Historian Michael Gillette interviewed by Professor Joan Neuberger

JN: Hi, I’m Joan Neuberger, editor of not even past, and we have a special guest today. For the first time, instead of featuring one of our UT faculty members we are featuring public historian Michael Gillette. Hi Michael.

MG: Hello, I’m pleased to be here

JN: Mike has a PhD from UT Austin in history and he ran the oral history project at the LBJ library before going to the national archives, and then coming back to Texas in 2003 to be the executive director of Humanities Texas. So, welcome.

MG: Thank you

JN: We’re featuring a book that he just published last fall called *Lady Bird Johnson: An Oral History*. It’s based on 47 interviews, and also some quotes form her diaries, right?

MG: That’s right

JN: The thing that I found reading the book, as not a specialist in US history, is Lady Bird has a really remarkable voice. I usually can sort of skim through these books, but I wanted to read every page because she has something interesting to say about everything and everyone that she talks about. Maybe you could start by just talking about what was most memorable about doing these interviews with her?

MG: Well, she had a wonderful command of the English language, and was very expressive—a lot of southern idioms. I guess there were so many interview sessions that I found fascinating, one, the courtship. It was about a two-hour segment spanning two different sessions, in which she talked about her first date with LBJ, on which he asked her to marry him. That was certainly a memorable conversation. And then the two and a half month courtship that followed where she was faced with a very difficult decision whether or not to marry this man that she’s barely known, or to say goodbye to him forever. So it was a tough decision.

JN: She is always described as being shy and reserved, and she describes herself as being shy. One of the things that I found really striking from the beginning from her college days in the early 1930’s here at UT was how independent she was and how curious she was about things. She went out of her way to write for the Daily Texan. Do you think she really was as shy as she said she was, or was her personality more contradictory than that?

MG: I think that there was certainly shyness. She described how she was in Marshall High School: one of the most popular boys in the school sat down beside her and tried to make conversation, but she was so shy and nervous not knowing what to say that she would get up and leave. But I think that as she got older her shyness became more narrow to focus on public speaking, and she really was apprehensive about speaking in pubic. And that was the shyness that she ultimately overcame, and became very comfortable with it. But I think that her shyness was really important in a way because it made her sympathetic to other people’s discomfort. She always went out of her way to extend herself and make sure that those in her presence were comfortable, it was really part of her grace. I attribute some of it to the discomfort that she herself had felt when she was young. She was popular at the university, she dated, she had serious beaus, but she was not an extrovert.

JN: She comes to Washington as a young Congressman’s wife in the late 30’s, and one gets this sense that she really enjoyed Washington.

MG: She did, she did. First, really getting together with the other women who were wives of members of the Texas congressional delegation, and then the various organizations that congressional wives gathered in: the congressional club and the 75th Club—named after the number that the congress was. And really for thirty years those women formed sort of a salon in which they had very stimulating intellectual and cultural conversations. That was part of her education. She was associated with some of the most sophisticated women in the country from the New Deal period and the 1940’s. So I think it benefited her tremendously to have those associations and friendships.

JN: And she was in Washington during a period when women’s roles changed dramatically. So her first experiences were in groups of people who were defined by their relationships with their husbands—wives clubs—but by the time she became first lady she had her own agenda, her own staff. Do you think she felt that she balanced her roles as wife, and mother, and public figure as well as she would have liked to? Or, did she find those transitions and that balancing act difficult?

MG: I think she found it very difficult. It was a divided life both in terms of the needs of her husband, which were considerable, versus the needs of her children. Fortunately, she did have staff who could care for Lucy and Linda, and did so very lovingly. But still it was a tension on her to try to perform both roles. And there was a geographic dilemma too, because half her year was spent in Austin and other half in Washington. So when congress adjourned she would pick up and move the family back to Texas, and that was not easy.

JN: One of the things that’s really impressive about the book is how much she talks about how much she learns throughout her life. She is always open to new experiences, always open to different kinds of people and learning different kinds of things. At one point you asked her, as LBJ’s ideas on race were evolving and he was becoming committed to passing laws against segregation, you ask her if her evolution kept pace with his, and she doesn’t really answer. Do you think that this was more of a struggle for her than she wanted to admit, or do you thin that she just didn’t see it as her role?

MG: Well, I think there are so many aspects to that question. First of all, there’s the geographic difference. He was from central Texas and she was from deep east Texas, so they had a very different history of race relations in those two different regions. And the influential experience that LBJ had when he was a classroom teacher at Cotulla certainly shaped his attitude on discrimination and sensitized him to that.

JN: And that was when he was teaching in west Texas in an all-Mexican school

MG: South Texas-- for a year, but it certainly had a lasting influence on him not only in terms of civil rights but also in poverty and education. In her case, though, like LBJ, she personalized the issue of civil rights. And when she saw the discrimination that Zephyr Wrightfaced, and when she traveled across the South with Mrs. Johnson on the way home to Texas back from Washington, she couldn’t stay in a hotel, she couldn’t eat in a restaurant with Mrs. Johnson, that really effected her and it affected her attitude on justice and racial justice. There was one incident that she described that happened in Washington, and not in the south, but she considered Washington a southern city—which it was then, I guess. Zephyr Wrightfell in the snow and broke her leg, the ambulance would not pick her up and take her to the hospital because she was an African American. Both LBJ and Lady Bird were really offended by this.

JN: Before turning to her role as first lady, lets look talk for a minute about her role as second lady. When Johnson was elected Vice President that was a demotion for him after running the senate. But for Lady Bird, that was a kind of promotion. She is suddenly in a role where she has a lot more influence and contact with a lot more people. What was that like for her?

MG: She had a wonderful time. She was as happy in the role of the wife of the Vice President as he was unhappy in the role of Vice President. She loved to travel, and this was the greatest opportunity she ever had to travel abroad. All of her life she dreamed of the kind of travel she was able to do in those three years. But it also prepared her for being first lady because she substituted for Jacqueline Kennedy at a lot of social events at the White House, and became very familiar with all of the state dinners and the protocol that a first lady would have to follow. And, they bought a big mansion and entertained there as well when they weren’t in the White House. She got to see the country more too; she traveled around this country not only in the campaign of 1960, but for other trips. So it was a wonderful experience for her.

JN: She talks about, during the election campaign, falling in love with the diversity of the United States, and going places she had never been before. And New England, it surprised her how much she liked it, even though she felt very different there. One of the things, I may just be badly informed, but I had always heard that her relationship with Jacqueline Kennedy was a tense one. I was just a the museum the other day and there is a very moving letter from Jacky to Lady Bird after the assassination of John Kennedy, thanking her for her friendship and graciousness. What was their relationship like?

MG: Well, I think at the foundation they were two very different women from different backgrounds, and Mrs. Johnson led a very different kind of life as a political wife. She was much more active in her husband political career than Jacqueline Kennedy was in hers. I think that the circumstances of the assassination created a very awkward situation for both of those women, but I think that Mrs. Johnson did everything she could to comfort Mrs. Kennedy and to follow through on Jacqueline Kennedy’s initiatives as first lady, especially the preservation of the White House and acquisition of art and antiques. And I know Mrs. Kennedy really appreciated that.

JN: And yet it was Lady Bird Johnson who really transformed the role of first lady. You quote our former colleague Lewis Gould, a first lady historian, as saying she was really innovative and really transformed that role.

MG: She did, and I think she studied Eleanor Roosevelt in particular and saw what Eleanor Roosevelt was able to accomplish. Lady Bird Johnson’s style was vey different from Eleanor Roosevelt, but I think she approached the job with a sense of purpose, as Eleanor Roosevelt had done.

JN: Before we talk about what she did, how do you think that she developed that sense of agenda and purpose?

MG: Well, I think the fact that she had known and observed four other first ladies, and had met with more than that, beginning with Edith Bowling Wilson. I think she had studied, before that, the role of first ladies and she had been an active Senatorial wife and an active Vice President’s wife. But I also think that she surrounded herself with very capable people like Liz Carpenter and Bess Able and Nash Castro and many others, Jim Ketchum, the White House curator.\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\* And she focused on the things that really meant something to her, like beautification, creating a more beautiful national capitol, encouraging what we call cultural heritage tourism today, “seeing America first”, adding more national parks to the system and encouraging the public to go to those parks. A lot of her trips were designed to generate tourism for some of the places that weren’t really appreciated at the time, keeping tourist dollars here instead of going abroad. Headstart was a favorite of hers; she really gave project Headstart the benefit of a White House launch. And she had so many of the congressional wives help her in getting applications from local projects around the country, so that they could start that tremendous program almost overnight. She was very instrumental in that initiative.

JN: Well any book about the first lady is ultimately going to be about her husband. What area do you think she had most influence in with LBJ in terms of policy?

MG: Well, the environment beautification was the area where she probably influenced him more than anything else, in terms of policy. But her influence, I think, was strongest on him in terms of her judgment, her ability to have a calming influence on him. He seemed to be a lot more at peace with himself when she was around. He relied on her for judgment. We’ve heard her critique his speeches and he listened—he wouldn’t listen to many people in a situation like that, but he certainly listened to her—the fact that she could be critical of him and honest with him. Friends would tell the story that they would enter a friend’s home, and if there was a very attractive bowl of bon-bon chocolates, or something like that, she would drop a scarf over it to hide it from him, and do things wherever she went to look out for his weight and help him stay on his diet. She was very thoughtful in terms of anticipating his needs, and of course traveled with him great deal in campaign trips.

JN: When Lady Bird Johnson died in 2007, of course in Austin there was about 48 hours of radio coverage of her life. As it happens, I was at home painting my sons room who had just gone off to college, so I got to hear a lot of it. And the thing that impressed me most was the story of her journey on the Lady Bird special. The Civil Rights Act had just passed in 1964, right before the presidential election, and it of course upset many people in the South. And she took it upon herself to travel across the South and talk to southerners and really bring out what she thought was the best in the South.

MG: She did. She wanted the national press to see that side of the South. She also wanted the south to know that they were not forgotten, that they were an important part of this country. She used to say in these whistle-stop speeches: you may not agree with what I say, but you can understand me in the way I say it, she had that Southern accent. And that was a great trip. That’s one of the topics that I didn’t interview her on. We didn’t get that far, and its not really covered in her White House diary, sadly. It was a time when she was so busy that she didn’t take time to sit down and record that. We have the recollections of other people, we have a more impressionistic description of that trip, but we don’t have the kind of day-to-day discussion that I would have loved to have.

JN: That would have been fascinating, took so much courage and strength and its part of the joy of seeing the trajectory of her life from ashy country girl to someone who could make a trip like that.

MG: That was really the finale. After being excluded from LBJ’s first campaign in 1937, all she did was do the laundry and write a $10,000 check, and that was it. But with each successive campaign she became more and more active, and by the time he ran in 1948, in the 87 vote election, her role was really pivotal to keep him in the race, first of all, and to generate a lot of support among women by campaigning all over the state to women’s groups. She got at lest 87 votes that’s for sure.

JN: Well, Mike, thank you for publishing this and bringing this remarkable life to life for us

MG: Thank you