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BESS ABELL ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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ACCESSION NUMBER 84-28

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 28, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BESS ABELL

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

PLACE: Mrs. Abell's home in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

B: This is the interview with Mrs. Bess Abell. Mrs. Abell, do you recall when you first met, or perhaps became aware of Lyndon Johnson would be a better phrase?

A: My first connection with him was because of my father. My father was in the Senate from Kentucky. I guess my first real awareness that I remember is when Daddy was assistant Democratic leader and Mr. Johnson was then the majority leader. He and Daddy were very close and were very good friends, and Mrs. Johnson was always very nice to my mother. I remember such things as hamburgers in the backyard of the Johnsons' house when Lynda and Luci were small and when I was much younger, but when I was in college. And then I remember a couple of times when Mrs. Johnson and Lynda and Luci and Mother and I used to go over to Bethany Beach and things like that.

B: Was the friendship between the Johnsons and the Clements a close personal friendship, as well as a professional association?

A: It was a close personal friendship, yes, definitely on the basis of the men; I think less so with Mrs. Johnson and my mother.

B: Did you see anything in those days of Mrs. Johnson and raising the children? What was it like for Lynda and Luci in those days to have a father who was so very busy, as Senator Johnson was?

A: I can't really comment on it from that period. I can go back to the time when the President was vice president and when I worked for them out at the house.

B: Why don't we then wait until we get there in the chronology and I'll mention it again. Did you have any political involvement in those days, assist in campaigns?

A: Nothing more active really than licking envelopes and taking constituents who were in town around on trips. That was really one of my jobs. Actually, when my father was in the House of Representatives, when I was much younger and long before I could be put behind the wheel of the car to take them on a tour, he would say, "Here is my daughter to

take you sight-seeing," at age twelve or whatever.

B: I suppose in a family like that everybody pitches in for that kind of thing.

A: That's right.

B: I understand that the Johnsons gave you a reception after your wedding to Mr. Abell.

A: Yes, it was rather a backward sort of marriage. First, we eloped just two days before Tyler went in the service; and when he finished his basic training I joined him, and then we went on our honeymoon. And then we came back to Washington and Mr. Johnson gave us a reception.

B: A rather large one, I understand.

A: It was absolutely marvelous. I felt very special that day because the Senate adjourned early.

B: Just for the reception?

A: Well, who knows! There were a large, large number of the Senate there and a number of people from the Pentagon. My husband, who had finished about two and a half months of basic training, was standing there in the receiving line. He had never seen anybody with more than maybe one gold bar on his shoulder, and coming down the line was a three-star general who was making the apologies to Tyler. He was so sorry that General Ridgway couldn't be there.

B: I hope Mr. Abell had the presence of mind to make an appropriate comment.

A: He just was panicked when he saw this man coming down the line because he didn't know whether he was supposed to salute or faint into the potted palm.

B: During the few years after that, the period between your wedding and '55 and the events of 1960, did you have any connection with the Johnsons?

A: Yes, I did. I worked for my father when he was executive director of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, which was '57 and '58. My father's office at that time was the same office that he had had as majority whip of the Senate, and the Majority Leader's office--I've forgotten the number on the door, the numbers have long since been changed--was on the gallery floor and you could walk out our door and down the corridor directly into the Majority Leader's office. So that at that time Daddy worked closely with Mr. Johnson and I was just very much on the fringes, but an enormous admirer. Tyler also had this feeling.

And then in 1960 he [Tyler] quit his job to go to work for the Johnson campaign.

B: You said, "Tyler had this feeling," you mean of Lyndon Johnson as presidential timber?

A: Oh yes, he had great and enormous respect and admiration for him. Those were the marvelous days of Johnson running the Congress, and I don't guess there will ever be anything like it again.

B: What was it like to watch him operate from the fringes like that?

A: A great deal of awe. He and Bill Knowland worked so well together, with a great deal of honesty and understanding and appreciation, one for the other, of their problems. There were none of these sessions that ran needlessly into the middle of the night. When they were ready to take a vote on a measure, both of them generally knew how the chips were going to fall. They'd be ready for the vote and I guess there weren't very many surprises because the tally had been taken before; they knew where their people were.

B: Did you ever in those days discuss, say, with Mrs. Johnson, her ambitions for her husband?

A: No.

B: In 1960 did you participate in the events leading up to the convention?

A: My only contribution was to have a baby right in the middle of the convention that was named Lyndon--not right in the middle, but about ten days beforehand, so I really didn't. After that I took a part-time job down at the Democratic National Committee.

B: You worked in Charles Murphy's speech-writing group, didn't you?

A: Yes, but I was a typer, not a writer.

B: Then it is after this that you joined Mrs. Johnson's staff formally, isn't it?

A: Yes. At that time when I was working down at the committee, I started writing some letters for Mrs. Johnson and for the girls, which really they were unaware of; I really don't know now whether Mrs. Johnson knows about this today or not. But as it should have been, the people who were handling letters handled, first, Kennedy letters, then Johnson letters, then Mrs. Kennedy letters, and nobody was doing any of Mrs. Johnson's mail. And the volume really wasn't that great, but I did start writing letters for her. I felt that I knew her well enough, that it was more of a plus for me just to write the letter and sign her name.

B: Was this during the campaign?

A: It was after the convention.

B: What kind of letters would she get?

A: The sort of thing that she generally got when she was in the White House. "Would you send me something for a parcel post sale?" "What's your favorite recipe for my recipe book?" "How do you raise your daughters?" That was always the hardest one.

But we would stumble around and find a recipe and answer, whatever. I'd just type the letter, sign her name, and mail it.

B: And Lynda and Luci got letters too?

A: Yes, but it was mostly for an autograph or a picture or something like that. I'm sure they would be appalled now at the thought of the pictures that I sent out because they look a whole lot better today.

B: Then this just sort of led into full-time formal work for Mrs. Johnson?

A: No. I really just wanted to do that because Tyler was traveling so much, and I've never been much of a volunteer type for the Ladies' Hospital Board. I hadn't worked between the birth of my two children.

Tyler then went down to work at the Inaugural Committee and the Parade Committee, and he said, "Come and be my secretary," so I went down there as his secretary, really thinking this would end in January.

Mrs. Johnson called me one day and was trying to locate the address of some friend, and I gave her the address. Then I asked her that question, which I'm sure even at that point she was bored at hearing: "How has your life changed?" She groaned and said, "Oh, I can't keep up with the mail. I just don't know what I'm going to do."

I said, "Well, gee, if I could come out and help you a couple of afternoons a week, I'd be delighted to." Then I started thinking about it and I talked to Tyler about it, and I said, "This is really the thing for me. I did that for a couple of weeks during the campaign with no great effort, and it's something that I rather enjoy, and it will get me out of the house a couple of afternoons a week."

So I'd just finished typing a letter to Mrs. Johnson, saying I'd like to do it and I thought I could. I was really literally taking it out of my typewriter down at the Inaugural Committee, and she called me and asked me to have lunch with her. I met her a day or so later, Mrs. Johnson and Liz Carpenter and myself, and she asked me if I would come to work for her and do that in what both of us envisioned would be a part-time job and one

that grew like Topsy.

B: Who else was on Mrs. Johnson's staff at that time? Liz Carpenter, of course.

A: Liz was during the campaign but, you see, Liz was going back to work with Les in the Carpenter News Bureau. She went back there before she joined the Vice President's staff the second time around. So really it was just me. Before that Grace Tully, who had worked for Mr. Johnson as majority leader and who had been FDR's secretary, had handled a great big chunk of Mrs. Johnson's mail.

B: What did you find your duties consisting of after you got into it?

A: Everything from cutting flowers in the backyard and arranging them on the table to getting the clothes from the cleaners, to paying the bills, to writing the letters, keeping track of appointments.

B: Had the Johnsons moved into The Elms house by this time?

A: No, they were in the house out on 30th Place, the house that they had bought a number of years ago--I really don't know how long they lived there, I would guess fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years. I had a little office up on the third floor in what had once been the children's playroom. Actually when I first got there I operated out of Mrs. Johnson's dressing room, which was terribly unsatisfactory, because you'd come in to work in the morning and there would be last night's stockings on your typewriter. And then I'm sure it was equally unsatisfactory for Mrs. Johnson. She'd be dressing to go out in the evening and she'd find paper clips and envelopes where she wanted to sit down and put on her makeup.

B: What does the wife of a vice president do?

A: She does a lot of pinch-hitting for her husband, and in the case of Mrs. Johnson, for Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy with small children and one thing and another, and I think a whole different type of personality, there were a lot of things that she just didn't feel that she wanted to do, and Mrs. Johnson would fall heir to a number of those. Tish Baldridge on Mrs. Kennedy's staff would call me or call Mrs. Johnson and say, "Gee, can Mrs. Johnson come down to the White House tomorrow and pose for a picture with the muscular dystrophy child?"

The invitations do go up. They go up much less in the case of the Johnsons, moving from majority leader to vice president, than they would for Agnew moving from governor of Maryland to vice president of the United States, so that she had had a taste of the world of embassy and congressional and lobbyist and White House entertaining before that. But instead of being invited to three White House dinners a year, the Kennedys invited the Johnsons to every official dinner they had.

B: Did Mrs. Johnson seem to enjoy her life in those years as compared with her life as the wife of the majority leader?

A: You see, I didn't know her well beforehand. I've never really known her when she didn't enjoy her life.

You asked about her as a mother and raising the children. I think, yes, she's a marvelous mother; she has given those girls a great deal. But if there was ever a choice between husband and child, the choice was always with the husband. If it was a choice between campaigning with her husband and leaving her children with Zephyr Wright, she would go with her husband. I'm not sure that there's anybody else in the world as selfless as she is. Other people always come first, but in that scale Lyndon Johnson is always at the top of it and the girls come next.

B: Did the girls learn to accept this?

A: I don't know that any child can learn to accept being number two any more than any husband could learn to accept being number two.

Lynda was always very much involved in her father's life. During the days when we were out on 30th Place, she would come home from school in the afternoon and almost the first thing she would do--well, the newspapers were always put up on her bed; after they were gathered up and in the normal household would be put in the trash basket, they were put up on Lynda's bed so she could read them when she came home from school. She was a student of history, as well as current events, and she would almost always get on the telephone to somebody in her daddy's office and say: "What about such-and-such a bill? Did the vote come up on that today?" And she really stayed in touch on the things that were happening on the Hill and the things that involved her father's life.

Luci was more interested in the page boys than in what the page boys were carrying.

B: Did you find yourself in sort of the position of the big sister to Lynda and Luci?

A: No, not really. I enjoyed both girls, but I can't say that I ever had a special closeness with either one of them. I think I made the most points with Luci when she discovered that my handwriting was like her mother's, and she said, "Can you write the note to Miss Lee at National Cathedral for me?"

B: I guess I have to ask. Did you?

A: Oh, yes. It was legitimate; her mother was away then. I recall it was early in the morning,

I don't know what it was but Luci was panicked because she had to show up that morning with a note to Miss Lee.

- B: Did you see much of Mr. Johnson in those years when he was vice president?
- A: Yes. I saw him, not like a secretary in his office or a staff member there, but he'd be at the house when I'd get there in the morning generally because he would do same work from the bedroom even there. He would never come home at night before I left, except when they moved over to The Elms and were doing more entertaining there. I guess I saw more of him there.
- B: Some people say that during those years of the vice presidency Mr. Johnson was restive in the sense that he didn't seem to have as much to do as he was accustomed to.
- A: There's no doubt about it.
- B: Is restive the right word as opposed to, say, unhappy?
- A: I would say frustrated.
- B: Did he ever complain about this within the family?
- A: He didn't complain per se. I remember very well his saying more than once, "I've got one friend at the White House--the President." I tend to go along with it.
- B: There has also been a good deal written about precisely that--the relationship between the Johnsons and the rest of the Kennedy group.
- A: It's not paranoid at all, but I felt that even with the very few people that I knew on the White House staff, that they sort of looked down on you because you worked for Johnson.
- B: Was this kind of thing fairly open?
- A: The only way that I came in contact with it was on a social basis. And by a social basis, I don't mean not being invited to the party--I mean when you were there. It wasn't not wanting to have anything to do with you, it was not wanting to "waste my time with you," was the feeling that came to me.

But one interesting story that was told me by my assistant at the White House, Barbara Keene, who had worked at the White House with Tish Baldridge. She said that President Kennedy always insisted that the Johnsons be invited to every State dinner that was held, and when Tish would send the guest list over to President Kennedy frequently the Johnson name would be left off, and it would always come back in Kennedy's

handwriting with Johnson's name in. She said it really, to her knowledge, was not by design of Tish's--it was just the list would come from the State Department and Tish really wouldn't do too much with it. She would add a few names at the bottom, suggestions of staff members, etc., and then send it over to the President. And neither Kennedy's name nor Johnson's name was ever on the list when it came from the State Department. As I say, she didn't feel that Tish did it by design, but apparently it slipped President Kennedy's mind and then when he was going over the list the day before the dinner he realized that the Johnsons weren't on it. He called her and said, "Why can't they come?" And she said, "I don't know, I'll have to check," and she realized they weren't invited. That was one of the few times that Barbara said that President Kennedy had really gotten very angry with Tish.

I do vaguely remember someone calling from the White House Social Office and saying a mistake was made and they hoped the Johnsons could come.

- B: Were there exceptions to this within the Kennedy group? Were there any individuals in it who did not share this attitude other than the President himself?
- A: I always felt that Tish Baldridge had a warm feeling toward President and Mrs. Johnson. I think that she would almost have had to because Mrs. Johnson did so many things for Mrs. Kennedy at Tish's request, and I'm sure so many things that Mrs. Kennedy maybe didn't even know about. Although almost invariably the next day there would be a little handwritten note from Mrs. Kennedy to Mrs. Johnson, saying, "Thank you for meeting with this and that group," and a little bouquet of something like lilies of the valley in a tiny little wicker basket.

But as far as any men on the staff, I really never had the feeling that there was any appreciation for Lyndon Johnson.

- B: Did Mrs. Johnson have any kind of personal relationship with any of the several Mrs. Kennedys?
- A: I'm not really qualified to answer that question. Of course Jean and Steve Smith went on the Asian trip with them, the around-the-world trip that they took in '61, and I was not along on that trip. I don't know whether any relationship developed out of that.

She was with Ethel and Jean and Eunice on the flying tea parties in Texas during the campaign in 1960, but whether or not there was any friendly relationship there I'm just not aware of it.

- B: One more question and I'll leave what is probably a distasteful subject. I have seen references to occasional snide remarks about the Johnsons within the Washington social set. I've seen references in print that indicate that there were some people who more or less considered the Johnsons a kind of figure of fun.

- A: I think that a lot of them were terribly disappointed that the President didn't walk into the White House with boots and spurs and a ten-gallon hat.
- B: My question was, surely the Johnsons knew of this kind of thing.
- A: Oh, sure.
- B: And did it hurt them? Or did they just tend to ignore it?
- A: Yes, it did. And I'm sure it kept the President from doing a lot of things that he might otherwise have done. It kept me from doing things in the way of entertainment at the White House that I would have loved to have done. I would have loved to have had a square dance in the East Room for a visitor from abroad, American folk dancing, but I just didn't feel that we could get away with it. We only served barbecue on the White House lawn once, and that was for a White House staff party that we had the last year, and it was a great, great success. Everybody said, "Why haven't we been doing this for five years!"
- B: And that was the only occasion? That was the party just before Christmas of '68, somewhere in there.
- A: Not just before Christmas, it was in September, the country fair that we had for underprivileged children and then we held it over the second day to have the White House staff party, which is ordinarily at Christmas time and just with members of the staff. This year the Johnsons wanted to invite husbands and wives. And since the walls of the White House aren't elastic and the staff of the White House is kind of like an iceberg--you don't see all of it at once--it was just impossible to have husbands and wives so we did it when we could expand outside and have the Ferris wheel and the tilt-a-whirl and the cotton candy, etc.
- B: It occurs to me that even you may not know how elastic that party was, the Lyndon Johnson Oral History Project was there too.
- A: Oh, yes, I do.
- B: And it was a delightful occasion. But that was the only time barbecue was served on the lawn?
- A: Yes.
- B: In other words, you had to watch to avoid giving more material for this kind of talk that was going around.
- A: What could you gain by it! You would amuse and delight a hundred and forty guests and

a visitor from one country abroad by having an American square dance in the East Room--they would love it, if you had the right guest of honor. But it's the sort of thing that a lot of columnists around the country would pick up and the sort of thing that would stay with you.

Although I have a feeling that all of us on the inside of the White House took it all perhaps more seriously than we should have. I tried not to while I was there, tried to always be able to step back twenty-five yards and look at it and say, "Is that really as important as it seems," and I felt that I hadn't stepped back quite far enough. Just yesterday when I was driving across Memorial Bridge and all the flags were out, the D.C. flag, the American flag, and some other flag I didn't recognize, I thought, "Nixon has a State visitor. Why don't I know who it is!" For five years I lived with it and thought that everybody else did too. You know, here I am right here in this town, and I think the visitor is being entertained in an embassy right around the corner tonight, and here I just have my head in the sand. I don't know nearly as much about it as I thought that everybody else knew about it when I was very much involved.

- B: There might even be some feeling of relief about not having to know who the visitor is.
- A: There is a little of that, no doubt about it. It's somebody else's problems.
- B: During the vice presidential years did you make any of the trips with the Johnsons, or Mrs. Johnson?
- A: Yes, I took the Middle Eastern trip in '62, and then the Scandinavian trip in '63, and then the Benelux countries in October of '63.
- B: Mr. Johnson seems obviously to enjoy those. Did Mrs. Johnson?
- A: Oh, yes, I think she did. I think that she enjoyed those three more than she did the first one.
- B: The first one being the Asian trip?
- A: Yes. Partly because you learn a lot from the first trip, and the first trip that they went on, they pretty much left up to the planning done by the State Department. You know, you ask any man what can the wife of the Vice President do when she comes to Timbuktu--I found that there's a town named Timbuktu. "Well, of course! She goes to visit the orphanages and the hospitals--that's the only ladylike thing to do!" This might be fine for somebody who really was a nurse and had an interest in hospitals and orphanages. Mrs. Johnson had a lot of interest in a lot of other things.

So on the Middle Eastern trip she said that what she wanted to do, herself, she

wanted to be on hand for anything she needed to do with the Vice President, but in any free time that she had, what she wanted to do was to meet some of the active women in the country. She had started having a periodic luncheon when that term that none of us really liked: "women doers luncheons." I guess the first one was the luncheon that she had for Indira Gandhi, and she had another luncheon for the Empress Farah of Iran.

B: This was still during the vice presidential period?

A: Yes. They were both vital, interesting women. Instead of inviting the wives of all the State Department people and the wives of all the congressional people that they in turn would be seeing at night, she brought in other people. In the case of Empress Farah, who had been a student of architecture, Mrs. Johnson brought in several women architects and people in those related fields.

So on this trip to Iran and Turkey, etc., each one of our ambassadors' wives gathered together--either for lunch or morning coffee or late afternoon reception--a group of twenty to forty women. What an eye-opener it was for all of us who thought that we were going into the countries where women still wore the veil, and, goodness knows, many of them did. We had an opportunity to meet the first woman lawyer in Teheran, and a woman doctor, and a woman who had begun a travel agency, and the dean of women for the University of Teheran. It doesn't give you the total flavor of the country, but it opens up a new window for you on what that country has to offer.

Then in the Scandinavian tour she wanted to see some of the farms. And of course this was a marvelous thing because not only did we get to see how farming was done there, but we also got to see something of the countryside instead of just spending our time in the cities. This has always been a cause of Mrs. Johnson's with foreign visitors coming to this country--"Don't just go to New York and Washington. Please come to Texas, to Iowa, to the blue grass country" of my state of Kentucky. "See something more of what makes up this country." You obviously can't do that in two days, but you can get more of the flavor of it than if you go to a lady's luncheon with all the wives of all the men that you're going to see at the dinner that night and the night before.

And then in her tour of the Benelux countries, it was a very short tour, and she went back at that point to the groups of interesting women in the countries.

So that's why I think that those trips were more enjoyable to her. She really got more out of them.

B: What kind of planning did you have to do for trips like that?

A: Unfortunately we never got to take the advance trip, which would have been great fun. It was setting down all kinds of detailed planning with people in the State Department, sending cables back and forth, saying, "this is what she would like to do. What are the

time frames in which it could be worked out?" And with only minor exceptions, everybody was terribly, terribly accommodating and helpful.

B: On an occasion like that, do you get advance information on the people Mrs. Johnson will meet? For example, the group of women she met with in, say, Teheran, did you try to get biographical information in advance on those people?

A: We tried to get a couple of sentences about them, but if my memory is correct, it didn't come back to Washington. It came to us maybe on the airplane before we landed in that country because the DCM--the Deputy Chief of Mission--would meet us in Country "A" and fly with us to his country, Country "B". And then he was available for mountains and mountains of questions, and almost always would have that list with him, with a couple of lines about each of the women, which of course was terribly helpful.

B: Some day in the future a lady scholar may be reading this and fault me if I don't ask you. What about such things as wardrobe, personal requirements like that?

A: That's something that you learn from your first trip too, because you realize that you don't want to ask a man "what do I wear," because they always say, "hat and white gloves." "Sometimes you don't always need a hat and white gloves. Mrs. Johnson, as I'm sure you're aware, is terribly conscious of all details, and clothing falls under that umbrella as well. She would always try before she left on one of these trips, whether it was four days or three days in the Redwoods, or three weeks in Asia, to write down black dress, with yellow jacket by that; time to change--such-and-such; hair comb; evening dress--pink floral; shampoo and set. She would have a space on that schedule that she would have pencilled in what she was going to wear, and when she could have her hair combed; and the time in there when she thought she'd need, and have time for, a shampoo and set.

B: That's impressive.

A: It is impressive. There are a lot of lessons you can learn from that lady.

B: I could pass them on to my wife.

A: And when we would arrive at a place where somebody would unpack for her, it would make her very nervous because she had everything in her suitcase. She never took anything out of her suitcase and put it in a drawer or anything. She had one little train case-shaped thing where her cosmetics were, and that would be placed in the bath or on the dressing table in the bedroom. Then she had all of her hanging garments in a hang-up bag and that would just go into the closet and be unzipped so she could see what she had. She would have purses in clear plastic bags and stockings in clear plastic bags, separate bags, where she could reach in and find it.

B: I've also seen it written that Mr. Johnson takes a direct interest in Mrs. Johnson's

wardrobe.

A: Absolutely. No saddle blanket fabrics, which are thick, woolly things. He likes the things that show the shape of your figure, if you have one to show. He does that not just with his wife, he does it with his daughters and he does it with his secretaries and he does it with anybody who will sit still and listen.

B: You mean you'll occasionally be walking by and he'll make a comment on your--?

A: Oh, yes. I always knew when he liked something I wore, and I knew when he didn't like it too. The other day I was talking to a man who has a beauty shop here in town whom I used to go to, and Mrs. Johnson went to, and a couple of the President's secretaries went to. He does the hair for one woman who works for Mr. Nixon. He said, "She never can come in, and when she comes in she just looks terrible." I said, "Well, can't you tell him how Mr. Johnson used to always want his girls to go to the beauty shop, so that they looked as well as they could." If they were going to be working all those long hours, he wanted them around to look good for him and look good for his visitors and not look frazzled and haggard.

B: Mrs. Johnson must have had other considerations too. I would assume that a woman in that position would have to worry about clothing that could travel well, that you could stand, sit and move gracefully in.

A: In the last few years I used to work with her on her clothes, and she would buy--are you interested in this?

B: Please.

A: She would buy twice a year for spring and summer and fall and winter. We would go up to a suite at a hotel in New York, and then a number of the designers would come to her and bring clothes that they thought that she was interested in, and swatches of other fabric. Her daytime clothes she really didn't worry too much about. If Mary Jones down the block had the same thing in four different colors, that really wasn't a concern. But her evening dresses, she really wanted to be one-of-a-kind. She didn't feel like that in the beginning, but one night when she was planning to wear a lovely green dress with a gold-embroidered jacket on it, and I was downstairs as the guests were coming in and her dress walked in on Kay Graham--Mrs. Philip Graham of the Washington Post--I ran upstairs and said, "You may want to change."

B: Did she?

A: Yes. It's an embarrassment to the guest. I really always tried to have my evening dresses different from everybody else's. I no longer feel like that now, but I always felt that some guest who had really knocked themselves out getting this pretty dress to wear to the

White House dinner didn't want to walk in and see the hired help wearing the same dress.

B: Did Mrs. Johnson favor any particular designers?

A: Yes, she liked two lady designers who were very accommodating--Mollie Parnis and Adele Simpson. She wore a number of other clothes, but she found that she has great difficulty in translating from a sketch and a swatch of fabric into a finished product, and she found it much easier to try on the sample size--and she could generally get into them--to tell if "this is for me." To try it on, walk around in it, and think to herself, "can I get on and off a helicopter in this dress. Can I get in and out of an automobile and still look like a lady." And then of course when we would go back to New York for the fittings, when they were pinning up the skirt hem, she would always move a chair over in front of the mirror and sit down and see if she could sit down and not need to reach for a scarf or a program or an enormous handbag to cover her knees. So she was very conscious of how things moved and how they photographed.

B: This kind of thing is not trivial, incidentally. I think beyond a doubt in the future there will be biographies written of Mrs. Johnson, and as near as a poor man like me can tell, this kind of information will be wanted by future scholars.

A: Rarely ever did she buy anything, as most women do, that just hung in her closet. She didn't buy something for a specific occasion and wear it once and put it away. She would decide before the season began, "I need two new dresses and coats. I need three dresses and jackets. I need two afternoon dresses that I can have my picture taken with the ladies auxiliary or the 4-H girls. And I need four new evening dresses." And then that would be the guideline that we would go by.

B: Did Mr. Johnson ever make clothing recommendations that she would not follow?

A: She had some dresses that he wasn't really wild about, but generally it was after the fact. If she brought something down to show him, "do you like it," and he was turned off by it, she wouldn't get it.

B: Did she also buy his clothes, or did he do that himself?

A: Not to my knowledge.

B: During the years of the vice presidential period, was Mrs. Johnson not also actively involved in business management in the Austin properties?

A: Yes. I wasn't terribly involved in that, though. She would get the monthly financial statements and I would do some of her correspondence back and forth to Mr. Kellam, the manager of KTBC. But it was all like Greek to me. I couldn't understand a financial statement.

B: But she was the active head of the business in those years?

A: I don't think it's fair to say she was an active head of it, because she didn't give that much time to it. She did pay attention to it, and she did read the monthly reports, and she did make various suggestions. But I would think of it more as like being chairman of the board of a company rather than president of a company--that kind of relationship. But I have no clue as to how this differed in 1961 from what it was in 1958 and '59.

B: What were the circumstances of acquiring the new house, The Elms?

A: They wanted a larger house. They wanted a house where they could do some entertaining, and the house on 30th Place was a lovely, graceful family home where you could have ten people to dinner or thirty people to a buffet supper, sitting around on their laps. They wanted to be where they could have a large pretty dinner party, or where they could have two hundred people for a reception, so the house was purchased for entertaining--I don't think there's any doubt about that.

B: Did Mrs. Johnson enjoy homemaking in the sense of decoration, management?

A: Loved it, absolutely adored it. I'm sure she can't wait for Lynda to get into her house up here and come up and help. She loved it when Luci got her new house and would go in and arrange furniture, look for upholstery fabrics and things like that. No, she really adores it.

I talked to her the other day and she said that one of the nicest days she has had was helping Luci clean up her patio.

B: Were the Johnsons any different when they went to the ranch? Did they relax more?

A: In a different way, yes. The President couldn't wait to get on the ground and get in the car and drive out and see the deer. I can't really say that the personality changed or anything, but he did feel a certain spirit of being home. "This is my land" comes to you.

It's a hard thing for other people to understand. I must say that I always felt, first, a hostility toward, and then maybe a frustration, and then maybe just a sadness that the people from the national press corps, could not identify with Lyndon Johnson's love of land. Somehow to them it was vulgar to own those acres, and of course to a Texan the acres that the Johnsons owned, even if you add up the ranches that they lease and maybe the ranches that somebody thinks that some day they might buy, it's nothing to a Texan or to anybody who understands western land. But to somebody off the sidewalks of Manhattan, four hundred acres must be the whole state of Texas. So you never saw them writing--I hate to keep going back to the Kennedys, but you never saw them writing ugly things about all the houses that the Kennedys owned, or all the paintings that the

Kennedys owned. Nobody writes about Teddy and Joan Kennedy's pretty house--I mean, they mention that it's a million dollar house or a two-million dollar house, but nobody writes about it as being vulgar to own half a million dollars worth of French and English antiques. But when you own all that in land and when you like to go out and look at that in land, they couldn't identify with it, and they felt there must be some screw loose in some guy who--

- B: Occasionally you got the impression that the press corps didn't like their facilities in Johnson City and in Austin.
- A: I don't blame them. I'd rather be in Palm Beach myself. And I'm sure if the President had to stay in a motel in Johnson City or an apartment on the beach in Palm Beach, there wouldn't be any problem of a decision with him either.
- B: Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about the vice presidential years?
- A: When you ask it like that, I can't reach back--
- B: I'm reduced to the vague ones. Let me try this one. Did the Johnsons ever discuss the future during those vice presidential years, discuss "where we go from here"?
- A: I'm sure they did, but not to my knowledge did they do it with me. I can't even really remember any specific conversation with either of the Johnsons when there was all the talk that Bobby Kennedy was pushing his brother toward dumping Johnson for '64. I'm sure it was discussed with other people, but not with me.
- B: Then we come to the time of the assassination. I believe you were in--
- A: I was at the ranch.
- B: You were at the ranch preparing for a dinner that night.
- A: Waiting for the Kennedys to arrive. They were going to come over after the fund-raising dinner in Austin, and Mrs. Johnson was really very concerned that everything be just right so I stayed there with the servants and also with the Signal Corps people, who were putting in all kinds of White House lines, etc.
- B: What were you planning for the Kennedys? The plans were for them to spend the night and part of the next day at the ranch.
- A: Yes, that night and then possibly all of the next day--what day was it? Was it a Friday night?
- B: It was a Friday.

A: They were going to definitely spend Friday night and Saturday and if my memory is correct, they might stay through a portion of Sunday, but that was still very much of a question mark. And what were we planning: Well, the first thing that we were planning was that one of Mrs. Johnson's problems always was to bring the guests in the front door instead of the kitchen door, because the kitchen door was where the cars just almost always drove up, and she would find herself with horror so many times just heading by rote memory to the kitchen door. So she said, "If you don't do anything else for me, please be sure that I get the President and Mrs. Kennedy into the living room door and not the kitchen door. I'm sure to forget about it." And I must say I've had trouble remembering that myself with other visitors who have been there, because the kitchen turns out to be the most convenient door to go in and out.

B: An old Texas custom.

A: Yes. It's an old Kentucky custom, too, so I identify with it.

But my memory is one of quarreling with the Signal Corps, who were putting in umpteen different telephones, and one they were putting in the room where Mrs. Kennedy was going to stay. It's quite a nice, small little room that has all kinds of flowered wallpaper, and they were just getting ready to put this telephone into the center of a wall, right in the middle of the wallpaper. There wasn't any table to set the phone on, just nothing-- it was sort of going to just hang there, in the middle of nowhere. And I said, "No, put it over here on the bedside table, and then you can put it underneath and when you take it out we can cover up those holes in the wall- paper with the bedside table." I really had to stand around and make them do it. I don't know why they were trying to make my life so miserable.

And then worrying about whether President Kennedy's mattress was going to get there in time. Because of his back problem he had to have a special bedboard and a special mattress. So that bed was just empty waiting for the bedboard and the mattress to arrive, and I thought, "Is it ever going to arrive before he does! Will he wander in to the bare springs?"

The visions of that day is one of the kitchen filled with pecan pies and showing the marvelous houseman who was down there, who does everything from cook to clean, mix drinks and mow the lawn, James Davis, "This is how you pour champagne on the rocks for Mrs. Kennedy," and just going over the menus.

Then there was a barbecue the next day out on the banks of the river, and I was going over the entertainment with two people who were involved in it, and also with the Secret Service man. There was, believe it or not, a sheep dog act, where this dog goes out and around--you've probably seen it.

B: I've seen it.

A: Which is fun and happy and at home there on the riverbanks.

B: I think maybe we'd better explain for the transcript, in case some non-Southern folk get hold of this, an act where a dog herds sheep.

A: Yes. From one little fenced off area into the other and it really is quite remarkable. That's the sort of entertainment that's happily at home on the banks of the river down there--that's one of the things I would never have been hurt if I couldn't have in the East Room of the White House, however. But the visitors who saw that sort of thing always loved it.

And then there was another act that we were planning on doing that was with a whip and a lasso, and then a guy was going to shoot things--a little slice out of the Old West. That's why I was talking with the Secret Service man, was it okay, would this be all right, is it going to be a problem. And it was really just at that time that someone came running down from the house to us down on the riverbank and said, "President Kennedy has been shot." Like everybody else, you faced it with disbelief, it can't be so!

B: What happened the rest of that afternoon then? Do you have any coherent memories?

A: The rest of that afternoon the Secret Service men, the men who were there waiting for President Kennedy and checking everything out for him, had really no way of getting much more information than we did over the television. So the kitchen once again became the center of activity. They were just in there glued to the television screen.

B: Did you try to get in touch with Mrs. Johnson in Dallas?

A: No. I thought that that was foolish, what was I going to do! The thing that I did was to make a reservation for Gene and Helen Williams, who worked for the Johnsons--a marvelous Negro couple who worked for them at The Elms and who were from Texas--and had come down to help us that weekend. I made a reservation for Gene and Helen and myself to fly back to Washington out of Dallas, and then got hold of Mr. Kellam, the head of KTBC--you didn't run off with any airplanes down there without an okay--to see if Dale Meeks, the pilot, could fly us in the little plane up to Dallas. So Dale flew us up there. We flew to Love Field, and then from there back into Washington and landed in the middle of the night and brought all the Johnsons' clothes back with us.

B: Was this Friday night?

A: It was Friday night.

B: You got back to Washington after the Johnsons?

- A: Well after the Johnsons. We got in about two or three in the morning.
- B: Did you try to talk to either of the daughters that Friday afternoon?
- A: Couldn't get a line in anyway. Couldn't even get a line into the White House. I talked to Walter Jenkins before I came back; just "if anybody inquires, Helen and Gene and I are bringing the clothes and we are on our way back and will be in the middle of the morning."
- B: Did you see the Johnsons then that night or the next morning?
- A: No. Helen and Gene went back to The Elms. I don't know how this happened, but a White House driver met us at Dulles airport, and I don't know whether that was something that I arranged or that's something that the Secret Service arranged--I don't know, but that was the first time I'd been in a car with a White House driver. We all lived in the same neighborhood. The car dropped Gene and Helen off at The Elms with all the clothes and took me home. It was about three or four or five in the morning by the time we got home.

And then I went over to see Mrs. Johnson the next morning about eight-thirty or nine.

- B: How was she taking it by then?
- A: It's one of those remarkable things about that lady. I walked in with this sad, sad, long face, and she looked at me and she said: "Oh, poor Bess, what you've been through!" I hadn't been through a thing! Not one bloody thing in comparison to her, but she really meant that. The empathy for me, being stuck down there at the ranch with twenty pecan pies and eighteen loaves of home-baked bread and really not knowing what was happening, then coming back to Washington in the middle of the night. I was glad to have something to do. But that was her attitude, just giving of herself, wishing that she could share a part of everybody else's burden.
- B: Did you immediately go to work, helping with the activities of that weekend and following week?
- A: We worked from dawn until past midnight, seven days a week.

People can be marvelous in a tragedy, the people that come in to help you. My neighbors did things for me like deliver completely ready meals to my house, unasked, unrequested. The man who did my cleaning, where I always had to take it and pick it up, dropped my cleaning off on the way home. I think that it was a time of such crisis that everybody felt "isn't there something that I can do? Isn't there something that I can do for my country!" And my cleaning man, the only thing he could think of was, "my customer

works for the new President, let me do something for her to save her from having to come over here and pick up her husband's cleaning."

Then of course there were calls from people that came to us, as they did to the Kennedys. "Can I open and help with some of the mail?" Ashton Gonella, who had worked for Lyndon Johnson when he was in the Senate--I can't remember whether I called Ashton or whether she called me, I think that she probably called me and said, "can I help." I said, "Absolutely, as long and often as you can." So she came over.

What was so invaluable then was to have people who knew the names on the letters. Lindy Boggs, I think Abigail McCarthy even, was over there helping with the mail. I think Marcella Bayh was there.

B: The reference to people who know the names, we'd better explain. You mean people who recognize what correspondence is from family friends and that kind of thing?

A: Yes.

B: Did you participate in planning the receptions and such that were held? I know that's the wrong word, but the activities in the White House through the time of the funeral.

A: No, that was all done by the Kennedy staff. No, I didn't participate and wasn't involved at all.

B: Again, because there has been a good deal of writing about it, I feel I must ask this. There has been a good deal of writing about the Kennedy staff resenting the Johnson people as usurpers at that time.

A: We did not feel it--Liz and I did not feel it on our side of the White House, because Pam Turnure and Nancy Tuckermann left to go with Mrs. Kennedy, so we moved into their offices. To my knowledge the people who stayed there were eager to work with us. A lot of those people look on presidents as people who come and go, and they stay on forever. I would say 80 percent of those people who were there with the Kennedys are there with the Nixons.

B: I suspect most people don't realize how big a crew is in the White House and how permanent most of them are.

A: But they are people who generally are not eager to tell you, "this is the way it has always been done." They are people who want guidelines from you, I guess because they like their jobs.

B: Very tactful of them. What was the relationship between Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy at that time? Did Mrs. Johnson do anything special for Mrs.

Kennedy?

A: She did all that she could do and not near as much as she yearned to do and wished she could do. One thing that both Mrs. Johnson and her husband tried to convey to Mrs. Kennedy was "we want you to stay here as long as you want to. Don't leave this house one minute sooner than you want to. Don't feel rushed about anything." Caroline, I guess, had a kindergarten and John had a little nursery group there, and Mrs. Johnson said: "I know that that's on your mind, and please continue to have it here as long as you want."

But as to other specifics I don't know. I know that Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy did talk. Mrs. Kennedy asked Mrs. Johnson to come down to the White House several days before they moved in to show her around the house. She had sent--and I imagine this was probably Mrs. Kennedy's idea, I don't know-- J. B. West, who was the chief usher at the White House out to see Mrs. Johnson with photographs of the rooms and floor plans of the rooms. Of course Mrs. Johnson had been in the White House any number of times, but when you go in a house to a reception or you go in a house on a tour with some constituents, it's an entirely different feeling than thinking, "this is the house I'm going to live in for a year."

B: It's almost incongruous under the circumstances, but I suppose you have to start being concerned with things like closet space and placement of furniture.

A: That's the tour that only first ladies give other first ladies.

B: Opening the closet doors. When did they move into the White House? I've forgotten.

A: There was a lot of discussion about the date, whether to wait one more day--on December 7th.

B: The discussion prompted by that being the anniversary of Pearl Harbor?

A: Yes. And whether or not they should wait one more day.

B: Was that, again, for fear of what the press might say?

A: Oh, no. It was only an inside--it was a heart reaction, not a head reaction.

B: Have you a little more time? We're at a stopping place right now, and I don't want to interfere with your schedule.

A: Is it eleven-twenty?

B: It's eleven-twenty.

A: I can go on for a little while longer. This is my Johnson day, I guess. I'm due to go out to talk with Liz Carpenter and read her wedding chapters.

B: The book Mrs. Carpenter is writing.

A: Yes. I can continue on for about twenty minutes if it's useful.

B: Incidentally, since you've mentioned it, are you planning to write a book?

A: I have no plans to. It's actually only been broached to me within the last couple of weeks. A lot of people say, of course, as they do to everybody: "You must write a book, you should write a book." But no publisher has come to me until recently and said: "I want you to write a book." And they're two entirely different things.

B: Yes, I know. Then, to carry on, what's it like to move into the White House as a home? Did you help Mrs. Johnson in the personal part of it?

A: When she came back after Mrs. Kennedy had so nicely asked her to come down and walk through the rooms with her, she came back saying how much she hated to leave The Elms; that it was a much more comfortable place to live in than the White House was going to be. And that's true. The White House, for all its space and all its rooms, is not what you'd ever call a family home.

And another thing that Mrs. Johnson always felt, a room isn't a room if it has more than one door. And what was really their sort of family sitting room and where they would be if they had only six, eight or ten guests, was the west sitting hall in which you had doors into the kitchen, into the dining room, into Mrs. Johnson's bedroom, into Mrs. Johnson's dressing room. And then the wide, double doors into the long hall. So that it was rather like being in Grand Central Station. If I had been over in Mrs. Johnson's bedroom, where she did most of her work at her desk and the sofa by the fireplace there, if I had been having a meeting with her and, say, we'd run into the lunch hour and the President had Secretary Rusk and Dick Helms from CIA and Clark Clifford or Mr. McNamara there for a luncheon meeting and they would be seated out in the west hallway, I would either have to go out and sort of walk through them, or else I would have to go out through the President's closets, then through his bedroom, and then out into the hallway.

B: Did they get to take many personal things with them, in the sense of furniture and pictures?

A: Yes. All the furniture in Mrs. Johnson's bedroom was hers, with a couple of exceptions. All the furniture in her little dressing room--I call it a dressing room, it was an area of closets and a desk and a sofa and a small fireplace there--all of that was hers. They

brought a number of paintings with them, which hung primarily in their own bedrooms. Then the furniture in Lynda and Luci's rooms was their furniture. She had a couple of French lamps that she had in the Yellow Oval Room, but other than that, that's just about all. Those rooms were vacant when Mrs. Johnson came in because the rooms that Lynda and Luci had, which now Tricia and Julie have, which before that were Caroline's and John's, were filled with cribs.

B: This may be a perfectly naive question, but do the President and his wife have by tradition the right to arrange those upstairs rooms as they wish?

A: Yes, surely.

B: There's none of the historical continuity that exists in the public rooms?

A: No. And I'm sure if the President really wanted to rearrange the rooms downstairs--you know, those things aren't hard and fast. The paintings are moved around from time to time. The thing that a presidential family cannot do any longer is have an auction on the South Lawn of the White House, which, as you know, has been done in the past. There won't be any of those.

B: I just kind of passed over this, but perhaps we shouldn't. Was it just assumed that you would stay on with Mrs. Johnson, or was a formal arrangement made?

A: Well, it was assumed that I would stay on with her. What was not assumed was that I would be the social secretary. I did some thinking about this myself and talked to my husband about it, I'm sure--well, you never can be sure, but I think probably before Mrs. Johnson or the President had given it any thought. No, I knew that Liz would be at that point going to the White House in all likelihood on Mrs. Johnson's staff unless she went on the President's press staff. A lot of people had thought that she would have been given an appointment to President Kennedy in his press office, so there were a lot of people who assumed that she would be going into Johnson's press staff. But I think that she really always very much wanted to work with Mrs. Johnson.

And then after I decided in my own mind, and got the okay from my husband, that I really did want to be the social secretary, I talked to Liz about it and then I told her, "I don't know what Mrs. Johnson's and the President's plans are, but this is what I want to do. Don't let anybody tell them I can't do it because I've got small children and I don't want that extra responsibility. I do." And then I talked with Mrs. Johnson about it.

I think she probably considered maybe asking Tish Baldridge to come back, I don't know. I don't know who else she considered. I'm sure that both the President and Mrs. Johnson were a little bit nervous about whether or not I could handle it.

B: I don't suppose there is such a thing as having prior experience for that kind of job.

A: No, I don't think so. You get all kinds of letters, once you're in that job, from girls in high school and college saying, "I want to grow up to be the White House Social Secretary. What do I do?"

B: Become very well acquainted with someone who is going to be President of the United States!

A: That's obviously it, except that that's not true for the girl who has the job now.

B: While we're on the staff, Mrs. Ashton Gonella also came onto the staff about this time, did she not?

A: She was working for the Committee on the Status of Women, I think--maybe it was the Atomic Energy, I don't know.

B: Such details we can look up.

A: But she had just been a Godsend! You know, it's like finding a 20-karat diamond in the middle of the street when you're broke and you can't find the owner of the diamond. We were having Ashton come in because she was just an invaluable help. And then I don't know how the idea came of bringing Ashton to the White House, I don't know whether Mrs. Johnson or Liz or I get the credit for that, or whether Ashton does. But I think it worked out very well.

B: I suspect probably that there wasn't any firm definition of responsibility, but roughly did Mrs. Gonella become Mrs. Johnson's personal secretary?

A: Yes.

B: The kind of thing you had been doing during the vice presidential years?

A: Yes. I did a lot of things during the vice presidential years, even more so when we moved out to The Elms when they started doing more entertaining, so that I had had a tiny flavor of what a social secretary does, only I did it myself instead of having a staff to help. If you wanted flowers for the table, then I went down to the florist and bought them and came back and arranged them. If you wanted the invitations to be sent, I looked up the addresses and wrote the invitations and licked the envelopes and met the guests at the front door and hired the butlers and ordered the liquor, and wrote the place cards.

B: Did you also assemble a staff to help you as social secretary?

A: No, I really walked into a staff that was there pretty much. There were two girls who had worked for Tish Baldridge and then had worked for Nancy Tuckerman, and one of them

was an enormous help and the other one, I would say, was less interested in working and less interested in the White House and less interested in any job. I don't think her feeling was about Lyndon Johnson; I think her feeling was about "I really only want to work part-time." And after that we had another girl who came in and worked with us in the office.

But it was working with the social correspondence office, which handled all of Mrs. Johnson's mail and all of the girls' mail, and that took an enormous amount of time in the beginning, trying to get them to write like Mrs. Johnson would, trying to get them to write like I did, like Liz did. So I would guess, no matter how hard I worked during the most difficult period, the hardest time of all was the beginning because we were new, but also because nobody understood how we did things, and the mail was just a crushing, crushing blow.

B: Was most of the mail favorable, complimentary, and sympathetic there at first?

A: Yes.

B: Were there also some crank-type letters immediately at first?

A: I don't remember. I really don't remember any crank letters. You get complimentary letters from nuts too, they're not always just ugly letters from nuts. The crank letters come in phases anyway. The White House operators will tell you that--you're going to think I'm putting you on, but they really do come with phases of the moon.

B: No, I think that's fairly well established theory, that aberrations of all kinds seem to come and go with the phases of the moon. I would assume that the White House operators and the mail room simply shunted off most of that kind of thing.

A: There are a class of letters that are just called "PRS," Protective Research Section, and they go over there. Also, there are some nutty telephone calls that you'll get that sometimes you can send over to PRS. Somebody will call, and, heaven knows, how they would end up with the White House Social Office, but they would be calling because somebody was sending brainwaves in, killing them, or giving them migraine headaches.

B: There at first the letters that you were having to answer--again, this may be on the verge of trivia, but do you answer them by a form kind of letter, or can you give any individual attention to the letters?

A: You try and give individual attention to them of course, but you can also give individual attention with a form letter. You know, how many different ways can you say, "Thank you for asking for my recipe, here it is." You just develop a way of saying it, and then out it goes. How many different kinds of letters can you write enclosing an autograph?

- B: How do you separate out the letters that the Johnsons would want personal attention to from old friends and family and that kind of thing? Do you just recognize the names?
- A: I had a little card file, which was of great help to the people who were opening up Mrs. Johnson's mail, which were names and addresses and a salutation on it. And also I had put on there things like "has two sons, Billy and Joe," where I happened to know it. I had done that in December of 1960. I was in the hospital for two days and before I went in, I went by to see Grace Tully and packed up tons and tons of Mrs. Johnson's correspondence and had gone through it and had taken down names and addresses and put those on card file. And then I just tried to keep it up to date with people that she would write to, people that she was on a first name basis with.

So they took that file, the man who opened the mail, and he would look up every one of those names in there, and if it was somebody in that box he would write FF--friends file-on it. In the beginning those would generally come into my desk or come into Liz's desk.

- B: The same sort of thing for the girls?

- A: Yes.

- B; The twenty minutes is about up, and we're at a stopping place.

- A: Okay.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]