My scholarly interest in Lady Bird Johnson began during the second half of 1982. In that year I had decided to offer a seminar at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) on “Modern First Ladies.” The response to that event led me to explore in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (1985) what seemed to me the historical void surrounding presidential wives in American history. My colleague at that time, Robert A. Divine, was editing a sequel to his very successful book of essays, *Exploring the Johnson Years* (1981). Knowing of my interest in presidential wives, Bob invited me to go over to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library to see if their files contained enough material for an essay on First Lady Johnson. I agreed and drove over to the library on Red River Street in Austin.

I soon realized that there would not be a problem with sources. The expert staff showed me the seventeen boxes devoted to the first lady’s interest in what she called “beautification.” There were folders about junkyards on the nation’s highways, regulation of billboards near the roadsides, and the first lady’s trips to promote public awareness of the challenges to the environment. There were extensive files on the first lady’s efforts to beautify and uplift Washington, D.C. Beyond the beautification files, there were 2,142 boxes of First Lady Johnson’s social files. As I would come to learn, there was even more relevant material in Lyndon Johnson’s presidential files and in the abundant oral histories that were being assembled at the library. I told Bob Divine that I had found more than enough for a chapter in his book.

I had already concluded that a book on Lady Bird Johnson and her beautification campaigns was very much worth doing. I was the chair of the History Department at UT Austin at the time. I would conduct research on the first lady during my limited spare time until 1984, when my term ended.
It was an exciting time for historians of the Johnson era. The LBJ Presidential Library was making its extensive holdings available to scholars, and there was a sense of discovery about a presidency that was still fresh in people’s minds for its controversies and consequences. Robert Caro had published the first installment of his multivolume biography of Lyndon Johnson with its corrosive portrait of a political opportunist (see my article “Robert Caro and George Reedy on Lyndon Johnson in *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* [1984]).

I did not know it, of course, but I had embarked on a task that would consume my writing life for the next five years. One of the most fascinating aspects of that journey would be meeting former members of the Johnson administration who had worked with the first lady. Among the most notable was former secretary of the interior Stewart Udall, an Arizonan who had been appointed by John F. Kennedy and then stayed on for Lyndon Johnson. Udall emphasized to me that he had an instinctive rapport with Johnson. Kennedy was a man of the sea, whereas he and Johnson were men of the land. Other notables included Bess Abell, First Lady Johnson’s social secretary who knew inside stories of the Johnsons; Liz Carpenter, the volatile and lively press secretary; Philip Tocker, the lobbyist for the billboard industry; and Mayor Walter Washington of Washington, D.C.

Lady Bird Johnson herself was the star interview. The first lady had come to my undergraduate class on the late nineteenth century when she was a member of the UT Austin Board of Regents to see a typical course in operation. I taught in Garrison Hall close to the Main Building, so it was easy for her on the first occasion to walk over and sit in on my Gilded Age course. After I started working on first ladies I invited her to come to the seminar in fall 1982. She was about to turn seventy and was launching her National Wildflower Center, so we both gained from the occasion. As the date for the class approached, I began to see why first ladies functioned as celebrities. The LBJ Presidential Library staff wanted to record the event, and the CBS *Sunday News* also sought coverage for a projected segment on her birthday. As word leaked out, people began calling me asking if “just this once” they might visit the class. I turned them away, but when the big day came we had Secret Service outside the door, two sets of cameras running inside the small classroom, fifteen students, Lady Bird Johnson, and me. The class went well and Lady Bird Johnson was her gracious self. However, when the segment aired, the classroom moment had been reduced to a few fleeting seconds. “Don’t blink or you’ll miss it,” I informed my mother, who
was watching in California two hours later. I was learning how show business and first ladies fed off each other.  

For the actual interview about the book, my first wife and I drove out to the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall, Texas, in September 1984 to have lunch. With Liz Carpenter along, we noted a pile of history books in the living room (Lady Bird Johnson read as much as her husband did not), had delicious pork chops for the meal, and talked about her beautification campaigns. The highlight came when I noted that Richard Nixon was then being praised for his alleged environmental accomplishments. Lady Bird Johnson thought for a moment and then told us in detail how she and her husband had gotten the Land and Water Conservation Fund enacted. She was making the point that she and her husband had been hands-on advocates for the environment in a way that Nixon had not been. It was as if the curtains had opened and she took us behind the scenes to see how the legislative process worked. My wife and I sat there with our mouths open. After five minutes, the former first lady paused, the curtains closed, and we turned to other subjects.

As I worked on the book, I came to understand just how close a working relationship the Johnsons had. She was emphatic in rejecting the argument that she represented the good side of the presidency and her husband was alone responsible for Vietnam and the excesses of his presidency. They were a team and all of a piece. In the years that followed, the former first lady and I talked on a few occasions. I was invited to a few of her dinners at the LBJ Presidential Library, and she sent me Christmas cards as long as she lived.  

I could not claim her as a friend, but we operated in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The book was fun to write. In retrospect I spent more time on billboard regulation and highway beautification than any reader might have wished. Having found such a complex story about the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 and its subsequent enforcement, I succumbed to the temptation to tell all I knew or, as my wife said at the time, “more than anyone wanted to know.” I like to think that I provided a window into the legislative history of the Johnson years for others to duplicate. Lady Bird Johnson really had three campaigns going at once: billboards and highway beautification, raising the nation’s awareness of the environment, and improving the quality of life in the nation’s capital.

The book came out in 1988 and received some friendly reviews. Sales were tepid and eventually reached 1,316 copies after thirty-one
years. In the several biographies of Lady Bird Johnson that have appeared since 1988 the authors have either deferred to my work or given it only passing attention. Interest in Lyndon Johnson’s presidency has also waned in the last three decades. Prospective biographers, other than Robert Dallek and Randall Woods, have decided to wait for Robert Caro to finish his multivolume life of Lyndon Johnson, and in the meantime scholarly attention has turned to the presidencies that followed the Great Society. What seemed so alive and in dispute about Lyndon Johnson after 1980 has become faded and forgotten almost forty years later. Interest in Lady Bird Johnson has receded as well.

I never contemplated writing a full-scale biography of Lady Bird Johnson. She lived until 2007, and the story of her post-presidential years, some thirty-eight in all, was a saga by itself. I had learned of the hazards of writing about someone who was still alive and active, so I turned back to my first love, the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. When I embarked on the Modern First Ladies series for University Press of Kansas in 1998 I wrote a slimmed down version of my book under the title *Lady Bird Johnson: Our Environmental First Lady*, but that is a tale for another time and another book.

Comments from my second wife Jeanne Robeson improved this essay. I gained also from the insights of friends John Broesamle, Stacy Cordery, and Bud Lasby. I am grateful to Kathy Lewis and the staff of the Warren County Public Library for their assistance. Thanks to the University Press of Kansas for making this volume available again.

*Lewis L. Gould*

Monmouth, Illinois

September 2019
Notes to Preface


2. One of the students in that first class was Stacy (Rozek) Cordery, who became a biographer of Alice Roosevelt Longworth and Juliet Gordon Low. Cordery is now a professor of history at Iowa State University, where she teaches her own popular class on first ladies.

3. In 2015, I donated my first ladies documents to the Monmouth College Archives in the Hewes Library at Monmouth College. In 1989, Senator Lloyd Bentsen asked Lady Bird Johnson who she would recommend to work with him on an oral history about his life. She recommended me and I worked with the senator from 1989 to 1990. The oral history was completed by Dr. Don E. Carleton after Bentsen and I had achieved 260 pages of his memories. The transcript is now available for research at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.


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