

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDE WILD, SR.

INTERVIEWER: Eric F. Goldman

Wild's office in the Perry Brooks Building, Austin, Texas, May 7, 1965

G: Mr. Wild, would you begin by telling us how you became the Johnson campaign manager in the first Congressional campaign?

W: In 1938 Congress Buchanan died and Lyndon Johnson announced one Sunday night, I think it was, for his place. This was a special election and there was no primary involved, no run-off, just winner take all. The next day, Sam Fore of Floresville and Denver Chestnut, with whom I have been associated in other ventures, came to my office and said they wanted me to manage Lyndon Johnson's campaign for Congress. My first comment was, "Who the hell is Lyndon Johnson?" They later brought him by my office and I thought--having watched politics and politicians for many years--that I could see a comer in him.

G: Mr. Wild, where was your office then?

W: In what is now the Capital National Bank Building in Austin. It was left up largely to me to work out the basic strategy of the campaign. Since it was a winner take all and he had about 9 or 10 opponents, the vote was naturally split. We engineered a little strategy.

G: Excuse me, sir. Had you known Mr. Johnson before this?

W: No, I had never met him until that afternoon when they brought him in and introduced him to me. I stayed with him for a day or so before we outlined any plan. He didn't altogether agree with what I was attempting to do but since I was in charge, he followed to the letter.

G: You had been experienced in campaign management before this, hadn't you?

W: Yes, I had been engaged in a number of campaigns, including the one for Governor Allred, who was the Governor at that time. He later was a great help in the campaign. He threw his own organization, as best he could, behind Lyndon although he had friends, many of them, who were supporting other candidates.

G: You said there was some disagreement in the beginning as to basic strategy?

W: Well, we worked up a little plan in which with respect to one candidate from one part of the district, we would pick a fight with him, would attack him. We would find anything weak in his record and bring it out. Our idea was to have Johnson against one in one place, and Johnson against another somewhere else so that Johnson was always in the center of the picture.

G: Who was the one man or the more than one man you most feared? Who was your real opponent?

W: No one stood out. There was Martin Harris, who was Assistant Attorney General, who had been District Attorney in the eastern part of the district which normally was not strong for President Roosevelt. Lyndon announced his campaign as a 100% supporter of President Roosevelt, including the Court Packing Plan.

G: One of the men was the ex-mayor of Austin, was he not?

W: We didn't do anything about Mr. Harris. We completely ignored him for fear of building him up. We knew he had a solid block down there and we were afraid of him. We had a very popular county judge in Williamson County and we were somewhat afraid of him if he could pick up strength anywhere else. But our move was to make the fight everywhere between Johnson and a different one and freeze each out. One

of them had been a very close confidante of Congressman Buchanan and he was engaged in the stone business and through that connection supposedly he had sold much stone for government projects throughout the country. We managed to make a lobbyist out of him. Incidentally, he became one of Lyndon's best friends over the years and is still living. We had two or three other local men. One of them we called an economic royalist. One was a state senator and he found himself in the Senate on the side of the resolution which condemned the building of the dams above Austin here. Of course that was fatal in this district and especially in his county. Mr Ray Lee was at that time connected with the Austin-American.

G: Pardon me, I tried to reach Mr. Lee this morning and they tell me he is in Puerto Rico. Is that correct?

W: He is with the State Department somewhere.

By the way, you don't have an appointment with a man named Barnet in San Marcos?

G: Should I?

W: He is Mr. Lee's brother-in-law and was very active in that campaign. Perhaps it's Burnett. He used to be county judge...

G: What is his first name?

W: I believe it is John, but I wouldn't swear to it.

G: He lives in San Marcos?

W: He lives on a ranch out there and everybody knows him. He's Ray Lee's brother-in-law.

G: He was active in this 1937 campaign?

W: Yes, I said '38--I meant '37 awhile ago.

G: You were the campaign manager--these other men were working with you?

W: That's correct; they were all friends of his one way or the other.

Now Ray Lee worked with the paper. He and I worked pretty close together and the speeches Lyndon would make in some part of the territory he would get in the paper. He might make a speech out in Menard, Texas, to 25 people but it might be an important speech that everybody got. That was the way we worked it.

G: Was there only one paper in Austin then?

W: Yes.

G: Of course, it did support the President?

W: Yes, it was quite friendly. I don't know whether it had an editorial policy or not but they supported him all right.

G: Do you have any of the newspaper clippings of that time?

W: No, I don't.

G: Do you know anybody that does, by any chance?

W: No, I don't. But you might ask Deason about that. Somebody down there connected with the newspaper might have them but I didn't keep them. I was in one thing after the other and it was just another deal to me and I didn't keep track of that sort of thing.

G: Now, Mr. Wild, I have interrupted you. You were talking about the way you worked out what the issues would be. Of course, the big one was the support of the Roosevelt and particularly the support of the Court Packing Plan.

W: Lyndon did that on his own before anybody knew he was going to do it.

He just pitched his campaign for Roosevelt. We never tried to defend the Court Packing Plan. We tried to make it so that Lyndon would get the dyed-in-the-wool Roosevelt people and the rest of the voters split among his opponents. That was the heart of the campaign.

G: Mr. Wild, in the beginning of this campaign, it is my impression from talking with other people that Mr. Johnson was considered a fairly long-shot candidate, that he looked like perhaps the person least likely to win. Is that correct?

W: That is absolutely correct. His own county of Blanco, had only been in the district for just a few years; the others had been in for some time but as they redistricted, they took that in. Nobody knew him. He had gone to school at San Marcos and a few people there knew him. He had been in the NYA here and a few people knew him. And, of course, Blanco is the smallest county in the district and nobody thought he had a chance.

G: Did you?

W: At first I had my doubts. After I saw this thing unfold that we had worked out and saw the other side begin to get a little desperate and make some mistakes, then I thought we had it. But I never did think he had a chance until--I guess the campaign lasted about 5 weeks and about the third week we began to see daylight because all of these other people were pretty good men.

G: Mr. Wild, one of the President's old friends has told us that in the first conversation with Mr. Johnson you said, "Look, you are a bright young man but I am the experienced political manager. I'm going to lay down the basic strategy and you're going to follow it." And the President agreed to do that. Is that correct?

W: Well, substantially so. I didn't tell him--I don't think I bragged on myself much. I remember when we outlined this and we were jumping on Senator Brownley and Brownley's record in Burnet County--I'm ashamed of myself, I can't remember that other fellow's name, this other local citizen who had been a friend of Mr. Buchanan's--those men were pretty good men but we had to attack them. Mrs. Johnson came to me and said she was putting up the money for this race and she wasn't going to have her husband slinging mud. She wanted him to be a gentleman. I remember my comment was: Well, do you want him to be a gentleman or a Congressman?

G: Can't you be both, Mr. Wild?

W: I left that up to them. She went to a friend of mine on the Hill, at the Capitol building, who was also a friend of hers and she told him that story. That's General Ernest Thompson and he said, "Lady Bird, do you have a cat?" She said, "Yes, I have a cat." He said, "Well, why don't you go on home and attend to it and let them run the campaign." Then they yielded. Lyndon said at one time that he wasn't going to do it, what I had said. I said, "Well, all right, you can run your campaign" and I went home. He called me back that afternoon, Sam Fore did. He said that they all agreed for me to call the signals and they would do what I said and he did.

G: In the beginning it was a rather rough political campaign?

W: Well, it was. There was a lot of feeling. Of course, Lyndon likes to run every show. He had been a campaign manager too and kind of wanted to run this one and it's a little hard to do both.

G: Mr. Wild, you spoke of your basic strategy. You said your basic strategy was to attack the candidate and to make it Johnson versus that candidate in each district.

W: Well, attack may not be quite the right word. All of these fellows were a little vulnerable somewhere and we pointed it out.

G: You said that at first you thought that things didn't look too good but after they began making mistakes, things started looking better. What were the mistakes?

W: They started attacking him, which was good advertising. One of them challenged him to a debate and that was another mistake. We sent a representative and he didn't show up at all and his own people turned on him. Things of that nature. And some of them got personal with him and he was just a young man and a lot of people didn't like that. I don't remember now but I thought all of them got desperate and that's the way people do, you know.

G: What was Mrs. Johnson's role in the campaign? She was young and shy--did she campaign?

W: No, she had little to do. She told me that she financed it. She stayed around, she was here and she was home and would drop by but I think she took care of her kittens pretty much.

G: Where were campaign headquarters located?

W: In my office over in the Capital National Bank Building.

G: In the support of Roosevelt which was the big thing in the campaign, did the President speak all-out support right on down the line?

W: Yes, he defended the President and tied himself in with President Roosevelt all the way. He laid off of most issues, a lot of which were controversial, as you know. He was a leader, he got things done.

Lyndon took his cue from there. And if you remember, Lyndon had never met the President at that time; he was just smart enough to grab that ball before any of us got on it. And after he was elected, Governor Allred found that the President was on the boat down in the Gulf and he suggested to Lyndon that this would be a good contact and he arranged for Lyndon to get on that boat.

G: Do you remember how long this was after...

W: About 2 or 3 weeks after the campaign--something like that--I've forgotten just how long it was. And he did, and of course they hit it off and when he went to Washington he ran around, as I understand it, with the Roosevelt brothers and became almost a member of the family. That's where Lyndon got a lot of his ambition and a lot of his ideas.

G: What kind of a speaker was Mr. Johnson during his campaign? What was his manner--how would you describe it?

W: I would say about like it is now. He was never considered an orator. We never had an opportunity or a big enough crowd running in all these little-bitty towns and communities. He would go there. We would book him ahead. And somebody would round up what few there were and he would talk on just whatever fitted that particular community--agriculture, for example, the AAA had been knocked out by the Supreme Court and that sort of tied in. And up in the Burnet county, it had to do with the lakes, etc.

G: Was his voice high or low then? Did he speak slowly or swiftly?

W: I think he slowed down in his later years. I think his pitch was a little higher. It was just boyish enthusiasm, that's all you could say.

G: Some people have used the word "fiery" in describing the way he spoke then. Would you?



W: No, I don't think so. I don't know what they mean by fiery. I think it showed enthusiasm. It obviously showed lack of maturity, and that was our biggest handicap, of course, and that's what they fought us on.

G: What did you do about it?

W: Ignored it. Never did try to defend him.

G: How did you travel around?

W: In an automobile.

G: Mr. Wild, at some stage of the campaign, Maury Maverick played a role, didn't he?

W: I assume he did. I never did have any contact with him. He came up here and I think he knew some people that he encouraged to vote for him.

G: Was Maverick a friend of yours or or Mr. Johnson?

W: A friend of Mr. Johnson.

G: How did he meet him?

W: I don't know, unless it was as secretary of Kleberg.

G: Did he discuss the campaign with people before he came to have a campaign manager?

W: I don't know.

G: Mr. Wild, one interesting part of the campaign is that at the end comes the appendicitis operation. Would you tell us that whole story, please?

W: Well, one night about 11 p.m. I got a phone call--I think it was from Congressman Roberts who lived out there with them--and he said that the President was sick. He asked me if I could come out and I did. He was in considerable pain and we got doctors--

G: You said come out--where did the President live then?

W: He lived out there near Camp Mabry in a two-story house of some sort.

G: Did he live in an apartment or a house?

W: A duplex, upstairs. So we took him to the hospital and he was operated on about three in the morning. It so happened that the next night, I believe it was the next night, he was to close the campaign in Luling.

G: Where is that?

W: That's in another county here.

G: Why was that selected.

W: I don't know why it was selected. We just hadn't gotten around there, and one of his friends, General Miller Ainsworth, was down there. He had arranged it. It was awful cold, as I remember. But we had written his speech--probably it was by Ray Lee--and we went down there and I read his speech. I remember I told them that he had written it before he got sick and this is a little fib that I hope they forgave me. I had a lot of comments on my delivery of that thing. I don't know why.

G: We heard it was very eloquent--with a golden voice.

W: Anyway we had a bunch of people, it was cold and we did not have many people, but we had to go through with it. We got up on that stage and I would give them a signal and when they cheered, it sounded like a million.

G: What stage was it?

W: An outdoor pavillion, a little outdoor pavillion.

G: Who were the audience?

W: They were all local people--local and some from here.

G: Is it your feeling that the final campaign effort, the one connected

with his illness, helped materially in winning for him?

W: It may have had some effect but the race was won I think, anyway.

And here's another mistake some of them made. The next morning a couple of his opponents got out the story that it was a faked operation or a faked illness. Some of the doctors had known Mr. Avery and they were for him even though they hadn't anything against Johnson necessarily, they were just for him. And when that story came out, one of the leaders phoned one of the local doctors and asked what the truth was and he told them what his blood count was and he said, The "So and So's." And he switched and started working. It backfired on them some. I don't think it won the election. I think we had it won by that time but it helped.

G: Mr. Wild, are there any other colorful details about the campaign which you remember? For one thing, Mr. Johnson in all of his activities in those days, as now, is described as a tremendously hard worker; up early, working late into the night--did he campaign day and night?

W: He would do that in those days. You could go to these little towns--they would like for you to come to see them. You would go around the block and go into the stores. He'd get up around five or six o'clock and walk down the street, go to people's houses, and all that; he really worked.

G: One friend of his, Ben Crider, says that he remembers that when the campaign opened, Mr. Johnson did not even know the mayor of Austin and that Crider remembers Mr. Johnson in a long, black coat walking all day and all night saying, "I'm Lyndon Johnson." Is this right?

- W: Yes, he had a black coat on. It wasn't long, he is just a long fellow and it looked long.
- G: How did he dress in general in those days?
- W: I'd say about like he is now. I never did call him flashy. You know Johnson at heart is a hillbilly. He was then and he still is. They criticized him for it; I think it's an asset. That's all he was, just a country boy coming to town and we were glad for people to jump on him, because that way they found out who he was. And they would want to see him and then when they saw him, they would like him.
- G: How about special aspects of the campaign?
- W: I remember one--we did have one little situation. Lyndon was having trouble with a lot of the church people. His father was an anti-prohibitionist and had been in the Legislature. Some of the church people picked this up and were giving him a little bit of trouble. We were worried about how to meet it. It just so happened that there had been a special session to repeal the racetrack legality or whatever you call it and it had been quite an issue. All these church people had been for it. So we hatched up a little speech for him where he said, "If I ever get to Congress, I am going to vote against it." Ridiculous you know, but I remember that very well and it did the job. A lot of people switched.
- G: Did his mother or father participate in the campaign?
- W: I never did see them.
- G: Mr. Wild, on election night, where was he? Where were you?
- W: We heard the returns, as I remember, we had our headquarters at the Austin Hotel and he was there, and he was as jubilant as a football hero.

G: You were there with him?

W: Yes.

G: He wasn't in the hospital then?

W: Oh, the election night you're talking about. No, he wasn't there. The crowd was there. It was just like a football rally, and they took him from his hospital bed.

G: Who was with him in the hospital?

W: Mrs. Johnson--I don't remember--presumably Mrs. Johnson.

G: What did he do? Did he keep telephoning you?

W: You couldn't keep him off the telephone then anymore than you can now.

G: I'm sure he was jubilant, etc. but do you remember anything in particular that he said?

W: Oh, he embraced and hugged everybody for what they did for him and all that--he does that now.

G: There were a lot of you in the hotel getting the returns, and there were some in his room?

W: I don't know whether they had a crowd out there or not. I'm a little hazy on that but I doubt it because he was still sick.

G: What hospital was he in?

W: Seton, that's Catholic.

G: Was there any special note sounded in that election eve speech, any particular plea why he should be the choice?

W: I can't remember. We did have something. We had a theme song.

G: Did he have any theme song that he was identified with throughout the campaign--that is, are we talking about a song or a theme?

W: I call it a theme song.

G: He did not have a song?

W: No.

- G: Was there any express or motto that he identified himself with?
- W: Well, he had this business about progress and development. He wanted to develop all this country and he wanted to follow the program, laid down by the President--the leadership--and he wanted to be a part of it.
- G: Did he issue an acceptance statement or any victory statement?
- W: Not that I know of. I don't remember that he had any victory statement. Probably he issued one to the press which Ray Lee wrote. He couldn't have done anything about it. But things were bound to be a bit subdued because the candidate was unavailable.
- G: Did you use the radio much to campaign?
- W: Yes, he was on a few times locally. This was the only radio station that was in Austin. Maybe we had two then--I don't remember how many--but we went on WAOI because these stations were weaker and part of the district it couldn't reach. And that's the only speech--the election eve one--that went over the whole area; WAOI did cover it very well.
- G: Mr. Wild, you said in the beginning you wondered whether he could win and then grew more confident. At the beginning, did Mr. Johnson think he was going to win?
- W: Well, you never know. He evidently did or he would never have run. It's hard to see how he could have thought so but he was as optimistic as ever.
- G: Did he dwell on his NYA record during the campaign?
- W: Some. Others did. They told about what a good job he had done and tried to build it up and talked about the fact that he knew everybody in Washington by being secretary to Kleberg, etc. But he didn't do much

of that. Others did. They would throw it in the news stories.

G: Mr. Wild, as an experienced political manager, when you look back over the campaign, what groups of voters really put him in--that is in respect to the rural and urban voters? The young voters, old voters, etc.--where was he strongest?

W: Well, he got the dedicated New Dealers. He got the Roosevelt vote, most of them. The rest of it pretty well split. He got very little of the businessmen's votes. He got some of it--the mayor at that time, Mayor Tom Miller, did support him and he had some following but generally speaking, he didn't. And you ought to remember that he won by not much over 30% of the votes put up in that split election. And at that time Roosevelt certainly had that many.

G: How about the German-Americans in Blanco?

W: They were against him; they have been against him. This was the first time up there--this last time--that he ever carried that county, I think.

G: Was there any significant minority vote of Mexicans or Negroes in that campaign?

W: No, it was never an issue then. Those who felt kindly toward Roosevelt probably were attracted to him but that was not an issue--the racial issue was not yet a factor.

G: You mentioned before that Ray Lee assisted in speech writing. Were there any other people who helped formulate policy and speeches?

W: There were some other boys connected with the newspaper but I don't remember. I remember Gordon Fulcher and I don't even know where he is. There was also another one down there but it centered around the newspaper boys.

G: Did Alvin Wirtz play any role?

W: Alvin Wirtz was a former state senator and he was one of the few substantial people who supported Roosevelt. He became Assistant Secretary of the Interior later. He was a lawyer down here and was an adviser, I think, to Lyndon's father. And I think he is the man who told Lyndon that he ought to run for Congress. He was an adviser but he didn't interfere with anything that I did; whatever influence he had, he did on his own. Lyndon always had a lot of confidence in him; he was a very capable, very able man. And probably, of course, he did throw him some support. A lot of people never could understand why he was a New Dealer and that became a critical issue. Roosevelt had been in long enough to create opposition by that time.

G: How much does a campaign like that cost in those days? Roughly?

W: As I remember it, around \$10,000.

G: Is that about what each of the candidates spent?

W: I don't know. We probably outran them a little.

G: Did Roy Miller participate in that campaign?

W: I don't know.

G: Do you have any letters or documents connected with that campaign?

W: I'm sure I don't; it's been so long. I've revamped my office so many time and we probably got rid of them. Now these boys, I didn't know Willard Deason in the campaign, I knew he was in it but I didn't know him until later.

G: Your contact with him ended pretty much after the campaign?

W: That's right. I had no more contact with him directly until he ran for the Senate in 1948; I ran that campaign--at least I was active in it. I had the title of manager. He managed his own campaign then pretty well.



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G: Before we cut off here--I'm worried about your time--is there anything else you would like to add about this campaign for the history books?

W: Well, no, nothing. History will know. I take a little personal pride in starting something that's still going.

G: You certainly did start something. You have been exceedingly helpful. Thank you very much.

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