of humor. He was always exchanging jokes with Mr. Smith, the president of the bank, when he'd come; we always laughed a lot.

F: You left Fredericksburg before the President was born?

W: Not exactly. I was back there--I was elected County Attorney in 1914 to 1916, and after my term expired I moved to Dallas. That was in 1916.

F: Do you have any memory of ever having seen the President when he was a little boy?

W: No. No, I didn't get around in the country around Stonewall very much.

F: That was the wrong county. Did you ever have any occasion either to represent Mr. Sam Ealy Johnson or the grandfather? Or to work with them on any legal matters?

W: No.

F: Did the Johnsons come into Fredericksburg fairly frequently?

W: Oh, not very often; probably once a month on the average.

F: What would they do, come in by buggy or wagon?

W: Horse and buggy.

F: How long did it take in those days?

W: Oh, it'd take about two and a half to three hours from Stonewall.

F: Was there any difficulty in crossing the Pedernales?

W: Not unless it was flooding.

F: It was a fairly good road from one town to the other?

W: Yes.

F: How large was Fredericksburg in those days?

W: In those days, two thousand.

F: It was pretty much the center for the trading area?

W: Yes. The Bank of Fredericksburg was the only bank in the county and there was no bank in Blanco County at that time. There was one in Llano and one in Mason, but most of the prominent people would come to the Bank of Fredericksburg.

F: So that the people in Stonewall, or Johnson City, probably would have come into Fredericksburg?

W: Yes.

F: Did you have a railroad in Fredericksburg then?

W: No.

F: Do you have any other memories of the Johnsons in that period?

W: No, I believe not.

F: When did you first become aware of Lyndon Johnson, when he was a Congressman, or before that?

W: When he was a Congressman, yes.

F: Were you in Dallas at that time or had you already left Dallas by then?

W: No. I was in Kansas City at that time.

F: But you kept up enough with Texas affairs--

W: Fredericksburg paper.

F: Have you ever seen Mr. Johnson since those days--did you ever meet Lyndon Johnson?

W: No. No, I have never had that pleasure.

F: You were an attorney?

W: Yes.

F: You took your college training at the University of Texas, right?

W: Yes.

F: When were you at Texas?

W: In 1903, 04, and 05. Graduated in 1905.

F: Then did you study any law there, or did you go back to Fredericksburg and study law--where did you study your law?

W: I practiced law in San Antonio for about six months, then I moved to a small town in Bee County, 105 miles south of San Antonio--Skidmore.

F: Oh, I know Skidmore, yes. And then to Fredericksburg?

W: Went back to Fredericksburg. For only a few years. Three or four years.

F: Was it a place that you didn't feel there was sufficient opportunity for a bright young lawyer?

W: Well, it was well supplied with lawyers, and the County Attorney Office there didn't amount to very much in those days. There was no salary connected with it.

F: Did you just live off the fees?

W: Lived off the fees, and that was only guilty pleas, \$5.00, or for winning a case that I had to prosecute would be \$10.00. And it was just too small a pay.

F: Yes. Did you marry a Fredericksburg girl?

W: No, I married a girl from Paris, France.

F: Where did you meet her?

W: In Kansas.

F: Have you been back to Fredericksburg since you left for Dallas?

W: Oh yes, I was back in 1933, and again in 1937. I haven't been back since.

F: Well, I don't think you'd find much change in it except it's been wet this year, which is unusual. In those days, did you have a lot of trouble with the weather, with its being too dry, do you remember particularly?

W: We had a very severe drought in 1893, which I remember well, being on my father's ranch at the time. I think that's the severest drought that I remember.

F: How bad did it get? Do you remember any particular--?

W: Oh it didn't rain for about six months, and the live oak brush on the hills died, a lot of them.

F: Did you have trouble with grass fires?

W: No, we never had trouble with grass fires on our ranch.

F: The Indians had all left by the time you were born?

W: Yes.

F: Was there much cedar in that country then?

W: Not very much, not on our ranch. Of course there's a lot of cedar in the cedar breaks west of Austin between Johnson City and Austin over in there, a little bit north of there, I understand.

F: Do you remember when the first automobile came into Fredericksburg?

W: Yes. It was an electric car owned by Dr. Tainter, L. K. Tainter.

F: Did he drive it out from San Antonio or Austin? How did he get it home?

W: I don't remember.

F: Did it create much of a sensation?

W: Not very much.

F: Were they using tractors when you were a boy on the farm, or did this come in later?

W: That came in later.

F: Do you remember the first tractors that were used in that area?

W: No.

F: What did you grow on the farm then?

W: Oh, mostly cotton, corn and wheat.

F: Did you raise much peaches? Did you have many orchards?

W: Only a little home orchard.

F: Did they make much brandy in those days? The reason I ask, they do now, and I wondered if that wasn't something that developed fairly late.

W: No, they made wine. My uncle and aunt together used to make, oh, say 50 gallons of wine.

F: Did they raise their own grapes?

W: Yes.

F: What kind of grapes, do you remember?

W: Black Spanish.

F: And the wine was just for home use.

W: Home use, my aunt would sell some bottles of wine for a quarter.

F: When you lived up there north of Fredericksburg, where did you go to church?

W: We went to church at Crab Apple. That was two and a half miles away, 14 miles north of Fredericksburg.

F: What kind of church was that?

W: Lutheran.

F: Had they quit having the Sunday houses in Fredericksburg at that time?

W: No.

F: People still used them?

W: They were very much in use. I remember when many of them were built.

F: Did you ever go into one on a weekend?

W: No. No, we had our uncle and aunt living there, so we always stayed with them.

F: So you moved in later and stayed with them. Did you go to school in Fredericksburg?

W: Yes.

F: Did you work in the bank while you were in school, or is that after you were out of school?

W: It was after I left school.

F: What, to save money to go to the University?

W: Yes, I saved some. Made a small investment on three lots, which I sold for for more than double what I paid for them.

F: There in Fredericksburg?

W: There in Fredericksburg, yes.

F: Incidentally, they have built, you know, a new courthouse and the old courthouse has been made into a sort of a library-museum. It has been fixed up and is very nice.

W: I saw the pictures in the paper.

F: You still get the Fredericksburg paper?

W: Oh, yes.

F: Well then, you keep up pretty well, probably better than I do. I was there when Mrs. Johnson brought the foreign travel editors there last spring, you may recall, and they decorated the wagons and carried everybody through town on the orchard wagons. It was a wonderful day. When you were in Fredericksburg, practically everybody was of German descent, weren't they?

W: Yes.

F: And you hadn't had too many Anglos come in at that time. The Johnsons then would have been kinda rare people in the fact that they weren't German.

W: Well, probably so, but the thing, the Germans there all speak English.

F: Yes, right.

W: My ancestors came to New Braunfels in the fall of 1845, when Texas was still a republic, and they stayed in New Braunfels over winter and then next spring they joined in the big immigration parade from New Braunfels to Fredericksburg. Oh, I suppose there were about 600 to 700 people in the one party. There had been a surveyor up there the year before, surveying the townsite, but the colonists didn't move in until May, 1846, landed there on May 8, 1846. My grandfather was with that group.

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Louis F. Walter

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