Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment

Gould, Lewis L.

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Preface

This study of Lady Bird Johnson and beautification began in 1982 when I offered a course at the University of Texas at Austin on “First Ladies in the Twentieth Century.” Lady Bird Johnson attended one session of the undergraduate honors seminar in November 1982, when she talked about her own perceptions of her role as First Lady. At about this time my colleague Robert A. Divine decided to prepare a second volume of scholarly essays on the Johnson years, based on his very successful book Exploring the Johnson Years, published that same year. He invited me, because of my new interest in First Ladies, to look at some aspect of Mrs. Johnson’s years in the White House.

Her work on beautification seemed a likely and manageable topic for the kind of exploratory essay that Divine had in mind. I had some general sense of the range of her involvement, or so I thought, and the materials in the Johnson Library were relatively untapped for such a project. So, in the late spring of 1983, under the guidance of the staff of the Johnson Library, I began to examine what the White House Central Files and the files of presidential aides contained on highway beautification, the First Lady’s efforts in Washington, D.C., and her national impact on conservation questions. These sources were rich and informative but also somewhat scattered. What was there in Lady Bird Johnson’s own White House Social Files on her beautification campaign? These files were in the library but had not yet been opened for scholarly research.

Through the help of the library’s staff, which reviewed and processed these materials, and with the kind consent of Lady Bird Johnson herself, I was allowed to scrutinize, for research purposes, the various series within the Social Files. Early in 1984 I began to examine the twenty-six boxes of the Beautification Files in the Social Files. It rapidly became evident that there was much more to Lady Bird Johnson’s campaign for beautification than a single forty-page essay could encompass. Telling the story of how the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 evolved would require
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an extended treatment of the subject, as would the different levels of her First Lady’s Committee for a More Beautiful Capital in Washington, D.C. This book is the result of my realization that the record of Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson and beautification in the 1960s needed a more elaborate and complete analytic investigation.

The nature of the research and writing for this narrative warrants discussion. After I began to work in the Social Files on beautification, the Johnson Library’s staff began to process review requests from me and other scholars in other sections of the Social Files than just the Beautification Files series. Because there are, for example, more than two thousand boxes in the Alphabetical Files series, this work is ongoing, and members of the library’s staff treat these requests in the same manner that they handle all review requests for all materials in the Johnson Library. In screening, the library’s staff looks for items that have been specified in a donor’s deed of gift as causing embarrassment, injury, or harassment to any living person; materials dealing with national-security issues; and papers relating to the Johnsons’ family or private matters. Otherwise the result of the reviewing work is that new information becomes available for scholars as that process continues.

Every file that I have seen is now open to all other researchers on the basis of the Johnson Library’s normal rules and procedures. No part of the sources of this book is off-limits to any other researcher, and I have received no special access to documents that other scholars may not see. Some sources that I have located, such as the legal records relating to the Taylor family in Marshall, Texas, and Lady Bird Johnson’s early life are in the Lewis L. Gould Papers at the library and may be seen by any interested investigator. I also intend to donate to this collection in the library as many as possible of the documents and letters that this study has generated.

This is not an authorized or official study of Lady Bird Johnson, nor is it a biography. She would prefer, as I understand, that no biographies be written during her lifetime, and I have tried to respect that position. This study necessarily has biographical elements as they relate to beautification. Mrs. Johnson granted me an interview in September 1984, and she was most hospitable and informative on that occasion. She has not, however, read any part of this book before its publication, except as she may have read the parts that have appeared in print elsewhere. The views expressed are mine, and no inference or conclusion should be drawn that Mrs. Johnson or members of the Johnson family agree, disagree, or have any opinion about the facts or conclusions that the book contains.

The Lyndon B. Johnson Foundation provided financial support for the research that resulted in the article for Professor Divine’s book. For
participants in the volume who came to Austin from other cities, this support consisted of transportation expenses and some photocopying of documents. Those of us who live in Austin received about the same amount of funds for the copying of source material, or about $500 in all. Each author also received an honorarium from the foundation. No representative or agent of the foundation has seen either the article or this book, and no one has attempted in any way to influence the content or interpretation of the research and writing that I have done.

As the reader of the book will quickly discover, I have reached a favorable conclusion in general about the worth and value of Lady Bird Johnson’s beautification endeavors. Colleagues have asked, as they so often do about women’s history, whether the record of what Lady Bird Johnson did reveals anything that was not already known or that is not “trivial” and “cosmetic.” While the First Lady’s commitment to beautification was well known during the 1960s, the range and variety of what she tried to accomplish has not at all been documented. The degree of her involvement with billboard control exceeds what researchers on this subject have previously discussed, and the complexity of the story says much about why highway beautification has taken the direction it has during the past two decades. Similarly, the work that she encouraged in Washington’s black community and the support that she gave to the initiatives of Lawrence Halprin to reshape Capitol Hill and other parts of the city reveal the errors that occur if a historian looks only at what took place in the floral and monumental sections of the nation’s capital.

On the question of importance as opposed to “triviality,” the issue itself embodies the assumption of a male-oriented history that what men do is significant and what women do is less relevant and consequential. If a man in the 1960s had been involved with an environmental issue such as highway beautification, had changed the appearance of a major American city, had addressed the problems of black inner-city youth, and had campaigned tirelessly to enhance national concern about natural beauty, no doubts would be raised that he was worthy of biographical and scholarly scrutiny. Lady Bird Johnson’s accomplishments as a catalyst for environmental ideas during the 1960s and thereafter entitle her to an evaluation of what she tried to do and what she achieved.

As was the case for Lyndon Johnson as well, the record she made is impressive. Martin V. Melosi has shown that Lyndon Johnson’s contribution to conservation and environmentalism was substantial. Lady Bird Johnson was a significant element in what her husband’s presidency achieved in these areas. While the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 was imperfect legislation that did not bring about the sweeping regulation of billboards, Mrs. Johnson’s identification with the cause made
the appearance of the roadside a national issue and kept it in the public eye. Her work in Washington, D.C., improved that city’s condition in an enduring way and contributed to a similar beautification and restoration impulse in cities large and small during that same decade. Most of all, she made citizen concern about the environment a legitimate position in the letters and statements that went out from her office promoting beautification campaigns and supporting efforts to preserve the California redwoods and the Grand Canyon.

Because of their situation as political celebrities, First Ladies have inherent difficulties in championing any policy initiatives that involve specific programs or controversial issues. Lady Bird Johnson overcame this obstacle because she deftly blended public occasions, where her beautification objectives received positive attention from the press, with the careful use of her influence as First Lady within the Johnson administration to promote the environmental causes she favored. She did so while simultaneously acting as a counselor to her husband, an advocate of the Head Start program, the coordinator of plans for a presidential library, and White House hostess. Among modern First Ladies for whom the historical record is open, only Eleanor Roosevelt surpasses Lady Bird Johnson in importance as the wife of the president.

My most important debt is to Harry Middleton, director of the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, and his staff for their generous and untiring cooperation with my research and writing. Harry Middleton encourages scholarship on Lyndon Johnson with admirable objectivity and provides a friendly and harmonious environment in which historical research can go forward productively. His associates, Charles Corkran, Lawrence Reed, and Gary Yarrington, were always prepared to provide support and understanding in abundance.

Michael Gillette ably directs the library’s Oral History project, but his enthusiasm for this book went well beyond his specific responsibilities. He guided me toward rewarding sources, helped arrange interviews, and listened patiently to drafts of early chapters and reports of research findings. The Oral History staff was always patient and kind, and I am grateful to Christie Bourgeois, Gina Gianzero, Theodore Gittinger, Regina Greenwell, Joan Kennedy, and Lois Martin.

In the archives section of the library, I was the beneficiary of the impressive talents of Claudia Anderson, Shellynne Eickhoff, Linda Hanson, David Humphrey, Tina Lawson, and Robert Tissing. I owe a special word of thanks to Nancy Smith of the archives. She was responsible for the opening, reviewing, and handling of Lady Bird Johnson’s White House Social Files. To that task she brought superb skills as an archivist, which
enabled me to consult relevant materials with an ease that otherwise would have been impossible. Nancy’s infectious enthusiasm as an archivist, combined with her imposing mastery of the sources in her charge, made a significant contribution in the book’s progress toward completion.

Philip Scott and Frank Wolfe of the library’s audio-visual section were most cooperative in helping me select illustrations for the book.

Those who participated in Lady Bird Johnson’s beautification endeavors responded with warmth and kindness to my inquiries. Elizabeth C. (“Bess”) Abell talked about her years as the White House social secretary during a lunch at her Washington home, which made it easy to understand her success as a hostess and her reputation as a witty and incisive observer of the political scene. Elizabeth S. (“Liz”) Carpenter extended her hospitality, helped to set up interviews, commented on portions of an early version of the study, and taught me much about her own unique personality. Cynthia Wilson put original materials at my disposal, gave perceptive critiques of my writing, and was always helpful and kind. Sharon Francis graciously shared her insights with me as well. I am indebted to Mayor Walter E. Washington and his wife for their hospitality in 1984.

Stewart L. Udall gave me an interview during the early stages of the book with characteristic generosity, and he remained interested and responsive as the work went on. Lawrence Halprin was most thoughtful and generous when I visited his office in San Francisco. Ross Netherton gave me valuable help with the issues of billboard regulation. Phillip Tocker shared his expertise on outdoor advertising with me in several long interviews at his home and at the LBJ Library. I learned much from his prodigious command of the workings of the billboard industry.

For other materials provided or interviews given, I am in the debt of Nash Castro, Mr. and Mrs. Willard Deason, Jerry English, Ruth R. Johnson, Katherine Louchheim, George McInturff, Yale Maxon, Elizabeth Rowe, Spencer Smith, Clay Speake, and Senator Robert Stafford.

Librarians and colleagues at other institutions were of crucial aid in helping me gather information. John Simpson at the University of Oregon did thorough research in the Maurine Neuberger Papers. Susan Jackson at the Montana Historical Society provided me with copies of relevant documents from the Lee Metcalf Papers. William Cooper of the University of Kentucky pulled together significant data from the papers of John Sherman Cooper. William H. Wilson provided a careful reading and helpful comments on the chapters regarding billboard regulation. Other scholars were generous as always with comments and suggestions—Thomas H. Appleton, Jr., Robert Dallek, Charles Floyd, Daniel Flores, Gary
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Students at the University of Texas were valued participants in the book during all stages of its preparation. The members of the First Ladies seminar in 1982 and those in the classes on Lyndon Johnson in 1986 and 1987 refined my ideas with their comments and questions. I owe special and individual thanks to Nancy Beck, Christie Bourgeois, Joseph Louis Brown, Catherine Collins, Judi Doyle, Louis Gomolak, Sally H. Graham, Dorothy Lane, John Leffler, Lois Martin, Janet Mezzack, Joseph Monticone, Craig H. Roell, and Stacy Rozek.

Two of my colleagues in the History Department at the University of Texas at Austin were of special assistance as friends and co-workers in the Johnson field. Robert A. Divine asked me to write the essay from which this book grew, and he was both a valued critic and warm supporter of my efforts. Clarence G. Lasby shared the insights he gained from his important research on the history of heart disease and Lyndon Johnson's health, and he gave generously of his wise counsel and insights into modern American history.

Two scholars who read my manuscript for the University Press of Kansas—Martin V. Melosi and Joanna Schneider Zangrando—offered criticisms that made the book better, and I am in their debt. I also wish to acknowledge the professional care shown to my work by the staff of the University Press of Kansas at every stage of the publishing process.

My mother-in-law, Helen Keel, has been an enthusiastic participant in the project since it began. She has been an expert proofreader and has always shared readily her good sense. Karen Gould gave beyond measure of her care, good humor, and affection, qualities that sustained me in the difficult passages of the book’s emergence. Her own scholarship was always an example of what I should strive to achieve.

For permission to publish materials that had already appeared in print and for their helpful editorial contribution in the articles themselves, I am indebted to Joseph Epstein and the American Scholar for passages that appear in chapter 2 and to Caryn Bernart and William D. Robbins of Environmental Review for portions of chapters 7 and 8.

Again, because of the nature of this book, it is important to reiterate that all of the judgments and opinions expressed in this study are mine alone and should not be construed as representing those of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, the Johnson family, or Lady Bird Johnson herself.
Nor are any of the people mentioned in these pages responsible for the strengths and weaknesses of this book. Those qualities are the result of my work, for which I am responsible.

15 May 1987

Lewis L. Gould
Austin, Texas
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