

LBJ tapes should improve the image

By JACK KEEVER

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AUSTIN, Tex. (AP) — Sen. Edward M. Kennedy talked easily to interviewer Joseph Frantz in 1969 about former President Lyndon B. Johnson, but Kennedy insisted that the interview remain secret until after the 1976 presidential election.

"That," said Prof. Frantz, his eyes twinkling, "has always intrigued me."

As early as 1966, Frantz said: "Johnson began to think about his history," and he chose the University of Texas history professor in 1968 "to be kind of an Arthur Schlesinger to his administration. Johnson never did ask me (to accept the job). It was a beautiful Johnson performance; he started introducing me to people: 'This is Joe Frantz. He's going to run my oral history project.'"

Frantz has recorded approximately 400 interviews, often doing several with the same person, such as Kennedy. He has supervised another 700 to "enrich our understanding of what took place (and) why it took place" during Johnson's 32-year political career in Washington.

Last year, Frantz, 58, passed the project on to the LBJ Library staff which, only recently, was able to interview Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Tex., and former Senate secretary Bobby Baker.

Frantz is preparing to listen to the Johnson story as told by Johnson's younger daughter, Luci Johnson Nugent, and possibly Mrs. Johnson, too.

Ironically, Frantz never was able to tape an interview with Johnson, who apparently would rather have clutched a rattlesnake than permit someone to record his conversation.

Why?

"That's for a psychologist to figure out," said Frantz.

The 1,100 tapes, along with the transcripts, are locked up at the library here that also holds Johnson's 31 million presidential papers. Some 200 interviews are open to researchers.

Some specified that their interviews

But Frantz has enough from the interviews to put together a 1,900-page manuscript, "a sort of Studs Terkel approach on what his contemporaries thought about him (LBJ)." After the manuscript is cut, Frantz expects it to be published nationally.

How do the interviews describe Johnson?

"I think they will improve the image," said Frantz. "I don't think they are too full of surprises I think the facts are generally known. The richness is in anecdotal depth."

could be used only for background, not quotation. Others demanded time restrictions that will keep their interviews off-limits until after the year 2,000.

"I've played, to a certain extent, an actuarial role and went for older people," said Frantz. "I got skewered on occasion. I went very hard for Sen. Carl Hayden, who was 91, and missed Bobby Kennedy."

Ted Kennedy, said Frantz, "felt very strongly that Jack had a real affection for Johnson. The two men understood each other and worked like a couple of pros, but you could put him (John Kennedy) and Johnson and Bobby in the same room together under the most favorable of circumstances and there was something in the chemistry; they'd be jaw-to-jaw before it was over.

"Teddy felt very grateful to Johnson because when he had that airplane crash, Johnson had shown him more attention than anyone else."

Jackie Kennedy got down on her knees in her Manhattan apartment to help Frantz get his recorder to work.

"I liked her more than I expected to," said Frantz. "I came away with the feeling that she probably exists on several levels, and on mine she was existing like some sort of responsible but petted West Austin housewife — no glamour or flamboyance or anything. She had on pants and a sweater; we sat down and visited and she poured coffee. It was all very low key."

Others were not so accessible.

The late FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz refused to be interviewed. Former Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg said he "had some things he disagreed with Johnson about, and he wasn't going to join the kiss-and-tell crowd."