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CLAUDIA "LADY BIRD" JOHNSON ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW II
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CLAUDIA TAYLOR JOHNSON

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Claudia Taylor Johnson 6/20/02

Claudia Taylor Johnson Date

by Patti Howell

Allison Fawcett 5-10-2011

~~Archivist of the United States~~ Date

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Appendix A

Attached to and forming part of the instrument of gift of oral history interviews, executed by Claudia Taylor Johnson, and accepted by the ~~Archivist of the United States~~ Assistant Archivist For Presidential Libraries on 5-10-2011.

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

May 26, 1975, with Merle Miller
June 25, 1976, with Merle Miller
June 29, 1976, with Merle Miller
January 30, 1977, with Merle Miller
February 14, 1977, with Merle Miller
August 12, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 13, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 14, 1977, with Michael Gillette
February 4, 1978, with Michael Gillette
April 1, 1978, with Michael Gillette
August 6, 1978, with Michael Gillette
October 9, 1978, with Michael Gillette
January 23, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 24, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 25-26, 1979, with Michael Gillette
February 27-28, 1979, with Michael Gillette
August 19, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 2-3, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 9, 1979, with Michael Gillette
November 13, 1979, with Anthony Champagne
January 4-5, 1980, with Michael Gillette
January 29-30, with Michael Gillette
September 20, 1980, with Michael Gillette
September 26-27, 1980, with Michael Gillette
February 6-7, 1981, with Michael Gillette
February 20-21, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 10, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 23, 1981, with Michael Gillette
September 5, 1981, with Michael Gillette
November 15, 1981, with Michael Gillette
January 2-3, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 10, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 30, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 15, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 19-20, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 22, 1982, with Michael Gillette

March 29, 1982, with Michael Gillette
August 3-4, 1982, with Michael Gillette
September 4, 1983, with Michael Gillette
December 30, 1984, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
January 4, 1985, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
February 23, 1991, with Michael Gillette
March 4, 1991, with W. C. Trueheart
March 8, 1991, with Michael Gillette
August 1994, with Harry Middleton (six interviews)
November 5, 1994, with Harry Middleton
January 23, 1987, with Nancy Smith
August 18, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 19, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 20, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, and John and Sandy Brice
August 1994, with S. Douglass Cater
March 22, 1985, with Louis S. Gomolak
July 16, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell
July 17, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell

INTERVIEW II

DATE: August 13, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mrs. Johnson's KTBC apartment, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: I thought that we would talk about your early education and work up to St. Mary's if we have time.

J: Fine.

G: I understand that you went to the Fern School--

J: Yes.

G: In my notes there's an indication that a lady named Nancy Lawrence was your preschool teacher and that she was one of your mother's closest friends. Does that ring a bell?

J: I'm so sorry; I cannot remember. The teachers were a parade of sweet, gentle, nice ladies, and each year, I think, I was crazy about the teacher. But I don't remember their names. I know there was one named Grace Nelson.

I think I must have begun school when I was five. It was a one-room school at the top of a hill about a quarter of a mile, perhaps a half a mile, from the Brick House. There was a big potbellied stove, which in the wintertime it was the job of one of the boys to keep filled and roaring with flame. In the summertime, or indeed fall, spring, any

good day, we had recess out of doors and played games like stealing sticks and base and Annie-Over, which involved throwing a ball over the house. The school would consist of--well, I think eight or ten was the biggest it ever was, pupils. They would range in grades from the first grade to the seventh. We didn't call it preschool; we probably called it primer, which was the first book one had. It began with one-sentence reading lessons: "This is Will. How do you do, Will? This is May. How do you do, May?" It was all very simple, and I loved it.

In the fall we would all rake up the leaves and pile them in great big piles and play jumping in them. Everybody brought his lunch in a paper sack. One would have perhaps a biscuit with a piece of bacon in between and a hard-boiled egg and maybe a little medicine bottle full of syrup, and you could make a hole in your biscuit with your finger and then pour it full of syrup. Certainly for me there was always an apple or an orange or a banana. I dare say not for many of the other children, though.

G: Did many of them miss school during the picking season or when they were harvesting crops?

J: No, I don't think they did. Actually, the school year was pretty much arranged so that you didn't begin until up in September, and they would have had a sizeable part of August to pick, and then in the afternoons when they got home they could pick. There may have been some of the bigger boys that might have been kept home.

G: Did the teachers attempt to gear the lessons individually to each student according to his age, or was it all just one class?

J: No, it wasn't one class because, you see, we'd be in different grades. With that few

students, I suppose the biggest class would be two or three, and since there was one family, the Jones family, that furnished five of the students, I would dare say that most classes probably just had one person in them.

We always on Friday had what we called exercises, which was singing patriotic songs. To this day, I remember the words to a great many things, like "America the Beautiful" and "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" and even "The Star-Spangled Banner,'" which was always hard, from having sung them at those Friday afternoon exercises. Then somebody would usually have to say a poem that he or she had memorized, often of a patriotic nature, sometimes a religious nature.

G: Was there only one room to this school?

J: Yes, only one room, and there was a sort of little walk-in closet where you went in and hung your coat on a peg in the wintertime, with some shelves on the other side for what few extra supplies there were. As I recall, even then, the state of Texas furnished the school books. You were issued your school books when you first got there in September, and usually they were used year after year so that you turned them in in May.

The teachers were always kindly, sweet ladies. Certainly for several of the years, the latter years, they boarded at my house, simply because they had to stay somewhere. That was close and had plenty of room.

G: Was the curriculum pretty much the three R's, or did you have any exotic courses--?

J: Oh, you bet. I'm sure there wasn't anything very varied or innovative. I'm sure it was pretty simple.

G: Did you feel at the time, or as soon as you were able to tell, that that primary education

served you in pretty good stead when you got to high school, or did you consider yourself, having gone to a very small school, disadvantaged?

J: I certainly didn't consider myself at any disadvantage, certainly not from an education standpoint. By the time I got to [be] twelve or fourteen years old and began to go off to school, I certainly was at a disadvantage socially, because I was very shy, and I had just not been exposed to many people and certainly not to people that you could consider at all wealthy or socially . . . whose way of life included parties or elegance. It was very simple.

G: Anything else about those years at the Fern School?

J: There was a family there, the Joneses, that I mentioned. Maydelle was just my age and a very agreeable, nice girl, and we were good friends. I used to love to go home to her house to spend the night or to get her over to my house to spend the night. Also I rather envied her having so many brothers and sisters. They were people in very moderate circumstances. Their father did a variety of things, such as, I think, he bred collie dogs for a few years, but mostly I would say he was a tenant farmer who had a hard time making a go of it. I don't know about their background, but I rather think they might have come down a step in the world. But her mother was one of those marvelous people who was always determined to hold her own little world together, and she sang very well and played the piano. Whenever she was any place where there was a piano available, she'd gather the children around her, and they would just sing away. I just thought that was so fine. I would try as loud as I could and never could hit the right notes. (Laughter)

G: With regard to your awareness of your own world around you, did you realize that you

were better off financially than a lot of your neighbors at an early age?

J: Yes, I realized that, but it was not a matter of any importance. I realized that people looked up to my daddy and expected him to solve the hard problems, and considered him sort of the boss. Lots of them had great affection and admiration, and some of them, no doubt, some resentment to him. I was aware of that, but I just thought that's the way things were.

G: Was any of this resentment, to the extent that there was some, ever put upon you?

J: No.

G: You were spared that? Having two older brothers, did you ever have an inclination to be a tomboy?

J: I was pretty much left to my own devices, and I did not, as I say, have many constant companions. Maydelle was about the closest, and the period when we were together was several years, but her family finally moved away. I had two little black friends, Stuff and Doodlebug, who were the children of, I think, the woman who washed for us. We used to just play house and store and all sorts of things, and I would quite naturally explore the woods and climb trees and do all sort of things that you might speak of as tomboy things, without thinking of it in that way.

I remember my brothers, one was eight and one was eleven years older than me, were off at school a great deal during my growing-up years, of course. I remember one time they had a couple of boys visiting them, and they were going down to the pond and going swimming, and I wanted to go with them. I was a pretty little girl, and my mother said no. I think it was my mother; I don't believe it was already Aunt Effie. In any case,

they didn't want me to go, because I was too little to tag along, and they finally just burst out and said, "Lady Bird, we're gonna take off our clothes. You can't go." And I said, "I don't care whether you take off your clothes or not." (Laughter)

G: I guess you spent a good deal of time with Dorris Powell, too, although she was considerably older.

J: Dorris was a good deal older, but she was a dear, wonderful friend, and as the years passed, that age variance sort of diminished. I mean, she became a kind of a chaperone or big sister by the time I was fifteen or sixteen and beginning to have a few dates. She was always helping plan things and [would] be there as the chief instigator of the fun that went on and the chaperone. Even as a little girl, I remember she used to come and cut out paper dolls for me and with me when I was a little girl. But her mother, Mrs. Odom, also was one of those marvelous women who was determined to make the most out of what she had, and give her children as good a home as she could manage, and sometimes against odds. There was a period of one or two years when my mother was not at all well. She was in the hospital a while, and she was staying at home with her mother in Alabama for a while, and Mrs. Odom came out to keep house for Daddy and me and for the boys, for whoever was there from time to time, and of course bringing her own family with her. So she was in the house with us for a while.

G: There's one more thing that I want to ask you about your mother that I neglected to yesterday. I read somewhere that she had had either a nervous breakdown or that she was a very high-strung person, and had--

J: She was, and of course at this late date I really know nothing about it. But I feel sure that

if she were in today's society, that she would be going to see a psychiatrist and very interested in it and maybe profiting from it and maybe not. But I mean she had psychological problems, of what nature I don't quite know.

G: Anything else on Fern School or any other experiences at that age? I was going to ask you, for example, about Mount Sinai, which, I guess, was--

J: Oh, that was the black church. I really loved to get taken to the black church by my nurse. I think at that time it was probably Cindy. I felt very much at home there and liked it. They always had a lot of emotion in their services and a lot of singing, and they enjoyed them. I felt a part of them, and I liked it. Of course, there were a number of them, but Mount Sinai and Peter's Chapel are two that I remember. They would be named after places in the Bible or characters in the Bible. I think there was a Bethel.

I remember that the seasons were a matter of great importance to my life then. The springtime was my very favorite, and we had a lot of jonquils in the yard, which were naturalized and came up year after year, and a lot of what we called "flags," which are lilies. I would just watch for the blooming of the first one, and I'd pick it and have a little ceremony and crown it the princess. I knew a lot about the woods and where they followed the streams for what seemed to me quite a long way. The bigger ones we'd call "creeks" and the smaller ones "branches." The one that was closest at hand was definitely a branch, but it led through what were then lovely woods. There were lots of violets in the early spring and a good many pine trees, which had the most mournful but distinctive sound when the wind would blow through them. On the rare occasions in the wintertime when there was snow, that was a great event. Grown folks would rush for

their cameras, and children would start making a snowman or snow ice cream or throwing snowballs. Also in the wintertime we always had wonderful fires roaring.

That brings me to a character in our life who was an important character to my brother Tony and to me, at least, and certainly to my daddy and mother. His name was Goodwin Coleman [?]. He was a sad character as one looks back on it, but I never thought of it that way then, because he was a man of good family and intelligence who had had--I don't know what the disease was, in his childhood or youth, I think it was probably in his early teens--a bad fever. I really don't know what it was, but it had left him mentally--well, he was different. At any rate, his mind was partially gone, but certainly he was harmless. He lived alone in a rather primitive house on some land that I'm sure must have belonged to his family, and such work as he did, he was likely to do for Daddy. He would show up when he got ready, and that could be five days a week or one day a month. But Daddy could always find something for him to do.

He also felt very free and easy about coming to our house. He was always welcome there, and we were always glad to have him. He could build the best fires, and he could tell the most interesting stories to the children. He also could draw--lions and tigers and cockatoos and parrots. Where he learned to do this, I don't know. I guess it was just something left over from his childhood before he had this disease.

He was laughed at by some of the people but never by my family, particularly by my mother. She always made him very welcome. And yet it wasn't quite fair, because I think his own family perhaps were embarrassed. There was not much of them left. There was a sister who had married and therefore had a married name, but his mother and father

were dead. I remember him saying something rather plaintively once about somebody not speaking to him or not being nice to him, and he said, "And my mother wouldn't have let them ride in her coach," which was one of my first observations on the way society treats somebody who is different.

I remember we never locked the house. Nobody did, as far as I know, but certainly we never did. At night, if we would hear somebody coming in, that was not a matter for any alarm; it was somebody that needed to come in, had business coming in. If they walked up the stairsteps--clump, clump, clump--reciting the names of all the generals of the Confederate Army, that would be old Good. He knew all about the Civil War, and he still got enraged about certain aspects of it. (Laughter) On the other hand, if it was somebody who came in whistling and about ten minutes later we would hear the strains of the Victrola giving forth popular tunes of the day, that would be my brother Tommy returning from a date. And if somebody went upstairs and in about five minutes you heard a loud, stentorious snoring, that would be my Uncle Walter, my father's elder brother, who, after his wife died, became a pretty constant visitor at our home.

G: How about Tony, did he have a peculiar [step]?

J: No, I don't remember. Tony, at quite an early age, like eighteen--how old would I have been then? Ten. He was sick, and he got what was diagnosed as TB [tuberculosis]. They decided the best thing for him to do was to go to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he liked that idea. He had been out to Los Alamos to school for one or two years. He was there when my mother died. He went off, and I really didn't see him much. We became very close friends later on, but from the time I was about ten, I'd only see him when he

would come home, perhaps at Christmas, maybe once or twice a year.

G: I was going to ask you about your shyness as a little girl. Did you feel like you were more bashful around people your own age that you didn't know than around adults?

J: Yes. Of course shyness is a fairly common phenomenon, particularly when you get to be about thirteen or fourteen, I think. But if you've been raised way out in the country and not associated with a variety of people, it can be pretty excruciating, and in my case it was. I imagined that everybody knew more about how to behave and dressed better than I did. The fact was, I probably went on wearing socks long after all the other girls were getting into silk stockings or something like that. I was very slow to adapt the standard behavior of my peers.

G: Do you think it may have been partially because you spent more time with adults than you did with . . . playmates?

J: Yes, I'm sure that was. Except for my trips to Alabama, in which I associated constantly with my peers; it was a pretty secluded sort of life. Even in Alabama, all of those were my kinfolks and a few of their friends, and they were people I knew very well. There was no such thing as a class of thirty children. That was not a part of my experience.

G: I guess there are a number of stories relating to this trait. One of them regards your desire not to achieve the valedictorian status. I guess this was at Marshall High.

J: Yes, by that time I was fifteen years old. The horror of that would have been that I would have had to stand up and make a speech. Also, I knew that my very good friend Emma Boehringer wanted it very, very much, and was a good student, and did indeed deserve it. My recollection is that she got it, and that someone named Maurine Kranson got second

and that I got about half a point below Maurine, which was an entirely satisfactory state of affairs.

G: Another version has this happening at the University of Texas. Is that a distorted version?

J: Oh, that is a distorted version. So far as I know, there is no such a thing as a valedictorian there, is there?

G: Well, not that I know of.

Also, there's another story that perhaps you can verify or deny about the glamorous boy that went to school with you that was always trying to speak to you, and you were too shy to answer him.

J: (Laughter) Yes. I don't know where that came from, but I do remember there was a very nice young man who was captain of the football team and therefore a big person in the class. He was just a country boy, every bit as country as any of us, but he would sort of come in and sit down by me and ask me about our assignment and this, that, and the other, and I would make some excuse to leave or go out and get a drink of water, simply because I couldn't think of what to say next.

G: Was this at Marshall also?

J: Yes.

G: I guess you went through eight grades, or eight years at the Fern School?

J: No, seven. That was the way of school in those days, seven elementary grades and then four of high school.

G: Right. Okay. And then you went to Jefferson?

J: Yes.

G: I guess you and Aunt Effie stayed there, did you, or boarded--?

J: We did. We boarded at Miss Bernice Emmert's [?] home. That was one of the first times that I was exposed to extremely intelligent people. These two maiden ladies, Miss Bernice Emmert and her sister, Miss Alice, were real scholars. They had been teachers, and Miss Alice, I think, still was. Their lives had been very much constricted by having to take care of elderly parents. They had never married, but they had good educations and had read just about everything that had been written, and spoke beautiful English. They were great friends of Aunt Effie's, and they were very kind to her. I'll always remember that time with happiness that she had them for friends. Finally they were reduced to the status of having to keep a few boarders. We had the good fortune to be--I think we were boarders as well as roomers, because I don't remember eating anywhere else.

But the reason for going there was after having finished Fern, I had to go somewhere to high school, and it would be either [Jefferson or Marshall]. Jefferson was about thirteen miles away and Marshall was about the same, really, fifteen to Jefferson possibly, thirteen to Marshall. But my brother Tommy by that time had married and was living in Jefferson and running the Jefferson Wholesale Grocery, and we just thought it would be nice for me to be in a town where he was. Although Aunt Effie would live with me, perhaps he could oversee us in some way.

Jefferson is a remarkable little community. It's quite patrician, but it is also very poor. There was a time when Jefferson was the second biggest town in Texas. In the

1870s and 1880s I think it was, because of the shipping that came up the bayou. They'd have dozens of ships at the dock there [that] came up, I guess, from New Orleans. It was an agricultural town with many beautiful old homes, and still are [beautiful]. Finally they've had a renaissance just simply through the hard work and determination of the women of the area, building upon these handsome old homes and their history.

So I went to school there for two years and began the business of meeting dozens of people my own age, whereas before there had only been an occasional one here and there. But nevertheless I soon had a few friends, and we did some ridiculous things like dressing up, and going into some of the kinfolks' closets and finding old-fashioned clothes and dressing up in feather boas and long skirts and parading around. You'll find some funny pictures, at least some existed and I think they're still there, of those days.

G: How many students were in your class, would you say?

J: Quite a lot there, I would think possibly easily twenty. I can't remember it's being a sparkling curriculum. I guess the first real mental stimulus that I can remember was at St. Mary's, the first exciting times of learning. Of course, as I mentioned before, just learning how to read was the most marvelous key from the very beginning. But as far as getting excited by a teacher and having real philosophical explorations and arguments, that didn't happen until I got to St. Mary's.

G: Why did you decide, or perhaps your father decided, to go to Marshall and finish high school there?

J: I don't know really. As I look back on it I'm really not quite sure why. At any case, when I was thirteen my daddy started sending me into Marshall. Of course it meant him

detaching somebody, and it might be a clerk, a bookkeeper, a butcher, a black man who drove the truck, just anybody, driving me into school. Then, because it would have been about a six-hour wait, they went on about their business and came back and made a second trip in to get me later in the day. Well, that was very time consuming, and my daddy got the idea he had better buy me a car. So he did. I learned to drive at thirteen. Jack Moore taught me, as I recall. He either is still living or was until very shortly ago. There were just lots of people in Karnack who were very close to my daddy, to the store, to the family.

G: How did Marshall differ from Jefferson at this time?

J: Bigger, a good deal more frightening in terms of meeting a lot of strangers. As a town, it really, to me, didn't have the charm that Jefferson did. It had a football team, and I soon started wearing, I think it was a red and white skirt and jacket and getting out there and hollering for the team and being interested in a lot of things that they were.

G: Were you a cheerleader or were you just a supporter?

J: No, I was just one of the crowd, I'm sure.

G: Did you feel that it was a better school academically than Jefferson had been?

J: I can't really say. It probably might have been.

G: How about your close friends from that era? Did you meet more of them at Jefferson or at Marshall?

J: Really, my lifelong friends began by the time I was about fifteen, approaching sixteen, and began to go off to St. Mary's. There was one family there, the Boehringers, whom I mentioned, their daughter Emma, the one who really wanted to be valedictorian and who

was a very bright girl, was a good friend of mine. They had an older sister, Gene, who had gone out into the world and done exciting things. In other words, she'd come down to Austin and had a year, I think, at the University and had gone to work in the Capitol for the then-chairman of the Railroad Commission, Mr. C. V. Terrell. They had a brother named Carl, who was one of my first dates, if you could call it that. We all paired up and went off and did silly things, going fishing and exploring what a taste of homemade beer or what was called "white lightning," which was liquor, was like. That was in the days of prohibition.

G: How about Helen Bird? Did you meet her in Marshall?

J: Yes, I met her at Marshall. She was the daughter of the Episcopal minister there. I cannot for the life of me think why on earth she wouldn't have been the valedictorian, because she must have been in my class, and she really, particularly at St. Mary's, did make such wonderful grades. Anyhow, it's long ago, and I can't remember.

G: Did you meet Emily Crow back then, too, or was this later?

J: I didn't meet Emily until we got to St. Mary's.

G: Let's see if I've got some more names. I also have Jack Staples and Clayton Fields. Were these from Marshall?

J: Yes, they were from Marshall. Jack Staples was a very handsome boy that all the girls thought was so attractive. Clayton Fields was just a big, tall, gangling, agreeable fellow as I remember. They were all sort of in a world apart as far as I was concerned. I would go with a crowd down to Caddo Lake with Dorris as our chaperone. We would all do things together, like go swimming along with lots of turtles and a few snakes and maybe

an occasional alligator, have picnics, and I suppose we explored every slough and bayou around there.

G: Would you have--

(Interruption)

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II