

INTERVIEW V

DATE: April 14, 1983

INTERVIEWEES: WILTON AND VIRGINIA WOODS (with comments by Wilton Woods, Jr.)

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: The Woods' residence, Seguin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Woods, I understand that you drove to Washington in 1939 with the Johnsons. Can you describe the trip?

W: They had a roadster, one-and-a-half seat car, you remember them.

I'm real highly prejudiced against John Connally because he's the guy in the United States that hurt Lyndon the most deep down when he deserted the Democratic Party. I don't know how many people would agree with that, but anyway, that's what happened.

G: You spent the night in Karnack, is that right?

W: Yes. I remembered it as a two-story [house]. My memory doesn't always comply with the pictures I'd see of the place, but anyway, it had four columns like we have here and an upstairs porch.

I imagine since you're a true historian you don't want to leave out John Connally.

WJ: Why not get John Connally? I don't understand, how did John Connally get into the trip to Washington?

W: Oh, he was going to go up there and go to work for Lyndon.

VW: Was he in this car though? I thought it was just you and Lady Bird and Lyndon that went on this trip.

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W: And John Connally.

G: In the fall or September I think of 1939.

W: Yes. We got there I think about dark, and it would have only been for a night. We ate and went to bed, and left the next morning. Lady Bird's father was an early riser, like a lot of the old timers were, most of them were. We drove into I think Virginia that night, not too far, but [a little] anyway. We made the trip to Washington in about I'd say it would be Karnack, Virginia and then to Washington I think.

G: Do you remember any conversations with Mr. Taylor, Mrs. Johnson's father?

W: No, he was a solemn, quiet old fellow. Of course, at that time we looked upon him as being elderly. But he didn't particularly have anything to say to us because we were just excess baggage. He spent the evening with LBJ and Lady Bird, and John and I went to bed.

VW: All right, tell him about Mr. Hudson [?].

W: Well, let's see, are we ready for that? Let me throw this in. Lyndon didn't like to drive in the car because it was too slow. He wanted to fly even in those days when planes were kind of decrepit. I wasn't too fond of flying, but I did. I couldn't get out of it.

VW: Was Lyndon driving the car?

W: Yes. Previously on several trips, they had hurriedly left Washington and came to Austin and visited here or Karnack. Then from there they would--well, usually he would fly back to Washington and I would drive his old car to Corpus Christi. The most impressive thing then and now about that is it cost twenty-five dollars to ship it to Washington, if

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I remember right. There was no receipt, no nothing, they'd just run it on the boat and--

WJ: Ship it out.

G: Did LBJ and John Connally talk about their plans for the office and what John Connally would do?

W: No, I don't think they did much because John had just gotten out of the University [of Texas]. He was eighteen years old. I've been irritated quite a bit by Fenner Roth and a lot of people that attribute more to John than he's got coming to him, because they don't realize that John was actually just a boy. In fact, I think--I don't know whether you or somebody talked to Fenner Roth and asked him who was LBJ's campaign manager in the first campaign. Old Fenner said, "Oh, John Connally I guess." Well, you can imagine an eighteen-year-old kid then or now trying to be a manager of a statewide race. It would be impossible.

VW: Now move on to your Census Bureau.

W: Oh. Well, I went to school up there for quite a bit, getting ready for the 1940 census. It actually was going to school to learn how to do it, you know, and it ended up with a pretty good-sized organization. You mentioned Hudson a while ago. He lived I think at Waco and he was Senator Tom Connally's appointee. When the old man failed his test--and it wasn't extremely hard, neither was it extremely easy. But anyway, Senator Connally was disappointed that his man had failed, and of course the first thing the Census Bureau did, they said, "We can't give that job down there to Mr. Hudson, because he can't hold

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it. Why don't you send Lyndon or Wilton down there to take care of the old man and help him do most of his work and all that?" From their viewpoint that was a pretty good out, but Lyndon wouldn't have any part of it. "No," he said, "I'm going to stick with my employee," which of course he did.

VW: So Wilton became the area director of the census at Waco instead of Mr. Hudson.

G: Where did you stay when you were in Washington?

W: Dodge Hotel, basement. [Robert] Caro makes a big deal about the basement of the Dodge, but it was just a--
(Interruption)

VW: --that, and we can go to 1940.

G: Now you indicated before we turned on the tape that you received a call in 1940 with regard to helping in the congressional campaigns. Can you recall how that came about?

W: Oh, yes, that's the reason John and I were going up there.

VW: Now we're talking about from Corpus Christi, Wilton, when you flew up.

W: Yes. the Naval Air Station.

VW: Yes. Okay. Mr. Woolsey [?]

W: --was general manager of Brown and Root.

G: And he called you, telephoned you?

VW: Mr. Woolsey, who was the general manager of Brown and Root, called Wilton, and he said, "I have Lyndon on the line, and Lyndon wants me to send you for a few days and deliver this envelope. Handle it carefully." And that was for the congressional campaigns. And Wilton

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stayed up there three weeks working in Lyndon's offices for the congressional campaign.

G: What did you do?

W: Well, you know the purpose of the thing, don't you, was to try to help weaker congressmen be re-elected if they were Democrats, because there was some--I don't know whether it was justified or not but LBJ always ran scared, you know. FDR was the same way apparently.

VW: He worked answering the telephone, he said, mostly. He would take their calls, and after he had the call, whatever their need was he saw to it that that need would be addressed. If it was for information on a voting record, or if their needs [were for] a speaker, or whatever it was, then he would see that the person who was supposed to take care of that followed through. He relayed that message.

G: What criterion was used for determining which congressmen were supported?

W: Well, first they had to need the money, he didn't give it to any affluent congressmen. Apparently they all needed it or thought they did. I think they needed money more than they needed information about how did so-and-so vote, or is it true that he voted this way or that way. We'd have to look up the voting record, which doesn't really take very long.

G: Where did the financing come from?

W: I don't suppose this is too confidential, but it came from the pockets of the affluent contractors that had worked for the Democratic Party, like W. S. Bellows working with Brown and Root. Herman Brown and

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George Brown, they were in position to tell these minor subcontractors "Look, we've got to have some money here," and they'd tell them why and they'd usually fork over enough. If it wasn't enough, they'd say, "Well, we'll come back to see you next payday" or something.

VW: Wilton stayed up there for three weeks and worked with them.

G: Were there any strings attached to the money? Any understandings?

W: No, they just had to be Democrats. Like I say, they had to need the money because Lyndon was pretty good at marking out those that acted like they couldn't get along without it and he knew they could.

VW: I think there was some indication on their part that they were going to support the programs that had been outlined by FDR.

G: Was any of this money oil money, from oil men as well?

W: Well, Brown and Root I don't believe ever got deeply in the oil business, because building was their first love. But other people, other contractors did.

VW: Well, actually you did not handle the money, so he can't really answer that question. I think he gave his envelope to Lyndon, and Lyndon turned it over to someone else. But that was not--

W: The Hendersons. There were two Hendersons. One of them died shortly after we were--

G: That was Herbert, I think. The other one was Charles? Which one worked in this campaign office?

W: The professional writer.

G: That was Herbert?

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W: He kind of served a double purpose there in writing pep talks and that kind of thing to send out to congressmen that needed some expert help like that. What else you got there?

VW: I only have that you stayed for three weeks and that you came home. And he drove John's car home, and that Nellie Brill and Sugar Crites came back with him from that meeting.

WJ: Daddy, you started to say that when you drove up to Washington in the roadster with Lyndon and Lady Bird and John Connally, what was the purpose of that trip?

W: That was just to get from Austin to Washington. John Connally was going to try to work permanently, and I guess he did. Of course, I was going for the Census Bureau training.

G: I guess we go to the 1941 campaign.

VW: Yes, unless you had something that you're going to ask between.

In that 1941 campaign we were in Corpus Christi, and Wilton organized a group, congressional district-wide, for Lyndon. I believe the chairman of the committee was the editor of the Kenedy paper [Denver Chestnutt], but other than that--and the names, if you would like, that we remembered were Sidney Robinson [?], Dan Storm [?], Marvin Pierce [?] and Prince [?], I can't remember his name, Mr. and Mrs. Prince, both of them.

G: Did he get much support from Sam Fore?

VW: Yes.

W: Oh, yes, enthusiastic support. Sam Fore told me himself that LBJ would come into their living room and he'd start telling Sam his

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problems and pretty soon he was stretched out resting or went to sleep a few times. But anyway. . . .

G: Was Roy Miller helpful in that election?

W: Yes, but he didn't come down to the level I was working in. We knew who he was and knew that he was a wealthy man and we knew that he was Lyndon's friend.

VW: They organized the caravan that went from here to the opening address that Lyndon made in San Marcos. Our car had a permanent sign painted on it, "Lyndon Johnson."

WJ: You went from Seguin or from Corpus?

VW: From Corpus Christi. We went from Corpus Christi. All these that I've just mentioned, each one had the car. And we picked up people as we went along; in each town there would be another group that would go. So when we got to Seguin, they went around the square, and then went on. So it was really impressive. It was like a parade.

G: How many cars did you have in the caravan?

VW: There were about five ahead of us. Not less than thirty in the caravan.

W: And like she says, those things gather momentum and you pick up people.

G: What was [Richard] Kleberg's role in that campaign?

W: Kleberg was a playboy congressman. He probably knew that Lyndon had a campaign, but he took no active part in it. If Lyndon needed some money, maybe he went there to get it. But he was aloof from the whole business. He would attend the House meeting in the morning, and answer roll call as present, and then--

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G: Did Kleberg help him at all in that campaign?

W: Not directly. He might have--there's probably quite a few indirect things that he did for him, but we didn't know about them. I didn't know about them, and John Connally didn't know about them.

G: Now, you worked in the Austin campaign office later during the campaign?

VW: At the beginning.

G: At the beginning you did, before you went to Corpus?

VW: Oh, no, no. We went to Corpus in August, and Lyndon opened his office in May or June of the next year. When Lyndon opened his campaign office, then Wilton took a leave of absence and went to Austin and worked the full time, from the first day of the campaign, and set up the offices, hired secretaries.

W: Yes, there was typing.

G: What did you do in the headquarters?

W: Well, my big responsibility was to pay the girls that worked there. I had to see that money was available Saturday, which was payday. I didn't have any problem except sometimes Senator [Alvin] Wirtz carried most of it in his pocket and sometimes he was hard to locate.

VW: Well now, that's the story of your little black book. Has he ever told you the story of the little black book?

G: I don't know whether we have it on tape or not. Why don't you tell me that story?

W: Yes. Senator Wirtz was a super cautious campaigner. He was practicing law and he didn't want to lose clients. They're still the same

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way, lawyers are, about these campaigns. But anyway, Senator Wirtz told me from the very start, "Now, I can give you the money and you pay the girls and you tell me ahead of time about how much you're going to need, if you can." Caro made a big deal in his book about Senator Wirtz handing me what, three thousand dollars? It was about that big a sum in one whack. Well, that wasn't a big deal, then or now, in a campaign. Anyway, Senator Wirtz said, "I don't want any records at all. Period. Zero. No written record." Well, if somebody called me on the carpet and said, "What happened to all this money?" I wanted to know where it went. So I did keep this little black book that she referred to for quite a while.

Something came up about Lyndon spending so much money that it was getting to be an issue in the campaign, and Senator Wirtz one day said, "I want to see you," and I went up to his office. Mary Rather was working there. But anyway, I went up there and he said, "You've got a little black book in your hip pocket there. Let me see it." I didn't know that he even knew I had it, but I did. So he took a look at it and he said, "This is money that went to the campaign?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "I think we had an agreement that there wasn't going to be any bookkeeping. Don't you remember that?" I had to admit, you know, that I did. Well, about that time he started tearing it into a hundred pieces. So there wasn't any accurate records kept in that portion of the campaign. I paid the typists. I did not pay radio advertising. These girls were my responsibility, to see that they came to work and that they got paid

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on time, because times were hard then and it was important to them that they were paid on time.

VW: You paid the printing and you ran the mailing room.

W: Well, they were really about one and the same. There's never been any disturbance between me and the girls, and I think I started out saying and got sidetracked, that somebody was making the issue or threatening to, claiming that LBJ had spent a quarter of a million dollars already. That was earlier in the campaign. Of course, I knew he hadn't spent that much, because I had the little black book.

G: But your book included only the expenses that you paid, didn't it?

W: Right. But it seemed like in those days there were fewer miscellaneous outside contributions. It just took less money it seemed to me like, because I never did spend any earth-shaking amount, which did include everything except those things she mentioned there.

G: Did any of the campaign people ever estimate how much they did spend in that race?

W: Not that I know of. Now it would be curious to know what--Mary
Rather, we haven't seen her in four or five or six years.

G: Now you indicated earlier that you also attended the rally in
Wooldridge Park. Is that right, in 1941? Do you remember that?

W: Attending it?

G: Yes.

W: Yes.

G: What do you remember about that rally?

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W: Well, it was a rather large political rally, that's all I remember about it.

VW: The thing I remember about it was that he made his radio speech first, and then when he finished making his radio speech he started talking, and there's such a tremendous difference. Most people would find that his radio speeches were stilted and not like him at all. But as soon as he started talking it was very personal. You felt as if he would be talking to you.

W: Relaxed.

VW: Yes, just so totally different. A lot of people, people that knew him, would be very anxious for him to get through talking on the radio so that he could be talking.

He wrote down here that there were fifteen typists who were working in the area on the mezzanine floor, but they also worked down the street in the mailing room, at the end of the block from the--

W: There were two activities I attended. One of them was the poker game, and the other one was I always went of course when Senator Wirtz said, "I want to see you." You know, he meant right then and now. There was one real fine person there that I liked a lot. Well, I liked several of them, like Everett Looney and all. But Beauford Jester, later he became governor, and I was sure shocked and dismayed when he died so suddenly. But he had come down from Corsicana.

WJ: How much did the typists or secretaries make a week?

W: I've forgotten. It was about fifteen dollars, I think, a week. A small amount by comparison with today.

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G: Did you travel any with the candidate in that campaign?

W: I don't believe I did in that campaign.

VW: He did not travel with the campaign, but we went to each one of his rallies, the Waco rally.

G: You were there at the Austin Hotel when the returns came in on election night. Can you recall what happened then?

W: Yes. LBJ thought and we all thought that the election's over and we'd won it. But these returns were slow in coming in from East Texas. Fenner Roth had occasion to kind of study how they operate over there, and there's no question but what a lot of shady things happened. They had a wet-dry campaign not too many months back, and Fenner said that a lot of these voting certificates, the guy who handled them or was in charge of them, he'd back date them just so they could vote. A lot of questionable things like that.

VW: There was a party, there was a big celebration on the mezzanine floor. All of the secretaries and all of the people who had been out in the area campaigning came in that night. There was dancing. It was just a real party. It was great, because we were winning and we knew it.

G: What was LBJ's mood that night?

W: Happy. He and Bill Deason and I, the three of us, went to a cafe this side of Austin that's closed now. It was to get him something to eat. He was always forgetting to eat because he was too busy and didn't have time. But he said, "I wanted to come out here with my two best friends. We'll kind of get an idea of what we're going to do in the

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Senate." And of course we assumed like everybody else that he had been elected.

G: Did you stay around as those late returns came in the next day or so?

W: Were you in Austin at that time or Seguin?

VW: I was in Austin, but we went home about two o'clock.

W: We stayed. It was mainly a celebration thing. We didn't stay to be sure that the returns--

VW: We were so sure it was right.

W: But Everett Looney I think was from East Texas, and he knew how they operated up there. It's unfortunate he died when he did, because he was a good man, real dependable and real--if you'd ask him a question he'd give you a straight answer, and that's what we liked, what I liked about him.

G: Was any thought given to challenging the vote?

W: Not at that time. That was too early.

VW: No, but at the end of it, when the final tally came in.

W: Well, Lyndon never did think much of this challenging. He brushed all those suggestions aside, I believe. I mean, I believe he was opposed generally as a matter of, I don't know, principle or what, but he wasn't in favor of going into whether the vote was accurate and so forth at that time.

G: Anything else on the 1941 campaign that you remember?

VW: I don't remember.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V]

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Virginia Woods
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and is unable to sign this
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