

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 18, 1987

INTERVIEWEE: MELVIN C. WINTERS

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Winters' office, Johnson City, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: What was Lyndon Johnson like when you first met him? You said you met him the first day you came to town.

W: Well, read that little story there.

G: You're referring to the story here that's in the Texas Highway Department magazine.

W: I met him right there; that's the first day I met him. If you read that story, you'd kind of find out what it was all about.

G: Okay.

W: It was over racism.

G: You can vouch for this story, then. It's true?

W: It's a true story. Just read the story before I start this. It won't take you but a second.

(Interruption)

What we had to build highways with was eight teams of mules. I came in to town, went down the main street there, and found a place to park them, and parked them. And that's when the man jumped out and said they couldn't stay there overnight.

M. Winters -- I -- 2

G: Who was the guy who jumped you?

W: Well, Lyndon and I didn't ever use his name publicly, because he has some daughters living here, and they're very good friends of ours. Guy Maddox [?] was his name.

G: Guy Maddox?

W: He was the town bully at that time, drunkard, and everything else. And I didn't have much trouble with him, because he was pretty damned drunk. (Laughter) Frankly, he was pretty full.

G: Well, that's a good story, and I'm glad to hear it verified. Now, you said that LBJ worked for you for two summers--

W: Two summers.

G: --on road construction.

W: I sent him in here at the age of eighteen to complete this job from Johnson City out to the county line, and he was going to school, and he worked for me two summers on this job.

G: Right. What kind of jobs did you give him to do?

W: Pick and shovel, handwork. It was all handwork. (Laughter) And he did drive a team some, a fresno [scraper].

G: Was he a good worker?

W: Damned good, one of the best.

G: I've heard that he could find ways to sort of Tom Sawyer people into getting them to whitewash his fence. Is there any truth to that?

(Interruption)

W: No, I think those books are at the house. I don't believe there are any of them in here. We had a bunch of team pictures and everything.

M. Winters -- I -- 3

G: Did he ever talk to you about that trip he made to California?

W: Yes. He went out there once. He had another buddy out there, Otto Crider, before he went.

They were awful close. He went out there and worked. I don't know any details on [it], though. I just know that he went and came [back].

G: A lot of people say that even at that age--

(Interruption)

People say that even back then Lyndon was extremely interested in politics. Was that your impression?

W: No.

G: No?

W: Not at that time. The impression he gave me then [was] he wanted an education, along about that time. He was more interested in getting a good education.

G: How did he like it at San Marcos? Did he talk to you about that?

W: He liked it very well; he sure did. The fact of the business is, he has encouraged me over the years to send my children to San Marcos, which I've done, all of them. I had three children, two sons and a daughter, and they went through San Marcos.

G: What did a young man have to do for entertainment in his spare time in Johnson City in those days?

W: Drink beer and run around, woo the ladies. (Laughter)

G: Well, now, wait a minute. That was Prohibition. Where'd the beer come from?

W: Home brew.

G: Home brew.

W: It wasn't any trouble to get it around here.

M. Winters -- I -- 4

G: Too many Germans for Prohibition to work?

W: Oh, hell, the Germans in the community. Lots of Germans.

G: Were there dances?

W: Oh, yes.

G: Did you go to those?

W: Oh, yes.

G: Did LBJ go?

W: Yes. Everybody went.

G: How was LBJ socially? How was he with the ladies?

W: Very popular.

G: Was he?

Let me skip through time a little bit and come to something that interests me: I've seen in the record that you occasionally were know to play dominoes with Lyndon Johnson.

W: Let me show you something.

G: All right.

(Interruption)

I didn't know that your wife went to school with LBJ. I see.

W: He was older than she, but they went [to school together].

G: Who did LBJ used to partner in those domino games, usually?

W: He and I were usually partners.

G: Oh, you and he?

W: With Ernest Stubbs and A. W. Moursund or somebody like that.

G: There wasn't any cheating or signals that went on in those games, was there?

M. Winters -- I -- 5

W: Yes, there was cheating and signals and bets, too. (Laughter) Lyndon was a hell of a cheater.

G: What kind of stakes did you used to play?

W: Oh, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty dollars a game. But never over fifty dollars a game.

G: I've seen that Arthur Krim used to sit in once in a while.

W: Right.

G: Was he a good domino player?

W: Well, he always got beat, Arthur.

G: He did? How about deer hunting? Was that a popular pastime with--?

W: It sure was; Lyndon liked to hunt, he really did.

G: Did you hunt with him?

W: Well, I have some, yes. He's hunted on some of my country, and I've hunted on some of his over the years.

G: He liked to bring guests deer hunting.

W: He liked to bring guests, yes.

G: Were you ever present when the Kennedys came to the Ranch in the earlier days?

W: Yes.

G: You were? Do you recall Bobby Kennedy coming down and going hunting?

W: I sure do.

G: I was thinking about that story that was on TV a couple of weeks ago, about Bobby Kennedy coming by himself to the Ranch, and I wondered if you remembered that visit.

W: I don't know. I met both of them through Lyndon.

M. Winters -- I -- 6

G: In the show they have Bobby Kennedy getting cut over the eye with the scope on the rifle.

Do you remember that incident?

W: No, I don't. I don't remember that. I'm sure it happened, but I don't remember it.

G: Were you associated with Alvin Wirtz during the construction of the Hill Country dams?

W: I knew him, yes, knew him real well.

G: Did you have any part in the construction of these dams?

W: No.

G: I see. That was strictly Brown and Root?

W: Yes.

G: I see. Were you primarily road construction, then?

W: We did build dams; over the years we have built several. But at that time, we didn't have any equipment.

G: What kind of work did you do during World War II?

W: For the government?

G: Yes.

W: Our main project at that time [was] we built Camp Wolters.

G: Camp Wolters?

W: Yes, during World War II. That was the biggest job we did for the government.

G: That was a considerable job.

W: That was an awful big job, it was.

G: Lots of runways.

W: Well, runways and barracks and everything else.

G: Did you ever do any political work for LBJ?

M. Winters -- I -- 7

W: Not really. I put up money to run ads, and campaign money, and things like that over the years. But I never got out and--I'd go with him to these places; I've made lots of [trips] over the years, I may go with him when he'd make a speech in other places; I've done that.

G: You were never a county man or an advance man, or anything like that?

W: No.

G: Do you remember his first campaign for Congress in 1937?

W: Yes, very well.

G: Did you work for him in that one at all?

W: Yes, I sure did.

G: What do you remember about that campaign, especially? What memories come back to you?

W: Let me think here a minute on it.

G: What was your part in that campaign? Were you working, contributing, or what were you doing?

W: Well, I was trying to help him get elected every way I could.

G: You said you loaned him your airplane.

W: Yes, he used my plane when he needed it. It was available to him.

One time, he was trying to get Coke Stevenson to agree to a debate with him, and Coke told him he had to shear his goats; he didn't have time. And I offered to go out and shear Coke's goats for him so he could have time to debate Lyndon, and Coke turned him down. (Laughter) That's one of the things I remember about that.

G: Did you know Coke Stevenson?

W: Oh, yes, [inaudible].

M. Winters -- I -- 8

G: How do you feel about how that race was decided? Do you have any opinions as to whether there were votes changed or added or deleted, or whatever?

W: I don't know; I really don't. I've always heard that they voted for you or against you in Duval County. I've known that for years. Everybody knows that. They're either for you a hundred per cent or they're against you. And they were for Lyndon, I know that. But they had the ballot checked and everything else, as far as I know, and the 85 votes still held up. It was contested in the Supreme Court.

G: Did LBJ continue to depend on you for support then, after he went to the Senate? Was there still a close connection?

W: Oh, it was still a close connection, very close.

G: I know you exchanged Christmas gifts any number of times. What was the most memorable Christmas gift he ever gave you?

W: Oh, he gave me watches; in fact, he gave me that watch I'm wearing right now.

G: What is that, a Rolex you're wearing now?

W: Yes; that's one he gave me. It's engraved on the back, there.

G: Yes, it's a beautiful gold watch, and it's engraved "To MCW from LBJ, 8-16-68."

W: It's one of the last ones he gave me.

G: Beautiful watch.

Do you remember when LBJ brought Lady Bird home the first time?

W: Here? To Johnson City?

G: Yes.

M. Winters -- I -- 9

W: No, I don't remember--well, that was before that I remember when they first moved here. In fact, I negotiated and bought that place for them up there, the old home place, we called it, up there.

G: Oh, you were the negotiator for that purchase?

W: His aunt owned it, and Lyndon owned the old home place here in Johnson City. And he wanted that place up there awful bad, so I worked out a trade and cash difference, and she moved to Johnson City and took the old home. That was a real run-down place; it was all to pieces when he got it. But he just went to work and rebuilt it, everything, just exactly like it used to be. It's still that way now.

G: What kind of a rancher would you say LBJ was?

W: He was a good rancher.

G: Was he?

W: Yes, he understood livestock real well, he did.

G: Did he make money on that ranch, do you think?

W: Well, they ended up with a lot of ranches, ended up owning one in Old Mexico, a big ranch. But he had capable people running them, very capable foremen and managers. And his cattle operations as a whole were all right, financially.

G: You knew Dale Malechek pretty well, I guess.

W: Oh, real well, yes. Sure.

G: You thought he was very capable.

W: Very capable, very capable. Sure was.

G: How was LBJ to work for, do you think?

M. Winters -- I -- 10

W: Well, I think he was all right. He respected everybody; he wanted them to tend to business, and he saw to it that they did. But he took care of them, financially, well. Anybody that did him a good job, he wanted to compensate them for it, did compensate them.

G: He was known as a generous man, to his friends.

W: Right, to his friends.

G: How do you account for the fact that his neighbors to the west, in Gillespie County, were so late in coming around to favoring him?

W: Well, there was a--I don't know whether he was a congressman, or what he was, from there. I don't remember what his name was, now. But anyway, he had served a term in the Congress, and then his wife ran for Congress--

G: Oh, Buchanan, are you talking about?

W: No, it wasn't Buchanan. Heck, I don't know, now, it's been so dadgummed long, what her name was. They had an office. . . . She ran against Lyndon, or was against him.

G: And you think that was at the bottom of it? You think that was at the bottom of the Gillespie County folks--

W: Right, that was at the bottom of it, but after that she turned around and was for Lyndon, and everything else was all right. Reversed herself, I remember that.

G: When LBJ was forming what became the park out at the Ranch, he bought up some land, I think, that adjoined his.

W: Right.

G: And there were some problems there. Did you have any insight into what the problem was with some of his neighbors?

M. Winters -- I -- 11

W: Well, some of the neighbors just didn't want to sell to him, didn't want the park. And I helped work out a bunch of those deals.

G: You helped work out a compromise?

W: Between the two of them, yes. And he got most of the land that he wanted, all the way around that house.

G: Right. Were there any problems when he put that little dam down on the Pedernales, with the people downstream?

W: There was some objection, very little though, very little.

G: You didn't do that job, by any chance, did you?

W: No. No, a boy out of Stonewall did it.

G: Who was it?

W: His name was Burke [?]-no, it wasn't. I don't remember what his name was. He built the dam.

G: Did you do any work out on the Ranch, building roads or anything?

W: I built the runway for him. I built the original runway, and then after he became president I lengthened it and redone it.

G: Were there any special engineering problems with that runway?

W: No, Bergstrom Air Force [Base] engineered the last runway.

G: I see. The end of that runway is kind of close to the fence, isn't it?

W: Right, it's a little short. He never could bring in *Air Force One* there, no way. Too short.

G: What about roads, and did you make any of those [stock] tanks that are on those places?

W: Yes, I built all the tanks, did all the road work, built the fences, and done everything.

G: Was he easy to please or not?

M. Winters -- I -- 12

W: No, no, he was pretty damned particular on a foreman [?]. He wanted it just right. And building those fences, we did part of that at night. He'd come out there with lights, and we'd work in the night, tacking up the wire and things like that. He'd wield a hammer right along with the rest of us. (Laughter)

G: Did you have to build fence any different for Lyndon Johnson than you would for anybody else?

W: Not particularly, but it had to be a good fence. We built all the fences up there. You look at them now, and they're still in A-1 shape. (Laughter)

G: Did he build any deer fences?

W: Yes, some of it's deer-proof. A lot of that country up there is deer-proofed.

G: Now, you had many, many meals with Lyndon Johnson. What were his dietary preferences; what did he like to eat?

W: Well, as I remember, he'd eat just most anything you put in front of him. (Laughter) He wasn't hard to please with his eating at all.

G: Was he a big eater?

W: A very hearty eater, he sure was.

G: Of course, he was on and off a diet, it seems--

W: Well, in later years, yes.

G: How was he on that diet, in your observation?

W: I think he tried to live with it pretty well. He worked at it.

G: Would he take a drink?

W: Yes, he would.

G: What did he like?

M. Winters -- I -- 13

W: He always liked a toddy, mixed up. He would always drink a pretty good brand of whiskey, very little scotch. He did drink some scotch; [but] mostly bourbon. But he wasn't a heavy drinker, that I ever knew. I never saw him have too much in all my years with him, socially.

G: Was he a good businessman, in your observation?

W: I think he was a good businessman, a real good businessman.

G: You had a relationship with him in the Johnson City bank, is that right?

W: That's right. Johnson City was without a bank here for seven years. And I organized and got approval to put in a bank in Johnson City.

G: When would that have been, can you recall?

W: Oh, gosh, seems like it was in the forties, I believe, 1941 or 1942. But anyway, the [State] Banking Commission told me, "Melvin, if you can get three hundred thousand dollars in this bank the first year, you'll make it. Otherwise you won't." And we opened up the first day with more than that, I remember that. They brought money in, in fruit jars and cans and in cash; I never saw such. Dug it up and brought it in.

(Laughter)

G: Was LBJ in at the beginning of the bank?

W: No, no. No, in later years he said, "I'd like to be a director of your bank." And I made him a director.

G: I see. Was that a paying directorship, or--

W: No, it was no pay.

G: Did he have stock?

W: Oh, yes, he eventually bought a bunch of stock. He didn't buy it individually; he let--the broadcasting company out of Austin bought the stock.

M. Winters -- I -- 14

G: The KTBC?

W: The KTBC.

G: Well, then he sold out his stock later, didn't he?

W: We sold the whole thing at one time.

G: The whole banking--

W: At one time. He came to me and wanted to sell it, and I said, "Lyndon, I don't want to sell. I don't want to sell it." And he said, "Well, I can get a tremendous bunch of money for it. I can get three times book." I said, "Well, that's just unbelievable, but I don't want to sell." "Well, would you take it?" And I said, "No, I won't buy at that price. It's too high." He said, "Well, if I find a buyer, will you sell?" I said, "Yes, I'll go with you, but I don't want to. I will sell." The deal consisted of two million, seven hundred thousand, and he found a buyer for it.

G: Wow. Well, were you the only one who didn't want to sell?

W: I think the rest of the local directors didn't. We didn't want it to get out of our hands. We wanted to keep it. I served that bank as president of it for twenty-seven years, and started it off and didn't want to get out. But Lyndon wanted—that was after he came back from the presidency, is when all this happened. And he kept saying we were going to have a deep depression. And in his own mind, he thought we were going to have a depression, and it didn't materialize. And he was trying to liquidate everything he could, radio stations and all.

G: Did he ever say why he thought there was going to be a depression?

W: Well, he just thought that it was as high as it would ever get and thought it would go bust, or something; I don't know what he had in mind. But he--

G: Did he think the Republicans were going to--

M. Winters -- I -- 15

W: He thought the Republicans would ruin it, I guess. I don't know.

G: Well, he was settling a lot of his affairs that last fall, I think, before he died.

W: Right.

G: Did he ever talk to you about feeling that he wasn't going to live much longer?

W: No, he never did, other than he was just afraid that he was going to get sick. He always had that in mind, something was going to happen to him. He had an intuition, I don't know what you'd call it, he just thought something was going to happen to him sometime pretty quick, and it did. He died on the way from here to San Antonio in the plane trying to get him to the hospital.

G: Was Judge Moursund a director on the bank?

W: I took him in latter years, too. He was a director of the bank.

G: How did he feel about the sale?

W: He didn't want to sell, either.

G: Do you think that was the main cause that LBJ and Judge Moursund split up?

W: On the split-up?

G: Right.

W: No, it wasn't over that.

G: It wasn't that?

W: No.

G: Do you know what it was?

W: Well-- (Laughter)

G: We can keep it confidential.

M. Winters -- I -- 16

W: It was over a bank up at Llano. A. W. had worked and organized to get control of the bank at Llano, and he took Lyndon in with him. And when he got ready to sell that bank, that's when this rift started. A. W. didn't want to sell it. And I think Moursund paid him a million-dollar premium to get him out, a million dollars more than he should have paid him, in order to keep the bank. They settled it right here, where we're sitting right here is where [inaudible] right here is where they settled it.

G: Right here in your office?

W: But it has worked out for Moursund over the years; it's been all right, been a good investment.

G: But I gather feelings were a little hard at the time, though?

W: Oh, yes, they were bitter at the time, they sure were.

G: Judge Moursund had a temper?

W: He had a temper; Lyndon had a temper, and they just fought each other, you know, it just wasn't good at all.

G: Who else was present, do you recall?

W: When?

G: When they made the settlement on the bank.

W: No one. But it was made right here, just the three of us.

G: Just the three of you? Well, they were in partnership in a lot of other ventures, too, and I suppose--

W: They had some more partnerships besides that; they sure did.

G: Were you partners with him on any of the ranches?

W: No, no, I never partnered with him on any of them.

M. Winters -- I -- 17

G: Did you ever deal cattle with him?

W: No. I'd help him buy cattle, you know, to advise him whether to take them or not, but I never did sell him. Gave him a bull once in a while, or something like that, but I never did--

G: LBJ reportedly quit smoking when he had his first heart attack in 1955.

W: Right.

G: Can you vouch for that?

W: Yes, I can. He quit.

G: He did quit.

W: He did quit.

G: He wouldn't steal a puff from you once in a while?

W: No, I don't remember him to ever--he'd fuss at me all the time because I didn't quit.

G: Oh, he would? Well, now, he did start smoking again though, when he came back from the White House, didn't he, at one point, that last year?

W: If he did, I don't remember it. I sure don't remember him ever starting back. I don't think he did.

G: Well, I saw a picture of him with a Tiparillo in his mouth.

W: I don't remember that; I sure don't.

G: Okay. Did you go with him on cattle-buying trips?

W: Some, yes, around locally.

G: Locally. I think he went to Brownwood and--

W: I went to Brownwood on a sale with him one time.

G: Do you recall anything about any of those trips that was memorable?

M. Winters -- I -- 18

- W: No. I don't think we bought any cattle up there that day. He thought they were too high, and I did, too. We didn't buy, just go and look at the auction.
- G: Did you ever go with him and Judge Moursund when they would go buying cattle?
- W: I don't remember ever going with those two, no. I don't remember that at all. I don't believe we did.
- G: You went to the inauguration, I think, did you not, in 1965?
- W: Yes, whenever it was. I had an incident happen there that was very--I have a distant relative that's in Austin in the lawyer firm of Clark, Thomas and Winters. You know, the law firm there? And my wife and I were supposed to be seated up on the grandstand with Lyndon, in his box. And this relative of mine who is the lawyer and his wife got there first. And they asked him what his name was, and he said Winters, so they took him up and seated him in the box. Then when my wife and I got there a few minutes late, and I told them who I was, the Secret Service knew me personally, and they said, "Something's happened here." So they go upstairs and bring he and his wife out and bring them downstairs and turn them loose, and we go up. (Laughter) Well, there's always been a little friction there between that [J. Sam] Winters and me. He has never forgotten that.
- G: He sort of figured that you had worked a deal on him?
- W: No, he knew he shouldn't have been there to begin with. He just got in, and it didn't work out.
- G: How did you go to Washington on that trip? Did he send a plane down?
- W: I don't [remember]. He probably sent *Air Force One* after us. I imagine he did; [to bring] the delegation from here. I rode that *Air Force One* so many times I just don't remember.

M. Winters -- I -- 19

See, during his administration as president he had a White House phone in my bedroom. He had it installed. And he'd wake up any time of night, and we'd talk. He'd wake up sometimes at two o'clock in the morning and just want to talk about something down here. It was kind of an aggravation, in a way. (Laughter) He'd just want to visit. And it stayed there after he ceased to be president for some six months before they ever-- It was run by the Secret Service.

G: He'd just want to talk; he was lonely?

W: Well, just lonesome. Talking about the Ranch down here, and everything, you know, just talking, just visiting, old times.

G: Who did most of the construction work out there on the Ranch? Now, you said you did some road work--

W: We did pretty well all of the work out there, the runways, roads, tanks and everything.

G: Did you do any work on the house itself?

W: No. No, Burg was the boy's name; one of the Burg boys did that. He was the head of the lumberyard there at Stonewall, and he did all that carpenter work.

G: You used to ride with LBJ in his automobiles, I guess.

W: Yes, oh, yes.

G: What kind of a driver was he?

W: He was a good driver.

G: Fast?

W: A little fast, but he was a good driver.

G: Was he a good shot?

W: Very good shot, very good.

M. Winters -- I -- 20

G: Did you ever go bird hunting with him?

W: Yes, I've been bird hunting with him, dove hunting, duck hunting, everything else.

G: They say John Connally was a pretty good bird shot.

W: He was awfully good, real good.

G: Now, you mentioned Secret Service. Did you know Mike Howard?

W: Yes, yes.

G: He, I think, came back to the Ranch with LBJ after he left Washington and kind of ran things. Did LBJ ever mention to you resenting the Secret Service shadowing him?

W: No, he never did resent them. In other words, he'd come to my house and they'd come, and we'd always feed them, take care of them, just like they--you know, after everything was over, well, they'd come in and take over. No, we got along with the Secret Service, and he did, too. He resented them some on his boat trips and rides; he resented them there. I had a boat up there on the lake, and it was an awful fast boat, and Lyndon liked to use it. He had a cabin cruiser up there, kind of a slow boat. And he'd enjoy getting in my boat and running off from the Secret Service. But they finally cured that; they finally got some boats that would keep up with him. (Laughter) He enjoyed that, though.

G: How about LBJ as a horseman?

W: Good rider, good rider.

G: Did he have a favorite horse?

W: Oh, yes, he sure did.

G: Was that Lady B; do you remember that horse?

W: I don't remember. I've got so many [inaudible].

G: I've heard he had a Tennessee Walker that he was awfully proud of.

M. Winters -- I -- 21

W: He was proud of that Tennessee--

(Interruption)

G: --what it was actually like when LBJ was working on that road back in the twenties. How was the labor actually done?

W: It was done mostly with teams of mules. (At this point, Mr. Winters directed his secretary to go to his house and bring back a picture album of road gang work.)

G: But it was mostly handwork, and--

W: Handwork and teamwork.

G: What kind of a surface were you putting on that road?

W: We'd get a pit, and he'd haul it with wagons and mules, and maybe old Model T trucks in those days, hauled it to the road and topped it. We didn't put any asphalt on in those days.

G: Just caliche?

W: Just caliche or gravel, whatever we could get.

G: How did you off-load it off a wagon?

W: We used dump wagons. We had wagons we pulled with mules, and then it'd dump down the bottom. You just kick a lever and the bottom would drop out, and you drive off.

G: I see. But they were loaded by hand?

W: No, not necessarily, not all of them. No, we'd build a trap, a kind of a bridge effect with a hole in the top, drive a truck under there and then the mules and fresnos would bring it over the truck and dump it down that hole into the truck.

G: I see. But there was still a lot of handwork to leveling it and so forth, I guess.

W: Oh, yes.

G: And how good a road did you have when you got through?

M. Winters -- I -- 22

W: Well, an all-weather road.

(Laughter)

G: There was a big move on at that time to bring better roads to the rural areas, wasn't there?

W: Oh, yes.

G: I think that someone said that LBJ's father was a leader in that movement.

W: He was a county road superintendent in here locally. He used to work under Ma Ferguson, furnishing mules and stuff like that. He was a maintenance foreman, I think, is what they called him then. I don't know.

G: Right.

W: Under the Ferguson administration--well, that goes back pretty far in time.

(Laughter)

G: Did you know LBJ's father pretty well?

W: Oh, yes. Never had any dealings, I just knew him. He and his brother both. His brother was a wonderful [man]. Everybody was their friend. The fact of the business is, when we first came here, little Tom Cage was here, and he had a room up there with Mrs. Johnson. She let him have a room to sleep in at night. And I'd go up there sometimes and spend the night with him. And she was always wanting to know if she couldn't fix us something to eat or do something; she was always very helpful, just ready to take care of everybody.

G: How was the Johnson family doing financially in those days? I know it was hard times for most people.

W: It was pretty hard times. Yes, it was hard times, sure was.

G: Can you remember what a typical meal would have been like?

M. Winters -- I -- 23

W: Oh, we never had any shortage there. (Laughter) I don't know where it all came from, but there was no shortage of meals. They never were short of food.

G: I see.

W: No way. They either grew it in the garden, or butchered it, killed hogs, do something. All those things.

G: How well did you know Sam Houston?

W: Pretty well.

G: Did Sam Houston ever work for you at all?

W: No, he never did.

G: He was quite a bit younger than that, I guess.

W: Lyndon talked me into putting him in the bank down here one time.

G: Oh, he did?

W: We tried him for about two or three months.

G: What did you have him doing?

W: Oh, he was trying to be a teller.

G: It didn't work out?

W: No, lord no.

G: What was the trouble?

W: Oh, I don't know. "My brother, the director," more than anything else. (Laughter) It just didn't work out. Sam Houston drank a whole lot.

G: Did he?

W: A whole lot.

G: It interfered with his work?

M. Winters -- I -- 24

W: Yes, some. To a big extent.

G: Was Sam Houston not intelligent, or--

W: I don't know; I think he was pretty smart. I think he was real smart. When he used it the right way. I think he would have been all right.

G: What about the sisters; did you know them pretty well?

W: I knew the youngest one pretty well; I guess her name was--dang, I can't even think of her name now, it's been so long. I think she was pretty solid. She was the only one that we knew pretty well. Josefa.

G: Josefa.

W: Josefa, she was it. She was pretty wild; always getting in some kind of trouble.

G: Do you remember when LBJ's father died?

W: Yes.

G: There are a good many stories that he was in financial trouble when he passed away.

W: He was; he was in very bad financial trouble. But Lyndon, over the years, paid all those old debts he had. He cleaned them all up over the years.

G: He didn't have to, did he?

W: No, he didn't have to, but he did it, which was a good thing. No, he paid off everything his old daddy ever owed, everywhere.

G: How was LBJ's father regarded by the local community? There are conflicting stories.

W: I think very highly, I think very highly. I never did hear anything against Mr. Sam, nothing. Never have heard anything. Everybody seemed to like him and get along with him.

G: How do you account for his bad financial condition?

W: I don't know; I don't know whether he was just a bad manager or what. I don't know.

M. Winters -- I -- 25

G: Did you work in the 1960 campaign at all, when he was running for vice president?

W: Yes, yes, sure did.

G: Anything about that one that stands out in your mind?

W: Not particularly, no.

G: I thought you might have had something to do with John Kennedy coming down to talk to the Protestant ministers in Houston that trip.

W: No, I wasn't in on any of that, not at all.

G: I know that you had something going on when they made that last trip, when the assassination took place in Dallas. Wasn't there going to be a dinner in San Antonio [Austin]?

W: In Dallas. [luncheon]

G: In Dallas.

W: Lyndon came by the house. He took off from our airport here, going to Dallas. And he came in the house along about four o'clock in the evening, and he brought my wife a present. He gave her a gun for a birthday present. That was on the twenty-second [twenty-first] of November. And he also brought me one at the same time. [He] gave us a gun apiece, gave me a rifle and gave her a shotgun, I believe it was. And then he went on to Dallas that night, and the next day, that's when he became president.

G: Right. Did you have any organizing duties on that trip?

W: No, none at all. No, I didn't have anything.

G: Did he talk to you right after the assassination? Do you remember when he first contacted you?

M. Winters -- I -- 26

W: After the assassination? Yes. See, the woman that swore him in up there at Dallas was Miss Sarah Hughes, and I knew her very well. I had dealings with her before. And she gave Lyndon the oath of office. Then I guess he was up there two or three weeks or so, and he wanted me to come to Washington. So I finally went. And he was in a turmoil, you know. He hadn't got all settled down and everything, and he didn't want anything in particular; he just wanted to visit, I think. I don't know what he wanted. He'd talk about this farm and that farm. And I don't know what the hell he wanted; never did know what he wanted me to come to Washington for.

G: How long did you see him?

W: I was up there about two or three days.

G: And he just chit-chatted?

W: He'd tell me about his problems. Hell, they were too deep for me. I couldn't understand that kind of problem. (Laughter) I never did know why he wanted me.

G: Do you think he just wanted a sounding board?

W: I don't know what he wanted; I just don't know. But of course, right after that was when he had that White House phone installed here in my house, and he had one in Moursund's house. He put one out there and put one in my house. And from then on, it was pretty well over the telephone.

G: I see. Well, now, he came back to the Ranch just a couple of weeks after the assassination, I think.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

W: Maybe he came back and I went up there after it; I don't remember exactly when that was.

G: Okay. How often did you go to Washington while he was president, do you reckon?

M. Winters -- I -- 27

W: Oh, I made several--

(Interruption)

Of course, after Lyndon became president, the Associated Contractors, of course, the head office is in Washington, the Associated General Contractors, and they'd have problems with him over his time up there, and they'd always dump it on me to get something done. And some of it I could do, and some of it I [couldn't].

(Interruption)

--and she said, "Well, Mr. President, [inaudible] doesn't care whether you sign it; you're hurting yourself, you're not hurting him."

(Laughter)

G: So he signed this highway bill at the last minute.

W: Right at the last minute.

G: Do you think he was kidding that he didn't know if he was going to sign it or not?

W: I think he felt like he needed to sign it, and he didn't want to sign it. I think he felt like he was being pressured into signing. I think that was the attitude he was taking. Of course, the Association of General Contractors in Washington, they had really been working him over, too, "You be damn sure and sign it." And he resented that fact very much.

G: Did that put you in kind of a pressure position, being a member of the Associated General Contractors?

W: Well, of course they were wanting it, and they needed it, and there was no question about it: it was a good bill. They needed it, the whole country. That didn't only include Texas; it was the United States.

G: Right. So they depended on you to do a little [inaudible].

M. Winters -- I -- 28

W: And they were trying to get me to be dadgummed sure that it was signed. Well, it just--(Laughter)--I don't know; he was always glad he signed it, after he signed it. It worked out well. Of course, he didn't do as much for the program; Eisenhower was the best man we ever had in there for the interstate work. Eisenhower did a wonderful job.

Of course, Eisenhower used this theory: get roads into these cities where you can evacuate the cities if you have to. That was his theory, and that's what he did.

G: Did you do any road work for LBJ when he was NYA [National Youth Administration] director down here?

W: No.

G: I know he's credited with beginning this roadside park idea. Do you--

W: Well, that was all handwork, you know, WPA [Works Progress Administration] work.

G: Right. Do you know if that's a fact, that he built the first roadside parks?

W: I don't know whether they were the first or not; I kind of think they were. Lady Bird, you know, she really picked that up and went for it 100 per cent.

G: She's been pretty big in highway beautification work, I suppose.

W: Right, she sure has. I got this job from Johnson City here out past the LBJ Ranch out there; I forget what year it was. He was president at the time. And, of course, I knew that I was going to have to contend with Lady Bird. And she asked me to come up to the Ranch before I ever even started to work, and she said, "Now, Melvin, I want to save every tree that can be saved on that road." I said, "Well, Lady Bird, we can save a bunch of them. There's a bunch of them we can't save. They've got to go." And she said, "Well, leave all you can." And then she got Mr. [DeWitt] Greer up there and gave him a lecture on it, and then he got his engineer that was going to handle the job up there and they were very

M. Winters -- I -- 29

particular. (Laughter) If you go from here to Fredericksburg, you can see what I mean.

Left every dadgummed tree you could leave.

G: Did you do any of the work improving the highway between here and Austin after LBJ went to Washington?

W: Yes, I did some of that.

G: Did he take a personal interest in that?

W: I don't think he took too much of an interest in it, no. We rebuilt that road pretty nearly all the way from Austin back into Johnson City, over the years, several years. Had let it about seven, eight, ten miles at a time.

G: Did you ever go bird hunting down at George Brown's place down in South Texas?

W: No, I've never been to his ranch; never was.

G: How about down to Floresville and down to Connally's place?

W: I've been there, yes. I built Connally's runway and tanks and everything, and did all that work there.

G: I see. Has he got a pretty nice ranch?

W: Real nice.

No, see, getting back to Brown and Root and Cage Brothers, we were always battling each other over the years for work. Competitors, very competitive, both of them. And there was a friction there between Brown and Root and Cage Brothers, always was. In other words, there was one instance that I recall, Brown and Root had the contract on this dam down at Austin.

G: Tom Miller Dam?

M. Winters -- I -- 30

W: Tom Miller Dam. And they let the grading down there, and riprap, all that kind of stuff, and I bid on it. And I asked Mr. Cage to go down there with me to the letting. And at the letting, George Brown was there, and we got the job; we were low. And George said, "Mr. Cage, I want to talk to you." And they got off in a huddle a little bit, and Mr. Tom came back and he said, "George Brown will give you a hundred thousand dollars to not bond that job and let them have it." I said, "Well, Mr. Cage, what do you want to do?" He said, "Well, it's strictly up to you. But you bid the job, and you want the job, and you needed the job, and my advice to you [is], if you want it, you keep it." And I did keep it; I wouldn't take the hundred thousand dollars. But they tried to get me just to forfeit the contract right then and there, and I wouldn't do it. I went on and did the job. And there was some friction through the job, because I had come in and took some work that they wanted. They wanted it themselves. But it didn't amount to much. We settled it--their superintendent was a fellow named White [?], general manager and superintendent. We eventually got along pretty good. So I said, "You block me, and I'll block you. It doesn't make any difference. I'll throw up some [inaudible] around here so you can't do your damned work." (Laughter) And we got along pretty good; lined [winded?] it out and done all right. We had a good job financially, and it worked out all right.

G: I imagine LBJ had to sometimes walk a line when some of these big contracts were up, didn't he? Because, after all, he was friends with all of you folks.

W: Brown and us, too.

G: Was there ever a time when he threw what influence he could one way or the other?

M. Winters -- I -- 31

W: Not that I know of, not that I know of. Of course, construction work is competitive bidding. There isn't much anybody can do with that. The low bidder is going to get it, regardless. Unless he forfeits it, or doesn't want it or something like that.

G: Did you ever do anything in the landscaping line that Mrs. Johnson was particularly interested in?

W: No. No, I never did any of that; I didn't want any of that. (Laughter)

G: You didn't want any of that?

W: No, I didn't want to fool with it.

G: Why not?

W: I just didn't want it; that kind of work is nearly all handwork. If you couldn't use equipment, we weren't interested.

(Laughter)

G: Did LBJ ever talk to you about why he decided not to run in 1968?

W: Yes, he sure did.

G: He did? What did he say?

W: For a while, he intended to run, and you know, right at the last minute, right at the last, there, he finally got up and--we saw it on television first--and he said, "I'm not a candidate; I'm not going to run; I'm not a candidate," and just quit, right then and there. Well, he told me, confidentially, that he was afraid he couldn't serve the term out. He was worried about his health. That's the reason he didn't accept it. But when he was elected, he was elected by a big majority, and he could have been elected again. But he did not run. And he was worried about his health. He just always felt like something was going to happen to him, you know, his health.

M. Winters -- I -- 32

- G: Well, that last year, when he had his second heart attack, I guess 1972, there are some accounts that he was in a lot of discomfort the last six months.
- W: He was; he was.
- G: Was he? Chest pains?
- W: Chest pains. And he walked a whole lot. He'd call the wife and I in the evening and at night to come up there and walk at night. Goddang, we were walking down that dadgum road around the house at nine and ten o'clock. He'd just walk and talk.
- G: Was he getting short of breath?
- W: Seemed to be, yes. He sure was. But he always wanted somebody to walk with him; he wouldn't go by himself.
- G: He hated to be alone, didn't he?
- W: He didn't want to be alone, never would. He wouldn't walk by himself. Had to be somebody there.
- G: You'd walk down to Cousin Oreole's?
- W: We'd go down there, to the cemetery.
- G: Did he talk about the men in his family not living long?
- W: Yes, sure did.
- G: Did he ever talk to you about Vietnam?
- W: Yes, sure did.
- G: What did he say?
- W: I was one of the people that thought he ought to drop a damn bomb on Hanoi and get through with it. You know, that was my impression. And the majority of the people felt that way. And he was talking about it there one day, up here, and I said, "Why in the hell

M. Winters -- I -- 33

don't you drop the damn bomb and get it over with?" He said, "Melvin, I know things you don't know, that you'll never know." I said, "Well, all right then. You've got some excuse." He said, "If I drop a bomb on Hanoi, the next day Russians will drop a bomb on Washington, D.C." And he thoroughly believed that. Now whether they would or not, I don't know, but he had that in his mind, that if he dropped one on Hanoi, the next day they would drop one on Washington, the Russians. You know what I mean; you went through that. You know what kind of a turmoil it was. But he thoroughly believed that, and that's the reason he wouldn't do it. I always thought he should have done it. Maybe I'm wrong. I might have been. I don't know whether Russia would have done it or not. (Laughter) But he didn't take the chance.

G: Anything else on Vietnam that he talked to you about?

W: Nothing other than that he inherited all that, you know, and it was a mess. It was a bad mess. He worried a whole lot about getting out of it, wanted out, and everything out.

G: He used to have high-ranking visitors down to the Ranch, and it seems that he was able to enlist practically the whole county to come and help cook and celebrate and everything else.

Were you involved in any of those?

W: Oh, yes.

G: What did he ask you to do?

W: Well, we did a lot of it for him out there. We'd give them fish fries, first one thing and then another. One time he had it out to our ranch, got out there and he wanted to do the cooking himself, wanted to do it all himself, didn't want me to do any of it. And he did a good job of it.

G: What were you having?

M. Winters -- I -- 34

W: Fish fry, and he liked it, too. He liked to have a fish fry.

G: Where'd you get the fish?

W: We'd get them up there at Lake Buchanan.

G: Catfish?

W: Yes. Bootleggers. They weren't supposed to do it, but they kept nets out up there. You could buy all the fish you wanted to. (Laughter) Still do.

G: Any particular visit you remember, other than that one, that stands out in your mind? Do you remember the [Konrad] Adenauer visit?

W: Yes, I remember that. I had to go up there and visit with him. We drove up there, the wife and I did. We had a room up there at the Ranch, upstairs. They called it the Winters Room. When they were remodeling that house and everything, he and Lady Bird spent so much time with us they'd just move in, you know, and they didn't have anywhere to stay, and so they named one of the rooms up there the Winters Room. And he told Adenauer that night, "We're going to put you in the Winters Room." (Laughter)

G: He got a lot of the German people from Fredericksburg in on that visit, didn't he?

W: Lots of them; they really appreciated that. He had lots of them down there as guests while they were visiting.

G: You remember Father [Wunibald] Schneider from the--

W: Oh, everybody knows him. (Laughter)

Lyndon had a theater fixed up out in what used to be the garage, I guess. He put in seats and everything out there, had it fixed up--

G: Oh, out in the hangar.

M. Winters -- I -- 35

W: Out in the hangar, yes. Had that fixed up, and then they'd have a movie up there, and he'd invite people to come up there and see the movie. And one particular night we were up there, they were having a movie, and it was kind of a vulgar picture, a little bit, had a little dirt in it, and Father Schneider was sitting in about the second row, and we were sitting pretty close to him, and he would get up and just reach over and get interested in it, you know--and it was embarrassing to him, I guess. (Laughter) And finally when it was over, Lyndon said, "Well, Father Schneider, how did you enjoy the picture?" He said, "Very good, very good, Mr. President. I really did enjoy it." And he did.

G: What do you remember about LBJ and religion, anything in particular? Was he a religious man?

W: I think so. I think he believed in religion. He didn't practice it much, but he believed in it. He took his first degree in Masonry up here and he never did finish that. We finally made him a full Mason anyway. (Laughter) But he never would come back, took his Entered Apprentice [the first degree of Masonry].

G: He never finished his degree work?

W: No, we had to try to get him to finish the damned thing. I did everything I could. Too much memory work; he didn't want to do it.

G: What lodge was that?

W: The lodge here in Johnson City, Lodge Number 561. He took his Entered Apprentice.

G: Do you remember when Luci converted to become a Catholic?

W: I knew she was a Catholic; I don't remember when it happened.

G: Well, he went to church regularly, but apparently, he spread it around.

M. Winters -- I -- 36

- W: Oh, yes. Yes, he spread it around. I think Father Schneider had a lot to do with Luci's becoming a Catholic.
- G: Do you?
- W: I sure do.
- G: Do you have any particular reason for thinking that?
- W: No, but they were very close. And she believed in it; she actually believed that's the only religion anybody ought to have.
- G: LBJ thought a lot of Father Schneider, didn't he?
- W: Oh, you bet. He sure did; he really did.
- G: Gave him presents, I think.
- W: Oh, yes. He thought Father Schneider hung the moon. (Laughter) He really liked him.
- G: In those last years, those retirement years, when he came back to the Ranch, did you detect that he was restless?
- W: Oh, very restless.
- G: Was he?
- W: Very, very restless.
- G: Do you think he regretted not running?
- W: No, I don't think he regretted that, but it was hard for him to adjust back to the life that he'd had before he went to Washington.
- G: Did he ever do that? Did he ever adjust?
- W: No, I don't think completely, no. He just was pretty restless, always. He'd come out here and visit a little while, and then we'd go to the Ranch, or he'd come to the house, but he was

M. Winters -- I -- 37

just pretty restless all the time. Never did seem like he could get fully relaxed. I don't know what was wrong.

G: Well, some people say he was like that all his life.

W: Well, he was to a certain extent, but I've always thought he was a little worse. He was, to a certain extent; he was [inaudible].

G: Did he have a temper?

W: Well, I wouldn't say it was a bad temper. He'd get vexed about things, but I never did see him in any violent rages in any way, shape, form or fashion.

G: What kind of things would bother him particularly?

W: Well, I don't know particularly what did bother him. I know when he came back here, he felt like we were going to have a big depression, when he ceased to be president. He just knew it was coming. He began to liquidate everything he owned, clean up everything and get ready for it. Tried to get me to do the same thing.

G: Did you have any other business dealings with him, besides the bank?

W: I bought a hardware store--well, I had a chain of hardware stores here at one time. I had one here at Johnson City, and one in Blanco, and one at Marble Falls, and Burnet, a whole chain of them. And one time he wanted into that business with me, so I let him in on the Marble Falls deal, took him in as a partner on that. And then I decided to sell it, and he was agreeable to that. He didn't complain about it. He said, "Do what you want to." That's the only partnership deal that I was in on him with, that business. That and the bank were the only partnerships I ever had with him.

G: You never were in any ranching partnerships with him?

W: No, none at all. No way in any of them.

M. Winters -- I -- 38

G: Do you remember the day he died? Do you remember when you got the news?

W: Yes.

G: Where were you?

W: We were at home; heard it on the television, I guess. Walter Cronkite announced that he died.

G: Did you go to the funeral?

W: Oh, you bet.

G: What do you remember about that? It was a cold day, wasn't it?

W: It was cold. See, they put him on a plane here in Johnson City to take him to San Antonio. He died on the way to San Antonio on the plane.

G: What do you remember about the funeral?

W: I don't remember anything other than how he was buried [inaudible]. Lots of people there.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

MELVIN C. WINTERS

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Anita Winters of Johnson City, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with my late husband, Melvin C. Winters, on February 18, February 25, March 3, March 12, and March 18, 1987 in Johnson City, Texas and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

<u>Anita Winters</u>	<u>3-22-04</u>
Donor	Date
<u>John W. Carl</u>	<u>4-8-04</u>
Archivist of the United States	Date