

INTERVIEWEES: EUGENE AND HELEN WILLIAMS (Tape 1 of 2)

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: The Williams's home in Washington, D.C.

October 27, 1974

MG: Let's start with the occasion when you first met Lyndon Johnson, if you can remember how you met him and where it was.

HW: When we first met Senator Johnson, it was at their apartment there in Austin out on Dillman Street. We applied there for a job that they had advertised for, for a couple that would travel. Of course, we thought that this sounded interesting and that we would apply. So we did. After two weeks' trial, we got the job. We met Senator Johnson later, who was a very tall, kind of heavy man and had a strong face, which seemed to have been his character for the rest of the time that we knew him. Of course, there were times when we would have to go to Washington. He was always very energetic, wanting his family around him, and entertaining everyone. I never have been able to understand how one person had so much energy. He loved his family so much. Most of the time, though, what was most impressive about him was when, in a crisis, he never fell apart. He could just always pick up the pieces and carry on.

MG: Can you recall an example where he was under a lot of pressure and yet just [carried on]?

HW: I remember one time when we had this flood at the ranch. He had

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a friend visiting him there with a helicopter. There were people around there that didn't know if they were going to be drowned. But he awakened everyone in the middle of the night, he got this helicopter, and he rescued all these people, brought them to the ranch, and there we were serving breakfast. It just turned out to be a gay affair in the midst of something very destructive. It was things like this that you could admire him for.

Then there were times when he would be campaigning and with very little rest. You would think that he had a few minutes to rest, and then one of the aides would come in and say, "This group is out to see you." He would have to be awakened, but he could always come out smiling and greet these people.

MG: Do you remember, when you met him the first time, did he give you any special instructions or guidelines or watchwords that you remember?

HW: Yes. Gene, you can remember that. Do you remember when he told you about minding your own business?

EW: I will say this. The way we met him is they wanted this help and we went out to interview. They had checked our references. I think they had maybe twelve or thirteen couples, or we were thirteen. He said to me, "You didn't finish college, you didn't do this, but with your references, we're going to hire you." Just like that. But then going on down, he said, "If you want to be smart, you do your work and keep your mouth closed." That means

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if you don't know, then you can learn by not talking. You listen to other people, and you can learn quite a bit, which kind of worked out, I guess.

MG: Now did you work with him primarily in Austin, or did you go to Washington with them.

EW: We worked with them in Austin and here, too.

HW: We commuted from Austin with them, and then traveled around with them on campaign trips and various places that they went. One other time that I recall was when we were at the ranch, we had a very, very hard time getting domestic help. So I was always that type of person, too, after watching him. These people kind of generated on you. You just wanted to be there and be with them and do whatever [you could]. They undertook so many problems, of other people, the country, and the state of Texas then, because he was senator, and you just wanted to do whatever you could to make life a little easier for them. We were unable to get domestic help, so we just kind of picked up and did the best we could to see that everything went along as smoothly as possible. And of course, he watched all of this. I came in that October 1, and surprisingly to me, with the staff around, he had got up a surprise birthday party for me. They sang Happy Birthday to me and [there were] all the gifts. This was when he gave me a record player. He had anticipated my needs. I had mentioned to Gene, "I'm going to get me a record player," because I felt as if I wanted some music.

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I asked Gene, "Did you tell Senator Johnson that I wanted a record player?" Gene said, "No." So I asked him [Senator Johnson] later, "How did you know that I wanted a record player?" He said, "Well, I just thought that you were the type of person that loved music, and you needed some music." You know it was just kind of surprising how he could anticipate your needs.

MG: That's a good story. Was there something that you could do generally to help him out when he was under a lot of pressure?

HW: He was a very warm person. I think he could tell just by the expression on your face that you were in sympathy with him. Maybe if you just handed him a hot cup of Sanka, or just handed him something, or maybe smiled. He knew his friends. You knew that it was very little that you could [do].

(Interruption)

MG: He liked hot coffee, then?

HW: Well, Sanka really at that time.

MG: What were his favorite foods?

HW: He liked mostly creamy dishes. He loved lamb hash and tapioca. He had very strong feelings about the way he wanted foods prepared.

MG: Did he ever cook himself?

HW: He never cooked, but I'll tell you, he could really tell you how to cook and how everything should taste.

MG: Is that right?

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HW: That's right. He really could. Oh, he knew about everything; there was nothing that he didn't know about, the littlest odd things that he knew about.

MG: Can you recall when someone else was cooking something and he was showing them how to do it or telling them how to do it?

HW: (Laughing) I can remember one time that the cook wasn't there at Christmas so I was cooking the Christmas dinner. Of course, I didn't exactly prepare the gravy properly, so he told me exactly what should have been done, and I knew where I had made the mistake.

MG: Did he like desserts?

HW: Yes, he loved desserts.

MG: What was his favorite?

HW: I really do believe that tapioca was one of his favorites, and during the season he loved fresh peach ice cream.

MG: Do you think he was considerably more relaxed at the ranch than he was in Washington? Did his life style change, or was he able to come back to the ranch and relax?

HW: Oh, yes. Well, to me he could relax either place, but I think he felt freer at the ranch. In Washington, let's face it, you have your ties and things like that, and at the ranch he was just like he is in that picture there. That's the way I really remember him at the ranch, in his ranch clothes, and that means a lot, out over the fields and with the family and all. Everybody was just kind of carefree.

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MG: Who did he enjoy being with at the ranch? Who do you think provided him with the best company?

HW: His family and his close friends around, like A. W. Moursund and Melvin Winters, and he loved the company of, who is now, I think, Judge Thornberry but was then Congressman Thornberry.

MG: Judge Homer Thornberry.

HW: Yes, friends like that.

MG: What would they do? Would they play dominoes?

HW: Well, there were nights that they played dominoes. After the swimming pool was completed, then they would spend time swimming and out driving over the ranch and things like that, played checkers.

MG: What can you add about LBJ's relaxation at the ranch, Mr. Williams?

EW: Well, he loved to hunt at that time and things like that. I don't know. There was a little joke, though, I will tell about one time they had a flood. I think my wife mentioned that. The flood was coming and he was stranded over, so he told me to go down there and check it. I enjoyed that; I liked it; so I got down there and the station wagon wouldn't do anything but back up, or something. I told him about that, and he said he had some Shetland ponies there. He said, "Y'all have already torn up everything; have you got the harness for a little Shetland pony?" That was funny to me, things like that. He loved to hunt, and we'd fish, and stuff like that. He liked that, especially at the ranch.

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MG: He lived a slower pace there than he did in Washington, do you think?

HW: I think it would be entirely different, because in Washington there are always the cocktail parties and things like that. But at the ranch it was more or less informal, entertainment and just personal friends that he really knew were his friends. They weren't senators and things like that that were trying to get this bill passed and that bill passed. So I'm sure that the life was quite different between the life in Washington and the life style at his ranch.

MG: Would you drive his car back and forth from Washington to Texas.

HW: Yes, we did for quite some time.

MG: Do you remember the first time you did? Would you both drive it back?

HW: No, I wasn't driving. I'm not the driver. Gene was the driver.

MG: I think that he used to tell a story of you driving the car to the ranch, isn't that right?

HW: Yes, and about Beagle?

MG: Yes, not wanting to take Beagle?

EW: That came in like this. We started work for them in 1950, and we came to Washington on the train. But then in '51, I would make the drive twice a year; we would go down and come back. At this time, he asked me to take Beagle with us. I wouldn't say anything, so he said, "Gene, I want an answer." I still just looked at him. Finally I told him, "It's hard for me to get a place to stay, much less the dog."

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He said, "Well I didn't know it was like that." That's the way that Beagle deal came in.

MG: Did you tell him more about it, the problems that you had?

EW: I did tell him that, like I say, it was hard for us to get a place to stay. We'd have to go to certain places or certain towns. I would say you'd have to look for black motels or something.

HW: At various times he was confronted with the problem, because I know again here in Washington Mrs. Johnson was away, so he asked us to take the children to the movie. Of course, I was going in with the children. These are the things that probably made him really aware of discrimination, more aware.

MG: I think so.

HW: So of course when we got to the movie, I noticed everyone acting rather strangely, so I went to the ticket window to purchase the tickets. The girl only gave me two tickets. I said, "I'm sorry, I need three." Then she reluctantly pushed another ticket out. At the door, the fellow on the door only gave me back two stubs. I said, "I'm sorry, I gave you three tickets." By that time, the manager was there, and he said, "I'm sorry. You can't go in." I said, "Oh, no? Well, the girls are with me, and I have to take them in." He said, "I'm sorry, you can't go in." Of course, this hurt the girls very deeply, so they began to cry because they wanted to see their movie. So I had to bring them home, and of course we

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had to report this to him, too.

MG: What was his reaction. Did you tell him yourself?

HW: Yes, and of course Lynda rushed in and told him.

MG: Try to recall it as vividly as you can.

HW: When we got back, I think he was standing by the radiator reading the mail. He was just getting in. Lynda rushed in crying, and he said, "What's wrong?" She said, "They wouldn't let us see the movie." So then he started talking with me, and I told him why. Of course he looked startled, and then he apologized to me, because he felt like he had gotten me into this situation.

But then following that, what was kind of funny too, the next time Mrs. Johnson was away, Lynda had this affair at school. She asked him to go, and of course, he couldn't go, and he said, "What about Helen? Can Helen go with you?" She thought for a minute, and she said, "Well, it says, Daddy, 'come one and come all,' and Helen is a 'one,' isn't she?" Of course, I didn't try to go to the school, or anything like that. But traveling to and fro to Texas, they were made aware each time of what a hardship it was.

MG: The indignities.

HW: Right. Another thing that I recall was when he first piloted the voting rights bill through Congress, he made remarks [to us] because he had come to know us well. I don't know how discrimination started and all that, because we know now that there is good and bad

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in all races. He said to me, "Helen, I am going to do all I can to get this voting rights bill through because of people like you and Zephyr and Gene. I feel that you and people like you have a right to the American way of life as well as anyone else." Of course, he fought against discrimination in every way that he could. He was sincere, and I knew that he was sincere. It would always be upsetting to me to hear some black person say an unkind word about him, because I knew how sincere he was about people having equal rights. And I'll tell you, if any black person travels now, and I guess the whites too, that's not flying, you can tell the difference. During the time that we were traveling to and fro to Texas, we had to go way off the route to find a place to stay. Now it's not like that, and your traveling time is cut much shorter, and it's really a difference: if you have the money, you stay. This is the way he respected black people. He always said, "If you pay a person a good salary, they will take care of themselves." That's the way I view him.

MG: Did he want to know about instances of discrimination against you and your husband?

HW: No, I think he never questioned us deeply about it, because I think the times that it did happen, knowing him he probably looked into it himself. Of course there were civil rights leaders fighting for the cause.

MG: He never referred any discrimination regarding you to the NAACP, did he?

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HW: Oh no, I'm sure he didn't. No, no, no. No.

MG: Was he mad when you would tell him about someone that had. . . .?

HW: No, I don't think he was angered at all. I think he was just deeply hurt. No, he never showed any signs of anger, not at all.

MG: He never attempted to straighten it out himself by ?

HW: No, because I'm sure he knew how it had to be done. And after all, let's face it, how he worked had to be discreetly, because being the senator from Texas was his job, too. It was just not something you can take care of overnight.

Another time I recall, another incident. Forgive me about dates, but it was either in Tennessee or Alabama. Then we were campaigning. When we registered in the hotel, I never knew that they didn't intend for me to stay there because I was black. That was the only time that we had been traveling that I didn't have a room assignment. I remember him asking Bill Moyers what was my room assignment. So of course, in order to keep me from knowing I guess, Mr. Moyers didn't answer him, but I guess later he told him that they wouldn't assign me a room.

MG: What happened in that case?

HW: Well, I stayed that night at the hotel, but I stayed in the Senator's suite because the girls weren't with us. So I stayed there in that suite. Which was silly. That just shows you how silly discrimination is, because they didn't assign me a room, but yet I stayed in one of the

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plush suites. It didn't disturb me, but you see, these are the things that he had to be aware of. If they were happening to me, then they were happening to those other people, too.

MG: In that sense, your presence was awfully important in forming his own awareness of what was going on.

HW: Right. I think so.

MG: Well, Mr. Williams, do you recall any other instances where you told him about discrimination with regard to yourself or friends of yours?

EW: No, not too much. I didn't do as much traveling as Helen did. Most of my traveling was from here to [Texas] and back. Most of my experiences on those things is like from here to [Texas] and back twice a year. But Helen did a lot of traveling with them overseas and stuff like that. Most of mine was driving a car and stuff like that, working at the ranch. I would go from here to the ranch and from the ranch back here. Most of my experience then was like when I was telling about the dog. I remember one night, though, I won't forget. I believe Zephyr was with us. We got into Knoxville, Tennessee, I guess, around ten o'clock. I guess it was one o'clock that night before we could find a place to sleep. You know, things like that. So that's most of the experience I had, from here to Texas and back on those kinds of deals.

MG: You were driving his limousine, weren't you?

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EW: Well, his personal car.

MG: Oh I see. I thought it was the [limousine].

EW: No. I would take his personal car down and then bring it back.
You see, the limousine stayed here. The chauffeur, I guess, was furnished by the government here. I was driving only his personal car.

MG: Did he ever talk to you about the impact of the dog incident?

EW: No.

MG: He never told you that it set the example, that that helped shape his thinking on [civil rights]?

EW: Well no. The only thing he said on that when I told him about that, he just said, like you would say, maybe, "Well, I didn't know it was like that." But like I say, when he said that, probably in his own mind, like you say, he can't do things by himself as a Senator. But maybe he was thinking, "Now why do people want to be like that." Because he was a lovely person. He loved everybody, and he didn't care. He just loved, you see.

MG: You were probably suspicious, maybe a little bit, of him when you first went to work for him. I mean, he was a Southern senator who had not, before 1950, had a reputation for supporting civil rights causes. When did you decide that he was on your side, that his heart was in the right place as far as civil rights was concerned? When did you learn that he was really motivated toward [civil rights]?

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HW: Well, I think when the issue first started out, I think I knew then that he was a friend of the black man, because of the fact that I had watched him and knew that from his heart he was not a prejudiced man.

MG: But did you suspect that he might be prejudiced when you went to work for him, I mean, just not knowing him?

HW: No, I don't really think that I did. I'm not really sure.

MG: I was wondering, was there one point in your early association with him where he more or less convinced you that he was advancing civil rights?

HW: No, the only time that I think I was really aware of him really advancing civil rights was when he started working on getting that voting rights bill through. But now the things that motivated him to do that up until that point, I'm not too sure of those, either. But I wasn't surprised that he undertook to do this thing, because I could tell that within his heart, he was not a prejudiced man.

MG: He didn't have any personal prejudice?

HW: No, and he seemed to be the type of man for advancement for the state of Texas and for the country.

MG: Can you recall him helping black constituents while he was senator, realizing, of course, that you weren't working out of the office day by day?

HW: Not at this moment I can't recall.

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MG: I know Mack Hannah from Houston used to go into his office.
I think he was friends with Hobart Taylor, wasn't he?

HW: Yes, and Dr. Givens was a great friend of his.

MG: Oh, that's right. Can you remember anyone else?

HW: No. Let's see. I was trying to recall the first black secretary that worked in his office. What was her name, Gene? Do you recall her name?

EW: Gerri Whitaker? [Whittington]

HW: No, no, no, the one before then, the one from Austin.

EW: In his office?

HW: Hazy Taylor? Azy Taylor?

EW: I don't remember.

MG: When did she go to work for him?

HW: That must have been . . . probably about '60, I believe.

MG: What do you remember about that?

HW: Well, I remember when they were beginning to hire blacks for these positions. He asked me one morning, "Helen, do you know a smart, attractive black girl that would like to work in my office." I said, "Yes, me." (Laughing) He laughed and said, "Well, you already have a job." So later on, I recall, she was working for him.

MG: How did he hire her, do you know?

HW: No, I don't know how she came to work for him.

MG: Was she happy with him?

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- HW: Well, I didn't know that much about her, but at the time that I met her, she was happy with her work.
- MG: Where were you during the campaigns, let's say election night in 1960, when he was elected Vice President? The year President Kennedy beat Richard Nixon.
- HW: We must have been at the ranch.
- EW: What was that question?
- MG: In 1960, remember, when he was elected Vice President, the night of the election, I was wondering if you were with him?
- EW: No. I'm not quite sure. I wouldn't say.
- HW: I can't remember anything outstanding that I was involved in that night, but--
- EW: But I believe we were at the ranch the night of the election, I'm quite sure.
- HW: I'm sure we were.
- EW: Y'all were at the convention before that, so during the election, I'm quite sure we were at the ranch.
- MG: What was your role during these campaigns?
- HW: Well as I was saying earlier, just trying to say all the good things about him you could whenever you could and seeing that they were as comfortable as possible and that everything was running smoothly.
- MG: Did you run errands?
- HW: Yes, if need be, and seeing that everything was kept where they could

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just . . . , because your scheduling is [such that] you don't have any time to play around. You have to really meet these schedules; you can't afford to be late. So I would say more of less coordinating the wardrobes with the scheduling, seeing that everything was ready for the next affair, something like that.

MG: What was your most frustrating moment in attempting to carry out one of his requests, do you recall? When you were trying, say, to get something for him and couldn't find it?

HW: Well, I would think it would be if I was supposed to have had something that I should have packed and didn't pack it, and then when I needed it, it wasn't there, say for instance, a favorite tie or a favorite pair of socks or a favorite piece of jewelry, cuff links or something like that. He was always very understanding about something like that, it would just be me hating that I had failed at this particular point.

MG: He would let you know that you had left something behind?

HW: He might have asked me about it, he might have said, "Well, I prefer having my thus-and-so pair of cuff links." And then, of course, I would have to admit, "I'm sorry, I didn't bring it."

MG: How did you know what to pack?

HW: Just by knowing the favorite things by traveling day to day with someone, or maybe if one of his close aides or advance men on the trip would talk to Mrs. Johnson, then she would tell me. Or maybe sometimes they would talk with me and let me know what the

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temperature was like in a certain place, and then of course [my] knowing his favorite outfit for this particular climate. Sometimes I had to be careful, too, because they liked to travel with the least luggage possible. So sometimes if I wasn't sure about an outfit, I would have to be sure that they had [it]. This was the point: you always wanted them to have home away from home; you wanted them to be as comfortable and have everything that they were accustomed to to wear. This would be a mental strain in order to go make a speech if you felt that this particular suit was inappropriate or this particular dress was inappropriate. So sometimes if there were doubts, you could stick in an extra outfit to be sure, or if they had a couple of favorite outfits, you might stick in two to be sure that you had one, at least.

MG: Mr. Williams, what about you? Do you recall performing for him during the campaigns or during his trips? What do you remember about that?

EW: No, I never was in any of the trips. Like I say, most of my trips were from here to [Texas]. I guess there are jokes on me that wouldn't hurt. I remember one time--I guess a lot of people know it, too--but when he would get his new shoes, he would ask me to wear them and break them in for him. So one day when we were at the White House, I met him, and he looked at me and said, "Gene, you don't have on my shoes." I said, "Hasn't anybody brought them

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to me." He said, "Nobody's going to bring them to you. You go get my shoes and break them in for me." And I remember the time he was in the hospital. He couldn't get his paper like he wanted, so he called down to Mrs. Roberts and said, "You tell Gene to get my papers out here, so I know I'll get my papers." So about that time, Mr. Moyers fixed it where the press would take his papers out there. Like I say, I loved him and he was a good man, and he knew I would do what he wanted me to do. So Mr. Moyers said, "No, wait a minute. I'll try to fix that." So then they got the paper going. So he [Johnson] told Mrs. Roberts, "Gene will get my papers to me right on time." But on the trips, I never did make any trips with him, nothing unless we would just go from here to Texas and back, a short trip. But I wasn't on the campaign trips. I would either be here or at the ranch to receive him, or something like that.

MG: How long would you break in shoes?

EW: Well, I might wear them about three or four days and then shine them. He didn't like new ones. I would clean them up and shine them for him, and then he would be satisfied with them.

MG: That's great. Well, he was a great raconteur, a great storyteller. Did he ever tell some of his Hill Country stories to you?
(Laughter)

EW: Yes, but he told so many, I can't remember them. Like I say, he was really a good man. One thing I liked about him was he was so

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kind-hearted. I mean, he would say things to you and you would say things to him, and it was all over. He was just really a good man.

MG: Can you remember when he became President, the assassination? Were you in Washington?

EW: Well, that was '63. No, we were at the ranch. That was 1963, November 22.

MG: You were getting ready for a party, I think.

EW: Well, getting ready for President Kennedy. They were coming in there to the ranch at night.

MG: Can you recall how you heard about it?

EW: Well, the way we heard it--let's see now, I want to be sure--I believe it was James' wife, Mary. I was out there on the porch doing something. She said, "Oh! President Kennedy got shot!" I said, "Aw, Mary, quit messing around." So I went on doing [my work]. Then finally they had it on television, a special bulletin, and that's when we knew. I would say it was about twelve o'clock there or twelve thirty at that time. Then we really got the reports on that.

MG: Mrs. Williams, didn't you go into action then?

HW: Well, we waited at the ranch to see what was going to happen after that. I think we finally got the word that they had gone back to Washington, so then we got a flight out. A private plane took us into Dallas that night, and then we got a flight out of Dallas which got us to Washington about . . . what time did we arrive in

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Washington, about seven o'clock in the morning, about six thirty?

EW: Somewhere around six . . . or six thirty. I imagine by the time we got out to the car it must have been about seven or seven thirty.

HW: About six thirty. Of course, we packed all the clothes and brought everything back with us. It was rather strange when we got to 52nd Street to see all the Secret Service and all those at the gate; we really had tight security. I was familiar with the scheduling, and seemingly there wasn't anyone stirring or preparing anything. I didn't see any other domestic help getting anything ready, so I immediately walked to one of the agents and asked him about the then-President's schedule. I said, "Well, he should be getting a meal." They said yes, so I just rushed right in and put the coffee on and took them up some coffee. They were happy that I undertook the initiative to do this, but of course they were very sad.

MG: What did he say to you?

HW: He said, "Helen, people are always talking about the black people, but they sure aren't going around killing each other." And of course, Mrs. Johnson said, "Helen, a lot of things have changed, but thank God you haven't changed." You know, it was just things like this that they would appreciate. At a time like this, as I've said before, just a gesture of giving coffee was kind of . . .

MG: Did you bring their clothes back with you, some warm clothes?

HW: Yes.

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MG: I think you went with Marie Fehmer, didn't you?

HW: No, it was Bess Abell that we came back with. Yes, we had all the clothes with us.

MG: Did you regard him differently now that he was President?
How did your role change? What did you do?

HW: My role changed. Instead of kind of just seeing about all of the family, my role mostly changed by just catering mostly to Mrs. Johnson after that. I catered to her after that. It was pretty much the same instead of taking the two along together, because the military had sergeants that would look after the Commander-in-Chief. So I only had just Mrs. Johnson after that, which was pretty much the same thing, coordinating the clothes and scheduling and doing what you can to see that things go as smoothly as possible.

MG: Did you live with them when they were at The Elms?

HW: Yes. As a matter of fact, the whole eighteen years that we worked with them, we never had any other address except what they had. Right. It was kind of strange to people at first, you know, especially after we moved into the White House, that we would give them 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue as our residence.

MG: Do you recall having any humorous experiences here, trying to convince someone that you lived at the White House?

HW: Well, at first it would be kind of strange when they would say, "What is your address." I wouldn't say "White House," I would say,

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"1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." It wouldn't ring a bell at first, and then they would stop and take another look at me. And then they would look again, two looks, and they would say, "You're kidding." And I would say, "No, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." They would say, "That's the White House." I would say, "Yes, I know." Of course, they wouldn't pursue it any further than that, but I'm sure they would check into it to see.

MG: Can you remember any big moments during the presidency? I'm sure you were involved with the daughters' weddings, weren't you?

HW: Well yes, we helped in every way we could. Those were big moments, because we had a lot of the family coming in, and it was so much gaiety and all, meeting different ones that you hadn't seen before, helping the bridesmaids.

MG: Did Senator and later President Johnson have time to be a good father, to spend as much time with the kids as . . . ?

HW: Well, considering, I think he did, because whenever he was free, he would always be with the family. Before he was Senator, when we were in Texas, there were times when he would take the family away from Austin, before he bought his ranch, to different friends' ranches and spend the weekend with them all. And I remember there were occasions when he would take them to St. Joseph Island and spend time with them there, which is very beautiful. I think, considering, he spent quite a bit of time with the children, not as

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much as some fathers, just an ordinary father would do, where they take the children out picnicking or something like that every weekend. But in the position that he was in--you know, most of his time wasn't his own, anyway, but I think he was a very good father.

MG: What do you remember about the weddings?

HW: Well, mostly just how thrilled everyone was. And I remember when Luci and Pat were getting ready to go away, we were all just so happy it was just unbelievable. I didn't realize how happy and how thrilled we were until they made some pictures and the way one of them turned out was just hilarious. That was when I really actually saw how thrilled we all were. It was just ridiculous.

MG: What about the birth of his grandson? Did you see how he regarded that; were you there?

HW: I can't say that I was there, but I do know that from Lyn's birth, from the time Lyn arrived, he was a very proud and doting grandfather. Of course, that was the son that he had never had.

MG: Did he ever tell you that or talk to you about his grandson?

HW: I remember one night he decided just at the spur of the moment that he wanted Lyn to go, and of course I was the only available person, so he grabbed me up to take Lyn in with him into Austin.

MG: What happened?

HW: Well, he wasn't happy with what I put on Lyn to wear. So he said,

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"Helen, couldn't you dress him up better than that?" I said that this was about the prettiest thing he had at the moment, so Lyn ended up with a whole new wardrobe after that.

MG: Did the President select the clothes himself?

HW: Oh, yes. He selected clothes for anyone that he chose to, Mrs. Johnson, the girls, or any of us. He always selected things, and he had very good taste for people that he wanted to buy something for.

MG: What else during the presidential years do you want to recall? Did you go to any of the state dinners, any of the parties there at the White House?

HW: Well, we attended some parties, but I never went to any of the state dinners.

MG: What were the parties like?

HW: Well, they were all, my gracious! That was one thing about the Christmas parties and any event that was given there where the staff was invited. Everything was just so gay and outgoing, and everyone just had a good time, and he entertained the staff just as elaborately as he would any dignitary. You know what I mean, not the full-course dinners, but we had the buffets, where there was just lots and lots of food and all the staff would enjoy the parties tremendously. I don't think they've had any parties like that since.

MG: Was it hard for you to leave the White House? Were you ready to go?

HW: No, it wasn't hard to leave the White House. Matter of fact, it was

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rather amazing to just see how quickly you can turn and get out of the way for the next occupant. Most of our things were going out, the last minute things. Of course, the new President and First Family's things were being brought in. Of course, by knowing that President Johnson was not going to run, we had a little more opportunity to kind of prepare and get things --

MG: When did you find out that he wasn't going to run again?

HW: The night that he announced it.

MG: Did you hear it on TV?

HW: I heard it on television.

MG: Were you surprised?

HW: I was surprised and thrilled.

MG: Were you?

HW: Yes, I was, because I thought that he had had it, by knowing him and how much he wanted to do for America and the people. It seemed as if everyone was just kind of turning against him as if he wasn't doing enough. And of course, I was thrilled to see him step down.

MG: Do you remember him talking to you after he made the decision, expressing a desire to be out of the White House?

HW: No.

MG: Was he tired from the presidency, do you think?

HW: No, I don't think he was tired of it. Just by knowing him personally the way I did, I just assumed that he figured that it was the only

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thing for him to do, because he had led the country as far as he could and if people were discontented, let them have someone that they would be contented with.

MG: Do you think he was glad to leave the White House? Did he express a desire to get back to the ranch? What did he say in these last days in the White House?

HW: I never talked with him personally on leaving the White House, because he was always so busy with other things.

MG: Was Mrs. Johnson ready to get back to Texas?

HW: I would think in a way that she was. You know, you just don't ask people these things. I'm sure there were mixed emotions about it, because I had mixed emotions for them. They had been in Washington and been so a part of the government for so many years. Naturally, they would be happy to get home and under perhaps a friendlier attitude. I feel like they felt that they had really given all they had to public life and that they were doing this without any regrets, really.

MG: You didn't go down to Texas, did you, when they did, is that correct? Didn't you stay in Washington?

HW: Yes, we stayed in Washington, because I kind of liked Washington, and of course in '65, we purchased this home because we had decided that we might stay here for a while. Reluctantly. He asked us to go back to Texas, but then when we explained to them that we wanted to stay

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in Washington, they understood.

MG: Can you remember your farewell to him when they left for Texas?

HW: Actually, we didn't say farewell here, because I flew to Texas with them, so that's where I said farewell to him.

MG: And then came back?

HW: And then came back to Washington.

MG: Did he give you any parting advice?

HW: No, he just grasped my hand and said goodbye.

MG: What about you, Mr. Williams? What do you remember about [it]?

EW: Nothing. Well, I didn't go down to Texas with them. I just said goodbye to them from here, I didn't go down. There's not much I can remember on that, no more than that, you know.

MG: After the presidency, when he was in retirement at the ranch, did he ever telephone you, or did Mrs. Johnson ever call you?

HW: We would go home during the summer months, and then we would call and go out for a visit then. I recall the fall that we were there before his death, we didn't get a chance to see him. But we did talk with Mrs. Johnson, and she said, "I'm sure Lyndon will not be busy long, so why don't you stay and spend the night?" Of course, she had to rush off to join him. So we said to James, "Well, knowing President Johnson, he will probably not be back for a little while, and I guess we had better go. Be sure you tell him hello and that we will be calling." Of course, we didn't get a chance to see him any

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more alive.

MG: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

HW: Yes, it was one summer at the ranch after he had retired. That's when he was talking to us about civil rights and about his book. He was looking great and still enjoying life.

MG: What did he say about his book?

HW: Well, he was asking us about how we fared in traveling. We told him the difference and the accomplishments that he had made in this field, in that particular phase of discrimination. He was pleased to hear that, and [we were] just talking about the time that Gene mentioned the fact that he could not carry the dog to Texas because it was hard for him to find a place to stay besides having the dog with us.

MG: Is there anything else about President Johnson or Mrs. Johnson that you'd like to add?

HW: I must add this, that the entire Johnson family was just glorious.

(End of Tape 1 of 2. Interview continued on Tape 2 of 2.)

INTERVIEWEES: EUGENE AND HELEN WILLIAMS (Tape 2 of 2)

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: The Williams's home in Washington, D.C.

October 27, 1974

MG: Okay. I'm sorry. Mrs. Williams?

HW: Okay, just continue from where I was with Luci?

MG: Maybe we can back up to Luci.

HW: I recall one time that Luci asked me if I thought she had a good mother. She said, "Helen, do you think I have a good mother?" I said, "Of course I do. I think your mother is the best mother in the whole world." She said, "Do you think I have a sweet mother?" I said, "Sure. Your mother is the sweetest mother in the whole world." She looked a little puzzled. She couldn't understand this when I said, ". . . mother in the whole world." She said, "Helen, don't you have a mother?" Of course, this is quite funny, I said, "Yes, I do, Luci. I do have a mother." But I still think that Mrs. Johnson was such a sweet person. I think that she was so understanding of her children and how to keep a household peacefully, that she was just truly a good mother --in spite of my mother, and I love my mother, too. This is the type of person that she is.

MG: She was from East Texas, I believe, from Karnack and Marshall.

HW: Yes.

MG: Did she ever talk to you about growingup there and what life was like?

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- HW: No. I never talked with her about her early childhood, or anything like that. I do know that her mother died when she was quite young, but she's surely a sweet person.
- MG: You felt, then, that the things that you did for the Johnsons were always appreciated and that they were always considerate?
- HW: Definitely. Definitely.
- MG: I think the impression that most of the "staff people" have given of President Johnson was that he expected a lot from the people that worked with him and that there were no "slackers" around him. Is this true?
- HW: Well, I think he expected his employees to anticipate his needs as if he anticipated their needs. And, of course, he just always expected a job well done, and this is what you would do. You really anticipated anything that needed to be done, you know, to make the job go smoothly and better, and this is what you did. Perhaps he did expect this, because this is the type of person that he was. If he depended on you to see to something, then this is what he depended on. So if you came up short. . .
- MG: He'd let you know?
- HW: Well, he wouldn't because he always remembered to praise you, and he appreciated those thing. . .and there were always rewards at Christmas time.
- MG: Did you ever give him anything at Christmas that he really liked?
- HW: I'll tell you, that was the hardest thing to do--to buy something for Senator Johnson. I really don't know. I remember one time when I gave him a manicuring set because Mrs. Johnson used to do his nails for him

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and what can you give someone who has everything? But that was it. He expected everyone to give him a gift. But let me finish about the manicuring set. I wanted to get him something that was different. So, Mrs. Johnson was using it on him and he said, "Helen, this set of yours doesn't work too well." I said, "Well, we'll have to wait until they've perfected it a little more."

But there was one gift that I know he appreciated, because we knew the type of handkerchief he liked. We knew where to get them, and we made a trip to Lewis and Thomas Saltz and got these white handkerchiefs with his initial on them, and he appreciated them. Well, he appreciated everything, but you wanted to give something small that you knew he could use and would use.

MG: Well, Mr. Williams, what about you? Do you remember having given or received any memorable gifts?

EW: Oh yeah. I haven't given, but I've received memorable gifts. The watch I have on now he gave me. It's got his initials in it right here. The gifts that we gave him, Helen and I were involved in it. But I'd let her do all the picking just like she does all the picking now. I have another watch that he gave me. It's an alarm watch. This one here with the initials in it I've been wearing for at least five years.

MG: What about his father? Did he ever talk to you about his father?

EW: No. When we met him his father had been passed for quite a while.

MG: How about his mother? Did he ever talk about his mother?

EW: Well, he talked about his mother, but we were around her quite a bit. She was a wonderful woman herself.

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MG: What was she like?

EW: I couldn't say exactly what she was like, because I wasn't around her daily and maybe I would just take something over to the house for her and maybe be there about thirty minutes or an hour. And that's about all I was around her. But the time I was around her, she was a very nice lady. A very lovely person.

MG: Mrs. Williams, what can you tell us about her?

HW: Well, Mrs. Sam Johnson was a very sweet, warm person, and she was very fond of Lynda and Luci and whenever Senator Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were away, she was really their grandmother and someone that they looked forward to having around. We would take them by and let them spend the day with her whenever they were away.

MG: Did you ever hear her give Senator Johnson any advice on things to follow or things to do or not do?

HW: No.

MG: Well how about you, Mr. Williams? Can you add anything else about President Johnson?

EW:q No sir. I tell you . . . what I can remember is pretty near accurate and correct. I guess that's about all. As you go along I may remember something from way back or a long time ago, but for today I guess that's about all I can say.

MG: How about you, Mrs. Williams?

HW: Well, that's pretty much all. I don't know if I touched on the Christmases and how much fun they were and how generous he was to all the employees. There was this big tree and he had gifts for everybody. Everyone would

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assemble in the livingroom. Then we would have the tree on Christmas Eve night, all the employees. We would all be served eggnog and things like that. And then Christmas morning he would load up the car with Lammes pralines, maybe a case of bourbon and a case of scotch and take out around the countryside giving different ones their Christmas gifts. He always tried to make Christmas really memorable for everyone in that community.

MG: Did he have Santa Claus at those parties?

HW: No. We didn't have Santa Claus. He was the Santa Claus without the beard.

MG: If there's anything else you would like to add you can add it later in the transcript if you think of anything or if you feel like I should make another trip back or see you on the next trip, just let us know and we'll work something out. But your recollections have been perfectly marvelous.

EW: I would like to say this before we close that you can see how we are fond of them. All the pictures you see, you don't see anybody but the Johnsons. There's one right behind, and over there. They are our favorite family. We really love them.

MG: Yes, they're certainly well represented here.

HW: I really feel that we have profited by knowing such a wonderful family. I think that if everyone had the insight into a family relationship as this family was, you wouldn't have any problems in America. They are just really marvelous. I could never explain exactly just what type of family they are.

I recall the morning after the election of Vice President Johnson and President Kennedy that he did mention to me that they were aware of the fact that if it had not been for the black vote, they would not have been

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elected. He said, "I want you to know that we are going to do all we can for the black people".

(End of Interview)

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